

From *Reading the Romance* to Grappling with Genre

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I first encountered *Reading the Romance* in the fall of 2007. At the time, I was a first-semester graduate student in the Joint Program of English and Education at the University of Michigan. At the start of my doctoral journey, I had every intention of developing a research topic around adolescent literacy practices in out-of-school contexts. As a former high school English teacher, I was fascinated by the heated discussions my department colleagues and I frequently had about how best to connect the reading and writing done in school with the reading and writing students did on their own. But one evening, as I was avoiding the readings that were due for my composition theory class, and instead re-reading one of my favorite romance novels, it occurred to me that what I was reading in school and what I was reading out of school had serendipitously aligned.

In my composition theory course, you see, we were reading about genre. More specifically, we were reading about rhetorical genre theory, whereby scholars examine how everyday genres – the medical history form, the course syllabus, the customer feedback survey – are shaped by and reproduce rhetorical situations and social actions. Now, at the time, my understanding of genre was quite different: it was either where I was situated in Blockbuster when looking for a movie to rent, or it was the romance novels I was reading – a type of “genre fiction” that was, for all intents and purposes, literary fiction’s low-class nemesis.

Given their interest in how everyday genres are enacted in particular contexts, by identifiable discourse communities, and for specific purposes, rhetorical genre theorists have often intentionally moved away from focusing on fictional genres that, as Amy Devitt notes, “are read by multiple audiences at different times and places, apart from [their] initial situation and community” (709).[1] Nevertheless, the more rhetorical genre theory I read, the more I wondered if and how I might examine the popular romance genre within this framework. And so I vividly recall a moment that October when I rushed to my advisor’s office to share with her that I was drastically changing my research topic. The first thing she said was, “Wonderful! Go read *Radway*.”

I did. And then I re-read and re-read. I found that some of *Reading the Romance* resonated with me completely as both a romance reader and as an emerging researcher. Like the women in *Radway*’s study, I too found myself reading romance novels to relax, to escape to fantasy worlds, to become the heroine, and to practice a form of self-

care. As a researcher, though, what struck me as most exciting about Radway's study was the distinction she placed between "the event of reading and the text encountered through the process" (11). In other words, her work suggests that while romance narratives may reproduce heteronormativity, the women in her study read romance novels as a way to cope with heteronormativity. In essence, *Reading the Romance* demonstrates that the literacy practice of romance reading produces a range of social actions that support, complicate, and exceed the romance narrative itself.

My research is heavily indebted to *Reading the Romance*. Radway's study took seriously women's everyday reading practices around popular texts by not only examining the texts themselves but also by talking with readers of them. This ethnographic move laid the groundwork for future cultural and qualitative studies of readers and reading. More specifically to my own work, Professor Radway's analytical distinction between the meaning of the text and the meaning of the event of reading "empowers us to question whether the significance of the act of reading itself might, under some conditions, contradict, undercut, or qualify the significance of producing a particular kind of story" (210). In other words, in what ways do consumers' varied uses of romance novels co-produce the romance genre simultaneously and alongside romance authors?

If *Reading the Romance* explores the question: *Why do women read romance novels?* then my own research asks: *What do individuals do with romance novels in addition to buying and reading them?* Drawing from rhetorical genre theory, literacy studies, and cultural studies, I frame genres as participatory constructs and I examine the various social actions, literate practices, and subjectivities individuals enact as they participate with and shape the popular romance genre. My interviews and book discussions with romance readers have led me to shift the focus away from romance reading as a solitary and single literacy practice to romance genre participation as comprised of multiple digital, social, and literate practices. By considering how individuals read, read about, write about, and talk about romance fiction, I demonstrate that romance readers co-produce the rhetorical situations in which romance novels circulate and are used; maintain intimate connections with friends and family members; engage in collective and civic action both online and offline; co-construct genre-specific knowledges and practices; shape the polysemic meanings of textual conventions; and therefore not only consume but also co-construct the romance genre.

I further argue that the pleasures derived from popular romance novels stem in part from the ways in which individuals use them to demonstrate readerly and writerly expertise, connect with others, and explore sociopolitical relations between men and women. These findings do not mean that the power dynamics among genre participants are equal; but they do demonstrate the ways in which genres are dynamically constituted and re-constituted through particular contextual enactments and practices. As Catherine Schryer notes, genres are never really fixed or static but rather "stabilized-for-now" (200). By examining the ways readers shape genres and consumers shape popular culture, I situate my own research alongside Radway's by suggesting that the appeal of romance fiction cannot be explained solely through a consideration of text or of reader but instead must be understood through an examination of the multiple and relational ways individuals use romance novels to escape from, connect to, and build their social worlds.

[1] I have borrowed this line almost verbatim from my dissertation, which includes a fuller discussion of everyday genres and rhetorical genre theory. See **Affecting Genre: Women's Participation with Popular Romance Fiction**.

Works Cited

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