

Studying the Romance Reader, Then and Now: Rereading Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*

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Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

I read Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* in 1995, the first year of my graduate coursework. The book was a required text in my cultural studies course, a course where I had been struggling to grasp a catalog of cultural theories: Frankfurt School, Birmingham School, and the "-ists," as I used to call them: Marxist, feminist, and new historicist theories. When my professor added semiotics and the critical techniques of reader-response and psychoanalytic criticism, I soon felt overwhelmed. To be honest, I'm not sure I ever completely understood all of those theories and critical approaches, and for those I did, I was sometimes skeptical about their use in the study of literature. But *Reading the Romance* proved me wrong. "So this is how you apply theory to practice," I thought. "By using the tools of other disciplines, you can study literature by studying the people who read it; you can analyze reading as a reaction to the social, political, and cultural forces in a society." Thus, I came to value *Reading the Romance* more as a primer for how to do cultural criticism than for its arguments about the impact of patriarchy, feminism, and consumer culture on romance readers.

Those arguments have certainly been challenged, but I would like to consider the research process Radway used to study romance readers, the logistics of the study itself, for I, too, study the "romance reader and her act of reading." When I reread Radway's book for this panel, I was struck by the difference 30 years has made between her research process and mine.

Those differences, of course, are due to the extraordinary technological change of the last twenty years. Radway used mailed questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to study a small group of romance readers similar in socioeconomic class and geographic location (a city suburb that goes by the alias "Smithton") in order to "discover how actual communities actually read particular texts" (Radway, 4). I seek to discover the same thing, but I rely almost entirely on *virtual* evidence (computer-mediated communication (CMC) in online forums, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs) from *virtual* communities to study any romance reader anywhere who has a connection to the Internet and can write in English. Radway has been criticized for generalizing from such a small population,[1] but I cannot help but wonder what it would have taken to study a much larger one without the aid of the Internet, especially among readers of a genre who did not have nearly the public voice

they do now. Yet I also know that the large sample populations we can study today raise equally important questions about validity.

If Radway were conducting her study now, “Dot,” (“Dorothy Evans”), the bookstore clerk who recommended romances to the Smithton readers, might be a blogger with a review site rather than the author and distributor of a print newsletter. “Dot” would tweet her recommendations to her “followers” on Twitter or to her “friends” on Facebook. Regardless of where she chose to share her expertise, a scholar could track and archive her comments. And there would be many, many “Dots” to study. The sample population challenge today is not scarcity; it’s abundance. It’s also finding a way to deal with the diversity and mutability among readers of romance. More than fifteen years ago, Cheryl Harris in *Theorizing Fandom* (1998) was concerned about the sheer variety and constant change among fan communities in general: “fans are constantly in flux,” she explained, and “Worse, they are prolific” (4). Today, the veritable hive of romance blogs and discussion forums is both an abundance of riches and a Tower of Babel for the romance scholar. How can one accurately make generalizations about so large and varied a sample? It makes me long for the homogeneity of the Smithton women.

And it is the Smithton women who spoke loudest to me when re-reading *Reading the Romance* for this panel. Hearing Dot’s voice throughout the book, I grew to admire her, as if she were the heroine of the story, and all too often I wished she did have a blog so that I could interact with her. I kept wondering what she would think of a site like *Smart Bitches*, with its sassy discourse and cheeky tone. Would she sneer at our academic blogs or be thrilled to see them? I had so many questions I wanted to ask her, and I had to temper the expectation of interactivity so ingrained in me now and remind myself that it would have puzzled the Smithton women who had little expectation of it at all.

One of the most important details I noticed on this re-read was the fact that few of the Smithton women knew each other until Radway brought them together for the interviews (Radway, 96). The majority of them had never discussed romances with a community of fellow romance readers, but it’s clear that they welcomed the opportunity to do so. That lack of interactivity seems almost antediluvian to me because there are now so many online romance communities that invite comments: individual reader blogs, author blogs, and Facebook and Twitter accounts for both. No romance reader need read alone anymore unless she wants to. But the glimmerings of organized romance communities do appear in the conclusion of Radway’s *Reading the Romance*: Radway’s first mention of the Romance Writers of America (RWA), then just four years old and already a national organization. (Radway, 218-219). Though RWA successfully organized romance *authors*, not readers, Radway’s mention of it suggests that she saw clear evidence that interactive romance communities were beginning to emerge.

Those communities are easier to find now, and they are, as Harris noted, prolific. There is no shortage of opinions to research and analyze. And yet I wonder about the ethics of studying them *virtually* rather than face-to-face.[2] The Smithton women gave their permission to be studied; most of my virtual readers do not. To be sure, their opinions are already publicly available, yet they were not opinions given *to me* to use. The Smithton women talked to Radway; the readers I study talk far more to each other than to me, and others do not talk to me at all. And I worry about the ethics of researching acts of reading that are done in private and for a variety of personal reasons even if the discussion of those acts is public. Radway even notes that the Smithton women “value reading precisely

because it is an intensely private act” (Radway, 92). And yet the urge to talk about that act with others, now easily observed in publicly accessible forums, suggests that for some readers, the private act triggers a social one. Perhaps the positive, though private, benefits of reading romances that the Smithton women describe, particularly the feeling of “emotional sustenance” (Radway, 12), can also be gained by connecting publicly with the romance-reading community. This interesting dichotomy produces rich opportunities for study, but how we conduct these studies, and do so ethically, continues to challenge romance scholars.

Underpinning Radway’s research and my own is the same question: “Why do women read romance?” Why, I ask, do we want to know this? Are we trying to legitimate the reader’s purpose in order to legitimate the genre? Validate women’s choices and support romance readers? Most likely, all of the above. But I also study why women want to *talk* about reading romances. What do they gain by moving from a private dialogue *with* text to a public one *about* the text? This is, after all, similar to what Radway did with the Smithton women, which is why her study was so groundbreaking. She read the Smithton women as culturally constructed texts and then went public with her analysis. Her conclusions are still controversial, but her inquiry shows us that romance readers gain more than pleasure from the act of reading the romance; they also gain “affective self-support” (Radway 96), such as increased self-esteem and the benefits of fellowship, when talking about their reading experiences with others who share their interest.

And it is the nature of that gain that continues to intrigue me, which is why, after rereading *Reading the Romance*, I thought more about the Smithton women than anything else. If they did read romances for “emotional sustenance” and as a form of protest, do they still read romances today? When I finished rereading *Reading the Romance*, it was the biggest question I had.

[1] Radway acknowledges the limitations of her sample size and cautions against using her conclusions as anything more than hypotheses that need to be tested (48-49).

[2] Several scholars have investigated the ethics of researching online discussions. See Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg, “My Profile: The Ethics of Virtual Ethnography.” *Emotions, Space and Society* 3 (2010): 15-20. Web. See also Katharina Freund and Dianna Fielding, “Research Ethics in Fan Studies,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10.1. (May 2013). Web. See also Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore and Jonathan Hickman in “Studying Fan Activities on Twitter: Reflections on Methodological Issues Emerging from a Case Study on *The West Wing* Fandom.” *First Monday* 18.9 (Sep 2013). Web.

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