



To My Mentor, Jan Radway, With Love

Deborah Chappel Traylor

Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

This panel was organized with each member giving a different perspective on *Reading the Romance* at its thirtieth anniversary. Clearly, I'm here to give the historical perspective, and I'm happy to do that. I have a lot of history with this book—in fact, my history with the book and with Jan Radway herself reaches back almost 28 years.

My first memory of Jan was, I believe, from the fall of 1988 or spring of 1989 when she came to Duke University, where I was a new graduate student. Those were the glory days at Duke, with Stanley Fish as chair of the English Department and Fredric Jameson chair of the Comparative Lit program. They had come to Duke only a year or two before I did and promptly embarked on a hiring spree of top literary and theory scholars that was the talk of the academic world. It was as part of that hiring spree that Jan came to Duke to give a job talk. I remember most of the details of her stimulating and excellent presentation, which was an early chapter on her Book of the Month Club work (*Reading the Romance* had already come out a couple of years before). But frankly, when I remember that talk what is clearest in my memory is the image of Jan herself, striking in this very stylish two-piece suit—I think it was yellow and black—and she wore the coolest earrings. (I would learn later that she always wore very cool earrings.) I remember thinking she was the epitome of everything I wanted to be, and I must have had some sense of how personally important she would be to me, because I had already decided to write a dissertation on the history of women's popular romance.

Lucky, lucky me. Jan came to Duke in 1989, and, along with the fabulous Jane Tompkins, co-directed my dissertation, which I completed in 1991. There weren't many places in the country one could have written a dissertation on romance in those days, and nowhere else on earth I could have found two such perfect powerhouse female mentors as Jan Radway and Jane Tompkins. Jan was a hot young scholar, not quite forty years old, who had already made an enormous impact in cultural studies with the 1984 publication of *Reading the Romance*, a scholarly work that really changed things for me personally but also changed the study of popular culture in general and women's romance in particular. Jan's monograph, along with Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance* in 1982, virtually created the field of popular romance studies which everyone in this room has inherited today. While Modleski's work was first by a couple of years, I think it was the

methodology of Jan's book that truly legitimated the study of popular romance and made it the locus of inquiry on feminist theory, the body, popular culture, and reading, thus really widening the audience far beyond those interested in popular women's novels.

Through its ethnographic method, *Reading the Romance* became an important book for many scholars in many different fields. Just one example—about ten years ago I was putting together a syllabus for a cultural theory class for Ph.D. students in our then-new Ph.D. Program in Heritage Studies. I had gone to scholars in each of the disciplines which fed students into the program, asking those scholars to recommend what they considered important works utilizing cutting-edge theory in their own fields; I made sure they understood I was seeking these recommendations in order to use these works in my course. Imagine my surprise when Sociology chair George Lord recommended *Reading the Romance* as the best book to help students understand methodology and theory in Sociology! So this book has had enormous impact on many fields and among many who have had little or no scholarly interest in women's romance.

But, of course, all of us in this room have a deep interest in popular women's romance, so, in particular, and after thirty years, what does this book mean to us?

By the time Jayne Ann Krentz's anthology *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* was published in 1992, there was already a revolt of the academic daughters in motion, in which young aspiring scholars, struggling to find critical space in the wake of Jan's important book, began to criticize her methods and conclusions. I also criticized Jan for many little things (many of which now, rereading the book, I think were pretty unfair); overall, I think I was criticizing her for not championing women's romance and its readers and authors energetically and loudly enough. It became popular at PCA panels on romance in the last two decades for young scholars of women's romance to mention *Reading the Romance* and then try to distance themselves from it—a sort of Bloomian Anxiety of Influence, I think.

Jan's book was so big, and so important, many scholars, rather than explicitly building on it, struggled to find their own critical space in which their ideas could appear to be anything other than derivative. Of course, the field has found new things to investigate, the most promising perhaps the in-depth study of individual authors, but in a competitive industry where scholars struggled for the big, overarching theoretical statement about romance that could set them apart, Jan's book sometimes seemed more of a threatening roadblock than a stepping stone to new investigations. In short, *Reading the Romance* may have been too good.

Getting ready for this conference, I did something I haven't done in several years, and that was to drag out my pitifully bedraggled and dog-eared copy of *Reading the Romance* and reread it, cover to cover. I've read much of what's been published in this field since 1988, and I don't hesitate to claim that this book is still the best piece of scholarship available. Rereading it I was struck once more by her freshness and insight into the genre, as well as by the unfairness of many of the criticisms of her work. Jan notes that "the nature of the [Smithton readers'] operation suggests that it is unsatisfactory for an analyst to select a sample of romances currently issued by American publishers, draw conclusions about the meaning of the form by analyzing the plots of the books in the sample, and then make general statements about the cultural significance of 'romance'" (49). Most of the scholars in this room will heartily agree with Jan's claim here, and yet several of us, including me, have accused Jan of doing what her own statement admits shouldn't be done.

There are valid criticisms of *Reading the Romance*, to be sure, including Kathleen Gillis Seidel's criticism of Jan for her failure to consider that how well or how poorly a romance is written may have more to do with readers' satisfaction with the book than does its feminist politics (Krentz 169). It's precisely Jan's analysis of the feminist politics of romance novels that seems to rub some scholars such as Pamela Regis and many of the genre's authors in just the wrong way.

She writes that romance is concerned with "the possibilities and difficulties of establishing a connection with a man who is initially incapable of satisfying a woman. Thus the romance is concerned not just with the fact of heterosexual marriage but with the perhaps more essential issue for women—how to realize a mature self and how to achieve emotional fulfillment in a culture in which such goals must be achieved in the company of an individual whose principal preoccupation is always *elsewhere* in the public world" (139). While, as Eric Selinger has pointed out in comments to me, she may be guilty of stereotyping men here, her personal experience as a married woman and mother, as well as her sympathetic understanding of women readers, still comes across and still challenges us to avoid stereotyping women readers and instead take what they tell us seriously, as she did.

The primary material in her book is still important and much of it still unduplicated, like the chart showing the frequency of direct responses on why readers read romance fiction—not "because [they] like to read about the strong, virile heroes" but much more frequently—as the two most frequent responses, in fact— "[f]or simple relaxation" or "[b]ecause reading is just for me; it is my time" (61).

Perhaps the most valuable contribution Jan made to the study of women's romance, besides her methodology and careful attention to why women read, is the way she ties an often deprecated form of popular culture to one of the most complex and important theoretical discussions of the last two decades, which is the discussion of the meaning of female subjectivity. She claims, "On one level, then, the romance is an account of a woman's journey to female personhood *as that particular psychic configuration is constructed and realized within patriarchal culture*" (138). We still haven't fully explored the ramifications of that claim, I think, and especially the layers of meaning that might develop if we bring in the later theories of scholars such as Judith Butler concerning performance and heteronormativity.

In conclusion, what is the importance of *Reading the Romance* thirty years later? Quite simply, I don't think we can or should study romance without it. I still feel, thirty years later, that nothing better than this has been written on this topic. And if I didn't tell you that at the time you so generously mentored me, Jan, I'm so happy this panel has given me the opportunity to tell you now.

Works Cited

- Krentz, Jayne Ann, ed. *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*. 1992. Reprint, New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1996. Print.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.