

## Genre, Author, Text, Reader: Teaching Nora Roberts's *Spellbound*

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**Abstract:** This article offers a reflection on the author's experience of teaching a novella by Nora Roberts, *Spellbound*, to an undergraduate English subject *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction* at the University of Melbourne. It outlines the subject's overarching pedagogical approach, including its objectives, syllabus and assessment, and presents a summary of the lecture on Roberts and her novella, *Spellbound* that engages with notions of genre, author and text. In the final section, the article explicitly considers readers by reporting on a 2013 survey conducted by the author to gauge students' reactions to studying *Spellbound*. This account of teaching Roberts raises questions about the interaction between reading for entertainment and reading for university, and the ways in which an academic context affects readers' appreciation of different kinds of writing.

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### Introduction[1]

Teaching popular romance fiction in the university is a sharp reminder of the importance of the syllabus in shaping society-wide notions of literary value. As Pierre Bourdieu explains, educational institutions legitimise specific literary texts by cultivating familiarity with and appreciation of them (*Field* 121). The omission of popular romance fiction from the literary studies syllabus judges the legitimacy of romance, but it also has far-reaching consequences for the formation of students' reading practices. Educational institutions promote particular attitudes towards reading and the "pursuit of culture" (*Field* 233). The cultural capital, or cultural competencies, that universities provide for

students reflects this twofold role: universities confer qualifications that guarantee a student's familiarity with legitimate culture and also foster long-lasting beliefs about literature over years of training in literary studies ("Forms" 87). The effects of the exclusion of popular romance fiction from the university curriculum are that students actively resist these texts and do not have the required skills to read and understand them.

My own reading experiences illustrate this process. As an undergraduate, I didn't study romance fiction. I was intellectually excited about modernism and postmodernism, and learned to appreciate older canonical texts. While I was immersed in learning about high literature, my mother and my sister were reading Nora Roberts. After I completed my PhD in literary studies, I finally took them up on their reading recommendations and became obsessed: I read 32 of Roberts's novels while on maternity leave.

My conversion to Roberts was accelerated through my involvement in teaching an undergraduate literary studies subject at the University of Melbourne. The subject *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction* was developed by Ken Gelder. I tutored in the subject in 2006 and 2007, and since 2008 have given a number of its lectures, including one on Roberts. My current position as a lecturer in the Publishing and Communications program at the University of Melbourne informs my approach to teaching popular romance fiction; in addition to my longstanding interest in texts, my current research investigates the production, dissemination and reception of books in contemporary culture.

This article responds to Lisa Fletcher's call to use writing about teaching practice as a "launch pad for interrogating more deeply the place of popular romance studies in higher education" ("Scholarship"). It begins by briefly outlining *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction's* overarching pedagogical approach: its objectives, syllabus and assessment. The second section summarizes my lecture on Roberts and her novel *Spellbound*. Finally, I consider students' responses by reporting on a survey I undertook in 2013 on the experience of studying *Spellbound*. While a single subject cannot transform a lifetime of educational indoctrination about the kind of literature worth valuing, *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction* aims to challenge students' preconceptions and to open up avenues for them to think critically about popular romance.

## **The subject: description, objectives and structure**

The unit description for *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction* is as follows:

This subject takes popular fiction as a specific field of cultural production. Students will analyse various definitive features of that field: popular fiction's relations to "literature," genre and identity, gender and sexuality, the role of the author profile, cinematic and TV adaptations, readerships and fan interests, and processing venues. The subject is built around a number of genres: crime fiction, science fiction, horror, romance, the "sex and shopping" novel, the thriller and the blockbuster. On completion of the subject students should be familiar with some important genres of popular fiction, and some representative examples of each genre and have a developed sense of the role of popular fiction in the broader field of cultural production.

So the subject is organized along two lines of enquiry. It raises large questions about popular fiction and its relationship with what Gelder describes as Literature with a capital L (11), and it also offers more focused analysis of a range of popular fiction genres. Romance fiction was first incorporated into the syllabus in 2007, when *Spellbound* was added. In 2013 Charlaine Harris' first Sookie Stackhouse novel was also included to diversify the presentation of romance. The texts are taught in chronological order, and in 2013 the syllabus was:

- *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Arthur Conan Doyle)
- *The War of the Worlds* (H.G. Wells)
- *The Hobbit* (J.R.R. Tolkien)
- *A Murder is Announced* (Agatha Christie)
- *Dr No* (Ian Fleming),
- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Philip K. Dick)
- *The Stud* (Jackie Collins)
- *Jurassic Park* (Michael Crichton)
- *Spellbound* (Nora Roberts)
- *The Litigators* (John Grisham)
- *Dead Until Dark* (Charlaine Harris)

The subject is taught to second- and third-year students, and enrolments for the subject are usually around 120. The teaching pattern comprises a 90-minute lecture, followed by small group tutorials in which students discuss the set text and associated readings in the subject reader.

At the end of semester, student must complete a long essay of 2,500 words that compares two texts, worth 60% of their final mark. An earlier essay of 1,500 words is due mid-semester and must address one of the first four texts studied, so students cannot write about romance for this task. A class presentation forms the basis of one of the essays. The topics for the long essays are comparative and broadly framed. Gelder's task outline includes this advice: "A good essay outlines significant critical positions and engages with them; it also looks closely at passages or scenes from the novels themselves, of course, and you will have to make decisions about what you'll look at here, and why." Topics that allow students to write about *Spellbound* include:

- comparing *Spellbound* with *The Stud* as examples of romance and "anti-romance" fiction;
- comparing *Spellbound* with *Dead Until Dark* as examples of supernatural romance fiction;
- writing about heroes in two novels;
- writing about heroines in two novels;
- writing about popular fiction and genre;
- writing about popular fiction and literary style; and
- writing about popular fiction and characterization.

The genre-based approach taken by this subject has, inevitably, both strengths and limitations. Arguably, the subject ghettoises popular fiction and each of its genres, obscuring what romance has in common with other genres and with Literature. Students

sometimes object to drawing a strict demarcation between Literature and popular fiction, or between genres (such as science fiction and fantasy), and it can be useful to remind them that examining the stability of these categorisations while acknowledging their effects is an important critical skill developed through the subject. Other students are very aware of the difference between genre fiction and Literature, and sometimes complain about the lack of literary features in texts such as *The Stud*: a student once told me the subject should be called “ShitLit.”

Teaching popular romance as one genre amongst many is perhaps an older model of approaching romance (see Goris). Some recent scholarship models other ways of teaching popular romance texts. For example, Lisa Fletcher, Rosemary Gaby and Jennifer Kloester use an “embedded” approach, where a romance novel is taught alongside more literary texts. An Goris argues for a “focused and differential approach,” that draws out the variety within the romance genre. Teaching according to genre, however, can be done in a nuanced way that addresses the dangers of simplification and generalisation. *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction*, for example, includes two different romance texts as well as an anti-romance, or “sex-and-shopping,” novel. This variety allows intra-genre distinctions and subtleties to emerge. Even within the week on Roberts, students are taught not only about romance fiction as a genre but also about the specific details of Roberts’s career and of *Spellbound* as a text, which are in some ways typical and in other ways atypical of the genre.

The genre-based approach also has particular advantages. Focusing on the genre of romance allows discussion from a publishing studies perspective, of romance’s place at the cutting-edge of digital- and self-publishing developments. This introduces a new theoretical framework for students, broadening conventional literary studies by insisting on the relevance of the social and economic contexts of contemporary texts. Looking at how romance as a genre has been dismissed by the academy also allows students to be self-reflexive, drawing upon Bourdieu. Students are invited by this subject to feel estranged from romance, to confront their own ignorance of the phenomenon, to think about what has been excluded from their education, and why, and what limitations this might produce in their ability to engage with contemporary culture. Pedagogically, this subject challenges students to think reflexively about what textual qualities they have been taught to value. When they say a book is “good” or “bad”, what criteria are they using and what assumptions are they making? Students find this line of discussion confronting, but it equips them to be more thorough and careful in their literary criticism, and more aware of the broader context of cultural production that surrounds their experience in academia.

## Lecture summary

Before the lecture, students are asked to read the set text, *Spellbound*, and two scholarly book chapters: “The Institutional Matrix: Publishing Romantic Fiction” from Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* and “One Man, One Woman: Nora Roberts” from Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. The lecture has three broad aims: to introduce the genre of romance fiction, to describe the career of Roberts, and to model some close reading of *Spellbound*’s setting and its depiction of gender roles.[2]

I begin the lecture with some dramatic statistics about Roberts. She has published over 200 novels, including 180 *New York Times* bestsellers, and releases six new titles a year. There are 400 million copies of her books in print, and over the last 30 years, an average of 27 of her books have been sold every minute. Roberts, I want them to know, is a big deal.

Then I summarise some of the judgements made about romance fiction which position it as anti-literary. Romance is cast as formulaic. It is dismissed as being read passively by women looking for a mindless distraction. Romance is also heavily commercialised. The lecture then works through these positions and complicates them.

The “romance formula” is a familiar idea for students. A number of writers have presented their own versions of this formula, and as Eric Selinger observes, a formula can be an effective pedagogical tool to prompt discussion and enable comparisons across different novels. Formulae range in complexity. A simple version is presented by Canadian romance writer Deborah Hale on her blog:  $((H + h) \times A) \div C + HEA = R$ . In this formulation, H and h= Hero and heroine, A= Attraction, C= Conflict, HEA= Happy Ever After and R is Romance. Despite the apparent reductiveness of this formula, Hale emphasises that each of these abstractions can be filled by a multitude of different possibilities: “The hero could be anything from a medieval knight to a Navy SEAL to a sexy werewolf. The heroine could be a bluestocking governess, a fashionista or a single mom ... romance writers can produce an infinite number of unique combinations.” This formula recognises the central elements of romance and its potential diversity.

Janice Radway’s 13-step formula (*Reading* 134), by contrast, is extremely specific. Presenting this can be humorous, as students realize how much of a romance plot is “scripted,” but it also tracks some of the complex and dynamic relationships that run through romance novels. Pamela Regis’ 8-step formula, recognized by Eric Selinger as a “Middle Way” between the simplistic and complex, is also valuable to share with students. This part of the lecture confirms that popular romance novels can be formulaic and acknowledges conventionality (particularly the happy ending) as part of the appeal of the genre. At the same time, the lecture invites students to see formulae as available analytical devices that illuminate some of the concerns of the genre.

The lecture next explores the idea that romance fiction is escapism for women. Students in this subject have already encountered Andreas Huyssen’s “Mass Culture as a Woman: Modernism’s Other” (from *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture Postmodernism*) which argues that the proto-modernist Flaubert creates, through his character Emma Bovary, a dichotomy between woman as the emotional, passive reader of inferior literature and man as the objective, ironic and active writer of authentic literature. A Flaubertian view of female romance readers is evident in Germaine Greer’s feminist critique in *The Female Eunuch*, which argues that the fantasies women encounter in romance fiction negatively affect their real life relationships: “Although romance is essentially vicarious the potency of the fantasy distorts actual behaviour” (203). For this reason, Greer attacks the depiction of the romance hero as strong, successful and powerful: “The traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage” (202). In this feminist reading, readers of romance fiction contribute to their own subordination in patriarchal culture.

One way to complicate the second-wave feminist attack on romance is through Janice Radway’s 1984 study of romance readers, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy*

*and Popular Literature*. This work differs from critical perspectives such as Greer's because it incorporates the views of readers themselves. This is a point where there is a close nexus between my teaching and my research, which also involves paying attention to how readers participate in literary culture (Driscoll). Following Radway's interviews with readers in the town of "Smithton," she suggests that romance fiction can operate as a way for women to cope with their real predicaments and the demands made of them: a small-scale "protest." Romance reading is not so much escapism, as a (temporary) act of refusal (*Reading* 211). Radway's study restores agency to romance readers: they emerge as active and strategic participants in culture, not mindless consumers.[3]

The final view of romance to complicate is that it is heavily industrialised. It is undeniable that romance is big business: 35-40 percent of all global mass market paperback sales are romances. In 2011, romance was worth \$1.36 billion – double or triple the market for science fiction, fantasy or mystery. I show students the websites of Mills and Boon and Harlequin to explore the way these companies market romance texts: we consider the types of formats for sale, the ways readers are drawn in through book clubs, forums and special offers, and, most of all, through the proliferation of subgenres. Subgenres standardise the production and consumption of romance fiction: readers can subscribe to a subgenre of a publisher and have new titles delivered/downloaded periodically. Readers know what to expect and publishers know how many they can sell.

This sophisticated industrial machinery can create a sense that romance fiction is writerless and that it is consumed rather than read in any meaningful way. For example, Ken Worpole writes that

there is a strong sense that the main problem about the romantic novel is that under heavy commercial pressures, it has become over-determined and over-conventionalized ... Certainly the prolific output of some writers in the genre confirms this view that once the setting has been chosen, the characters assembled and named, the novels more or less write themselves (qtd. in Gelder 44).

However, the industrialisation of romance is complicated by the genre's simultaneous creation of personal connections amongst readers and writers. A high level of (mediated) intimacy characterises the romance community. Many romance writers nurture close relationships with their fans, often through active websites. To illustrate this point, I show students Roberts's website, [noraroberts.com](http://noraroberts.com), which also functions as an introduction to her as an author. Under the menu item, "About Nora," a section titled "Up Close and Personal" offers a humorous, intimate biography. It begins by describing Roberts's life as a stay-at-home mother: "I macramed two hammocks," she admits now, "I needed help." After a blizzard led to "endless games of Candy Land and a severe lack of chocolate," she began to "look for a little entertainment that was not child-related. She took out a notebook and started to write down one of the stories she'd made up in her head." This presentation of Roberts's story vividly personalizes her and forges connections with her likely readers.

These website analyses lead to a discussion of another industry practice: digital publishing. Romances titles dominate ebook bestseller lists, and Roberts has a strong presence in digital sales: she was the third author to sell more than a million books for the Kindle. Romance publishing is moving online: two out of every five romances bought in the

fourth quarter of 2011 were ebooks. E. L. James's *50 Shades of Grey* began life as a piece of online fan fiction before becoming an ebook bestseller, then securing a print publishing deal and becoming a hard copy bestseller. At this point I open the lecture up to a discussion, asking students why they think romance titles seem to be a particularly good fit for digital publishing. Most students realise that ebooks neutralise the social stigma of reading romance fiction—no one can see what you're reading on your Kindle or iPad. Other suggested reasons for the popularity of digital romance include the ability to instantly purchase and download new titles, to store large numbers of texts, to access more of the backlist, and to try self-publishing.

The second section of the lecture concentrates on Roberts as an author. Roberts began writing category romances for Silhouette, Harlequin's US imprint, in 1981. Her work is often adapted for TV (the *Lifetime* channel) but not for film. She publishes six new titles each year: two J.D. Robb crime novels, two trade paperbacks (parts of a trilogy or quartet), one hardcover (released in summer, "the big Nora") and one mass market title or novella (often also a J. D. Robb story). Throughout the subject students have learnt that popular fiction writers work at a different pace to literary authors. They often write one novel a year, like John Grisham, rather than one every ten years, like Jonathan Franzen. However, Roberts's pace is dramatically faster than the other popular fiction authors they have studied and her level of output is often challenging for students to comprehend.

I discuss the different formats Roberts writes in, beginning with her recent "Inn at Boonsboro" trilogy. One of the engaging features of this trilogy is that it is set at the real life Bed and Breakfast owned by Roberts, in the town of Boonsboro where she lives, and features other real businesses owned by her family members such as the Turn the Pages bookshop. I ask students what might be going on here: why would an already wealthy author write a fictional book about her real world business? Cross-merchandising seems too simplistic an answer, although that is undeniably part of it: for example, the online store at NoraRoberts.com sells the themed toiletries that appear in the novels and are used in the Inn. I suggest that the novels romanticise her business: the first line of the first book in the trilogy, *The Next Always*, reads, "The stone walls stood as they had for more than two centuries, simple, sturdy, and strong. Mined from the hills and the valleys..." (1). Becoming a setting for a romance novel has imbued this building with emotion. This halo effect extends to the town of Boonsboro: there's a romanticising of the small-town mythology of America at work in these novels, a celebration of a particular ideal of American life.

The "Inn at Boonsboro" trilogy uses the genre conventions of romance to blur the lines between reading, tourism and the lived experience of Roberts and her family. Roberts clearly uses genre in some deft and creative ways. Her ability to manipulate genre conventions is showcased through the 40 plus books of the "In Death" series, penned as J. D. Robb. This series participates in multiple genres, the most obvious of which is crime fiction. In each book Lieutenant Eve Dallas and her team solve a homicide case. The covers use dark colours and bold graphics, with the gender-neutral pseudonym prominently featured. Crime is a genre of popular fiction with more prestige than romance, and more male readers, so this genre-based marketing extends Roberts's audience. Crime genre conventions influence characterisation in these books, particularly Dallas and her police colleagues, and there are crime logics at work in the telling of the stories: lots of hard work, danger, exhaustion and strong, black coffee. The books are also futuristic science fiction, as the series begins in the year 2058. While there is no world-changing "novum" such as

nuclear apocalypse, there are a host of playful details that add interest to the setting: cars that travel vertically, “auto-chefs” that cook for you, droids as servants and pets and off-planet locations for prisons and theme parks. The science fiction setting also assists in the plotting—less research into crime scene investigation methods or forensic science is necessary when Roberts can talk about “sealing up” in a vague but intriguing way. Science fiction tropes sometimes provide plots: *Creation in Death* is about cloning, while *Fantasy in Death* involves murder by hologram video game. The science fiction elements also facilitate some social commentary: for example, guns are banned and the police instead use “stunners.”

Underneath these genres, however, the books follow the core conventions of romance. The narrative drive of the series is the developing relationship between Dallas and the sexy, dangerous Irish billionaire Roarke. There are at least three sex scenes between them in most of the novels. Roarke is a classic romance hero: tall and rangy, with long, dark hair, a face with “strong, sharp bones and seductive poet’s mouth” (*Reunion* 5), “the wisp of Ireland magical in his voice” (*Vengeance* 10). He is a reformed criminal and wealthy businessman who nurtures Dallas emotionally and practically, by providing meals and medical care and encouraging her to sleep. Dallas and Roarke are married by the third book in the series, but Roberts maintains interest in their relationship by focusing on their shared psychological journey as survivors of childhood abuse. With each novel, they confront and overcome reminders of their past trauma, and their mutually-supported healing forms a spanning narrative across the series.

Not only do the “In Death” books combine several genres, but also Roberts plays the genres against each other, often for comic effect. For example, Dallas’s tough cop persona means that she must show discomfort with Roarke’s romantic gestures, including the beautiful clothes and jewellery he buys her. However, Roberts’ combination of genres is not postmodern. It’s unironic: there is no sense of parody or pastiche. We might characterize Roberts’s approach as “more is more” as she builds a blockbuster super-genre. An illustrative scene occurs in *Fantasy in Death* when Dallas and Roarke test a holographic video game that offers a time travel experience to players, allowing them to experience various historical eras in a realistic way. The game play begins in science fiction mode: “He slid [the disc] into a slot as he spoke, used both palm plate and retinal scan, added a voice command and several manual ones” (*Fantasy* 106) then the tone shifts as the game begins: “With barely a shimmer this time, she stood on a green hill, her hair long and tied back. She wore, as Roarke did, some sort of leather top that hit mid-thigh and snug pants that slid into the tops of boots” (107). This is “Ireland, Tudor era” (107): “She turned back to him and didn’t he look amazing with all that black hair blowing in the wind, in that scarred leather and with a bright sword in his hand. ‘I won’t be calling time-out.’ She lifted her sword. ‘Let’s play’” (*Fantasy* 108). The narrative device of the hyper-realistic video game allows Roberts to insert a scene like the ones she writes in *Spellbound*, of ancient combat in a mystical landscape, into a futuristic crime thriller. She provides the pleasures of multiple genres in one reading experience.

The final part of the lecture reads the set text, the novella *Spellbound*, which students are now equipped to approach using a range of critical frameworks. *Spellbound* has a varied publishing history. It was first published in 1998 as a short story in Jove’s collection *Once Upon a Castle*, and then released as a standalone mass-market title in 2005 with a price point of US\$2.99. The endmatter of this edition describes the 81-page novella



as one of a series of “hotshots,” “six quick reads from your favourite bestselling authors.” *Spellbound* is also available in two other formats: as a 2-in-1 with Roberts’s *Ever After* and as an ebook for US\$2.99. *Spellbound* participates in the subgenre of paranormal romance, incorporating supernatural elements such as witches, wizards and magic spells.

The Irish setting of the novella offers a productive analytical pathway. *Spellbound* has a heavy investment in Ireland’s romantic landscape. Roberts has Irish heritage, and frequently creates Irish settings and characters in her writing. In *Spellbound*, she constructs Ireland as a place of mystery, myth, possibility and enchantment. Calin Farrell, the hero, begins the novel in New York and flies to Ireland to address a deeply felt but inarticulate yearning. In Ireland, Calin meets Bryna, a young witch who lives alone in a cottage at the foot of a ruined castle. Bryna has been waiting for Calin: she knows that they are reincarnations of lovers from 1000 years ago, a warrior and a witch, who were separated by the wizard Alisdair when he accused Bryna of being unfaithful and killed Calin in battle. Bryna’s mission in the novella is to convince Calin of the truth of this story in time for him to battle Alisdair again, one day after he arrives in Ireland: only true love between Bryna and Calin will enable Calin to win. Calin is immediately attracted to Bryna, but his twofold task in the novel is to accept the supernatural story and to commit himself fully to her.

Like Calin, readers of *Spellbound* travel to a world removed from the everyday, a mystical world of fields, mists, stags, forests and castles. At points, the novella reads like a tourist advertisement for this mythologised Ireland. Halfway through the novel, Bryna soliloquises on Ireland as a “dreaming place”:

“We’re proud of our dreamers here. I would show you Ireland, Calin. The bank where the columbine grows, the pub where a story is always waiting to be told, the narrow lane flanked close with hedges that bloom with red fuschia. The simple Ireland.”

Tossing her hair back, she turned to him. “And more. I would show you more. The circle of stones where power sleeps, the quiet hillock where the faeries dance of an evening, the high cliff where a wizard once ruled. I would give it to you, if you’d take it” (47).

This, clearly, is not the Ireland of poverty, alcoholism and sectarian violence. Rather, it is the Ireland of postcards, an Ireland likely to appeal to those who have yet to visit the country.[4] In *Spellbound*, the escapist imperative of romance fiction is built not just into the romance plot, but into its setting, which is an imaginative space of alternative possibilities. It is also an emotionally charged landscape. Roberts’s descriptions of place contribute to the affective impact of her story, as natural features stand in for the passions of her characters. Consider Calin’s first view of the castle above Bryna’s home:

The ruined castle came into view as he rounded the curve. ... Perched on a stony crag, it shouted with power and defiance despite its tumbled rocks.

Out of the boiling sky, one lance of lightning speared, exploded with light, and stung the air with the smell of ozone.

His blood beat thick, and an ache, purely sexual, began to spread through his belly (11).

In this tightly written novella, no words are wasted. All the prose is geared towards providing emotional satisfaction for the reader.

A second way to approach *Spellbound* is through its depiction of gender. One of the key differences between this novel and the majority of romance fiction is that it is written largely from the perspective of the hero. Like the Irish setting, a focus on male characters is a characteristic of many of Roberts's novels. As the "bio" on her website notes:

Through the years, Nora has always been surrounded by men. Not only was she the youngest in her family, but she was also the only girl. She has raised two sons. Having spent her life surrounded by men, Ms. Roberts has a fairly good view of the workings of the male mind, which is a constant delight to her readers. It was, she's been quoted as saying, a choice between figuring men out or running away screaming.

The female focus of much romance fiction reflects the genre's historical association with the rise of companionate marriage in the late eighteenth century (Regis 57). The heroine is typically the protagonist because her choices determine the marriage that takes place at the novel's end. *Spellbound* reflects some of the changes in gender relations between the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. In this story, Bryna pursues Calin. She knows that she is destined to be with him – "they were meant to be lovers. This much she believed he would accept" (16). It is Calin who must make the choice to accept her offer of love. He is effectively seduced by Bryna in the novel, and this places him in a feminised position. We see this most clearly in the passage where Cal begins to worry that Bryna might be an obsessed fan who has drugged him:

Cal awoke to silence. His mind circled for a moment, like a bird looking for a place to perch. Something in the tea, he thought. God, the woman had drugged him. He felt a quick panic as the theme from Stephen King's *Misery* played in his head (18).

Bryna has taken control here, and Calin feels threatened and disoriented. If a heroine were placed in a similar position to Calin, this scene would invoke the heroine's fear of rape. Calin may be the protagonist but Bryna has power, and in Roberts's writing, this reversal of typical romance gender roles becomes enjoyably comic. When Calin asks Bryna why she stripped him and put him to bed, Bryna retorts, "Oh Cal, you have a most attractive body. I'll not deny I looked. But in truth, I'm after preferring a man awake and participating when it comes to the matters you're thinking of" (23).

Despite these shifts in the roles of heroine and hero, most aspects of the novel fulfill the genre expectations of conventional romance fiction. Calin is handsome, wealthy and famous: "He was thirty, a successful photographer who could name his own price, call his own shots" (7). Bryna, despite her sexual forwardness, has some conservatively feminine qualities. Much attention is placed on her domestic skills and the clean, welcoming cottage she has created. She even spins her own wool. Calin's reaction to this validates traditional female labour, even as it carefully avoids offending more modern female readers. Roberts writes, from Calin's perspective: "Most of the women he knew couldn't even sew on a

button. He'd never held the lack of domesticity against anyone, but he found the surplus of it intriguing in Bryna" (33). So *Spellbound* plays with some gender conventions of the genre by allowing the heroine to be sexually proactive, but other conventions are left intact.

## Student responses

To explore the effects of this lecture on students, I prepared an online survey through the free service SurveyMonkey which I announced in the lecture and in a follow-up email. This survey comprised nine multiple choice and open-ended questions and took about five minutes to complete. Twenty students responded from a total enrolment of 120 students, a response rate of 17 percent. This low level of participation in the survey means that the results should not be read as reflecting the experience or viewpoints of all students in the subject. The respondents were self-selecting, which may have introduced a bias towards those who were already interested in Roberts or romance. Eighty-five percent of respondents were female, a slightly higher figure than the percentage of female students enrolled in the subject (71 percent).

The first set of questions in the survey explored students' pre-existing familiarity with popular romance. Question 1 of the survey asked "Had you heard of Nora Roberts before you took this subject?" The purpose of this question was to assess students' awareness of this bestselling author. Fifty percent of students answered yes, and fifty percent no. This indicates that many students lack knowledge not only of romance fiction but of commercial fiction: Roberts is an author prominently displayed in bookshops and frequently mentioned on bestseller lists, for example, but has not been consciously noticed by many university students.

Question 2 asked "Had you read any novels by Nora Roberts before taking this subject?" If the answer was yes, students were prompted to identify which ones. Only three respondents (15 percent) had read any novels by Roberts before taking the subject. One was evidently a genuine fan, having read "Northern Lights, Jewels of the Sun, Tears of the Moon, Heart of the Sea, Valley of Silence, Dance of the Gods, Morigans Cross, a few from the "In Death" series. Probably more but I cannot recall the titles." Another had read *Northern Lights*, and another had read "One of her JD Robb novels." A fourth student noted that they "hadn't read any but my mum is an avid reader of her novels."

Question 3 broadened the inquiry by asking "Had you read any romance novels before taking this subject?" Eight students (40 percent of respondents) had previously read a romance novel. The question followed up with, "If yes which ones?" The titles nominated by students included "Nicholas Evans and Rachael Treasure novels," "Louise Bagshawe – The devil you know" and "I'm a big fan of Sherrilyn Kenyon's Dark-Hunter series, Rachel Gibson's novels, and Fiona Walker's 'Well Groomed'." The specificity of these answers suggests that these students may belong to fan communities of romance, with a high level of knowledge of the genre. One student wrote "Jane Austen novels," which showed insight into the history of romance fiction. Another reported reading "anything available on the op shop[5] shelves—historical romance, Collins ... I never paid attention until I read *A Woman of Substance!*" This response begins with a generalised conception of romance fiction and

one of its primary purchase locations (the op shop), before moving on to a specific author (Collins) and a particular novel to sketch a growing interest in romance fiction.

Having established students' connections with romance fiction, I went on to ask about their experiences with the set text, looking at both enjoyment and intellectual engagement. Question 4 asked "Did you enjoy reading *Spellbound*?" and Question 5 asked "Did you find *Spellbound* interesting, from an academic perspective?" Only 20 percent of respondents said they enjoyed reading *Spellbound*. By contrast, 70 percent of respondents said that they did find *Spellbound* interesting from an academic perspective. These suggestive findings indicate that many surveyed students do not associate reading this romance text with pleasure, but that adopting a critical posture increases their comfort with the genre. The nuances and implications of these results are teased out in the responses to the later survey questions.

Question 6 asked "What did you like most about *Spellbound*?" The students who responded to this question fell into some discernible groups. A number of responses were ironic: one student enjoyed "When it finished," one thought "it was so bad it was good." Another wrote, "I did not particularly enjoy any of it, to be honest. The fact that she named her lead male 'Calin Farrell' was ridiculously hilarious, however." [6] These students display something of a camp sensibility in their reading of the text. In the *Genre Fiction/Popular Fiction* subject, students discuss camp when they study Collins's *The Stud*, so this is a mode they are familiar with by the time they encounter *Spellbound*.

Another group of students enjoyed the novel on its own terms. One wrote that:

It was easy and fun to read. I liked the fact that the female was in the dominant role. I actually think the writing was decent, too. It certainly wasn't a dumb book as some would lead you to believe.

Another enjoyed the setting, "the gradual shifting perspective from the reality of life in New York to the fantastic supernatural of Ireland" and others the characters: "It was so easy to read, the characters were well defined despite the very short length of the novel." These students take pleasure in the constitutive elements of the text: characters, setting, plot, themes and writing style.

A final group of students wrote that they enjoyed looking analytically at the text. One appreciated "Seeing a genre usually dismissed taken seriously" while another responded, "I didn't so much enjoy the book as a book, but rather as a representation of the vast industry of romance fiction." Three students commented specifically on the feminist aspects of the book. One wrote, "The overwhelming gender performativity astounded me, because it was written in the 90s, a decade when women were gaining independence, yet it was interesting how Bryna was so domesticated." Another enjoyed "studying feminist critiques of it" and a third was interested in "social commentary on romance as perpetuating women's subjugation, and why the genre remains appealing." These students, then, did not appreciate the book as a leisure reading experience, but could value it as a text to be studied analytically ("taken seriously") through a conceptual framework such as feminism or through its participation in industrial practices and genre conventions.

The aspects of *Spellbound* disliked by students also reveal much about the ways in which students approach romance. Question 7 asked, "What did you like least about *Spellbound*?" A cluster of responses to this question focused on stereotypes and gender

issues. Two students wrote “stereotypes” and “gender stereotypes,” and another disliked “the part where despite Bryna’s power, it’s Calin who can solve the problem and he did it alone while protecting her.” One response offered a more lengthy feminist critique:

I found the entire plot contrived. I believe she simply utilised the supernatural genre in order to justify the “preordained love” scenario, and to give her female lead some agency, and even that was limited as she relied upon her male hero’s confession of love in order for her powers to flourish.

A second group of responses objected to Roberts’s writing style: these students disliked “the writing style,” “poor expression and writing,” and dismissed the novella as “so poorly written.” One student linked this with the commercialization of romance fiction, criticizing the book’s “lazy writing suggesting Roberts put little or no effort into the book instead relying upon her reputation/name to sell books.”

These prose-related objections are consonant with other respondents who dislike *Spellbound* because of its genre conventions. One student wrote, “some parts were very cliched (which I guess is part of the romance genre). Some parts were a bit cringe-worthy, too,” while another thought the book’s “strict adherence to romance formula, just made it pretty boring with nothing much to it.” Another student wrote that “the pace in which the events of the book unfolded seemed very unrealistic to me. Also, I had never read a romance novel before but I didn’t particularly enjoy the format.” These students critique the novel using the criteria they have been taught to apply to literary texts: complexity, realism and originality. Measured against these criteria, *Spellbound* is a failure and students are unable to appreciate it.

In a slightly different vein, two students disliked the novel on the grounds that it was not a strong example of romance fiction. One wrote that “Considering the context, it only served to concrete the stereotypes about romance fiction that people would have had in their minds – shallow and uninteresting, whereas many romance novels have much more depth.” Another compared it unfavourably with other romance fiction and other Roberts novels:

It was extremely predictable and not at all complex like many other romance novels I’ve read. It seemed almost childish with its simplicity and I wasn’t as enraptured with the plot or characters as other Nora Roberts books or other romance novels.

Like the students who disliked romance fiction’s conventional features, these students criticize *Spellbound* as lacking depth and complexity. So for these respondents, romance as a genre is defensible because it can show traits that are literary – even though *Spellbound* doesn’t.

The survey also aimed to ascertain which critical approaches to romance were most engaging for students. Question 8 asked, “What did you find most interesting about the lecture on *Spellbound*?” Selected responses show a number of routes into romance that caught students’ attention. Several enjoyed learning more about the author: such as the one who was interested in “Nora Roberts” entrepreneurial relationship with her readers and her latest series set in her home town: “weird; ballsy” and the one who appreciated “The

parts about Nora Roberts herself (eg the website and biographical info). It was interesting to consider Roberts as the product." Other students were interested in approaching the text from a feminist angle. One liked "the discussion about the formula of romance novels and the genre's relationship with feminism," and another thought that "the feminist critiques of romance novels was very interesting and fuelled lots of discussion in our tutorials."

The largest group of students was interested in romance as a genre. One was engaged by "the critical theory behind the success of romance novels and the digitalisation of romance novels" and another by "the economy of romance fiction." One stated that "the general background information of the romance genre was useful. I liked that it was treated as a legitimate book to study. Looking at different romance formulas was also useful." Another student took a broader perspective on the genre: "I thought the lecture was great, it illuminated all of the problematic aspects of romance fiction and also talked about its more positive/redemptive features."

Examined as a whole, the insights into students' thoughts provided by this survey indicate that most respondents did not enjoy reading *Spellbound*: they resist *Spellbound's* conventionality and depiction of gender roles, and find it lacking in qualities such as complexity, realism and depth that they appreciate in literary texts. However, these students do have a strong academic interest in romance fiction: its conventions, logics, practices and authors.

## Conclusion

What is the place of popular romance fiction in the higher education system? This article's account of teaching Roberts raises complicated questions about the interaction between reading for entertainment and reading for university, and the ways in which the academic context affects readers' appreciation of different kinds of writing. Historically, texts read for enjoyment and texts studied at university have been sharply distinguished. Describing her experiences as an undergraduate, Janice Radway identifies a difference between the books she read for pleasure—"bestsellers, mysteries, cookbooks and popular nature books"—and the high literature she studied in class (*A Feeling* 3). Following the cultural studies turn of the twentieth-century, the study of popular culture, including genre fiction, has a more prominent place in higher education. Yet, what happens to the pleasure of reading when these texts are co-opted by academia? Radway came to enjoy reading high literary texts at university, but for her this "was always combined with an intellectual distance ... my new tastes somehow failed to duplicate precisely the passion of my response to those other, suspect, supposedly transparent, popular books" (*A Feeling* 3). Texts that are studied as part of the university syllabus are inevitably intellectualized, and are never experienced purely as leisure. Teaching popular romance fiction at university re-situates the genre, valorizing academic readings of romance texts and obscuring what happens when such fiction is read for pleasure.

The relationship between leisure reading and academic reading is further complicated when students do not enjoy particular works of popular fiction. The survey conducted for this article showed a poor awareness of romance fiction prior to the subject and a determined refusal of its pleasures by many respondents. In this context, the

academic study of popular romance challenges and reframes students' antipathy. Studying romance fiction offers students an opportunity to explicitly consider varied reading communities and hierarchies of literary value. A pedagogical presentation of romance fiction can extend students' experience of literary culture and encourage them to reflect on their own reading and critical practices. It can open students up to the possibility of considering other literary texts as cultural products, too: further surveys of students' experiences with other genres and texts may be illuminating in this regard. My experience of teaching Roberts has reinforced the importance of acknowledging the varying reactions students have to popular romance and of providing intellectual tools that approach romance from a number of angles, such as discussions of feminism, genre conventions and the contemporary publishing industry. These academic frameworks, while unable to fully account for the pleasures of romance, enable student readers to appreciate some of the specific social, cultural and literary qualities of the romance genre, its authors and its texts.

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[1] I gratefully acknowledge the input of Ken Gelder and Claire Knowles, whose ideas and suggestions contributed to the development of this article.

[2] Both Claire Knowles and I, at various times, lectured for the subject and this section of the article reflects the collaborative nature of our lectures.

[3] Some students may be interested in engaging with critiques of Radway's characterization of romance readers and her view that reading romance may be a substitute for social or political action (see, for example, Moore and Selinger 2012).

[4] I am indebted to Claire Knowles for this idea and phrasing.

[5] An "op shop" or opportunity shop is a store run by a charity selling secondhand goods cheaply, including secondhand books.

[6] Presumably because of the similarity with the name of the actor Colin Farrell.

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