

Reading the Romance: A Thirtieth Anniversary Roundtable, Editor's Introduction

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At the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (April 16-18, 2014, Chicago), scholars of English, cultural studies, fandom, religious studies, and other disciplines gathered to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Around the world, this ethnographic study of the romance readers of "Smithton," a small city in the American Midwest, has become a touchstone for the study of all forms of popular culture—or, rather, of how forms of popular culture are used and, sometimes, transformed by their audiences. Yet as An Goris observed at the 2010 IASPR conference in Brussels, Radway's work has also been controversial, and its reception within the field of popular romance studies has sometimes been marked by "harsh and even unforgiving critiques" which amount to a form of "Ritual Matricide."^[1]

As co-chairs of the PCA Romance area, Goris and I hoped to advance the conversation about Radway's work by bringing together senior faculty, junior faculty, and graduate students to talk about the book, its reception, and its continuing importance, both in the academy and outside of it. We invited the author herself to join us, and she very graciously accepted our invitation. At the last minute, a death in the family kept her from attending—but the packed rooms at both PCA roundtables remained packed even after her absence was announced, a tribute to the lasting and expansive significance of this study.

Because these were roundtable sessions, much of the time was devoted to conversation. The pieces that follow cannot capture that lively debate, but they do hint at its parameters and crucial themes. We begin with a personal tribute to Radway as mentor, as well as scholar, by Deborah Chappel Traylor, a student at Duke in the late 1980s whose dissertation *American Romances: Narratives of Culture and Identity* was co-directed by Radway and Jane Tomkins. Lynn S. Neal, author of a more recent ethnographic study of romance readers, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction*, encountered Radway's work in the 1990s. As she explains in her remarks, she found in it a "scholarly model" for taking seriously the ways that ordinary people create "religious meaning through popular culture forms." This model has not, in Neal's experience, had the kind of transformative impact in religious studies that it has elsewhere—as, for example, in fan studies, the discipline of our third contributor, Katherine Larsen. A "spy in the house of

love,” Larsen addresses the impact of *Reading the Romance* on her discipline and on how she thinks about issues of shame and the complex self-positioning involved in contemporary “aca-fandom.”

Several of the roundtable speakers addressed the differences between the historical moment of *Reading the Romance* and our own. Jessica Matthews, our fourth contributor, explores the differences between the romance community Radway describes in Smithton in the early 1980s and the networked, interactive communities of romance readers, authors, bloggers, and scholars she herself studies. The challenge of abundance haunts her, as do enduring issues of ethics. What haunts our fifth participant, Heather Schell, are the “residual effects of the distrust and acrimony of the 1980s and ‘90s,” a time when “my scholar heroines,” Radway and Tania Modleski, were “tarred as villains by some popular romance novelists and scholars.” In “Love’s Laborer’s Lost” Schell explores some of the reasons for that anger, and also some of the stages in the ongoing reconciliation, not just between authors and scholars, but between generations in the scholarly community.

Our last three pieces, by our youngest participants, show the field of popular romance studies moving beyond this moment of intergenerational acrimony. In “From Reading the Romance to Grappling with Genre,” freshly-minted Kent State professor Stephanie Moody outlines how Radway’s account of the mostly solitary practice of romance reading in Smithton thirty years ago has shaped her own research into contemporary “romance genre participation”: the array of “digital, social, and literate practices” that romance readers now engage in, both on and off-line. Katie Morrissey, a “queer feminist” and a “lifelong romance reader,” encountered *Reading the Romance* first and foremost as a methodological toolkit: an early attempt to break down the boundaries between texts and their reading contexts. Her own dissertation work builds on that methodology, but refuses to isolate romance narratives in popular fiction from the broader discourse of romance that that we are “always already a part of,” both in the media and in lived experience. Finally, current Ph.D. candidate Mallory Jagodzinski—born after *Reading the Romance* was published, as she pointed out to groans and applause at the PCA roundtable—laments how excerpts of Radway’s study have come to stand for the book as a whole, leaving the readers and novels discussed in *Reading the Romance* to stand for the genre and its audience, but she doesn’t blame the author for this problem. Quite the contrary: as she studies the critical conversations underway within the online romance reader community—some of them sharply critical, and politically sophisticated—she sees them as the natural continuation of debates that *Reading the Romance* helped to spark three decades ago.

[1] For the full text of Goris’s remarks, which came in response to the conference keynote by Pamela Regis, see her article “**Matricide in Romance Scholarship**,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2.1 (2011).