

Kahn, Laurie, director. *Love Between the Covers*. Blueberry Hill Productions, 2015.

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Review by Beth Driscoll

Published online: July 2016

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Australian universities and popular romance fiction may be moving towards their own Happily Ever After. Growing scholarly interest in romance fiction here includes presentations on romance fiction at large conferences, a special Australia issue of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, and the award of a large Federal Government grant to study the genre worlds of romance, fantasy and crime in Australia.[1] For researchers and teachers looking to build upon this momentum, Laurie Kahn's documentary *Love Between the Covers* is a valuable resource: a lively collection of interviews and footage that is sure to stimulate thought.

The greatest achievement of *Love Between the Covers* is that it presents the complexity of romance fiction as an ecosystem. Rather than pursuing a single clear narrative, the documentary offers a number of case studies that are surrounded by an assemblage of snapshots of the romance fiction industry. There are scenes showing pitches, marketing meetings, writing critique sessions, authors' retreats, book signings, cover photo shoots, and writers writing, as well as interviews with authors, readers, editors, bloggers, and academics. This variety is a strength of the documentary, and sociologically minded students and scholars will value the insights into romance fiction's intricate, vibrant networks and systems.

At the same time, the multiplicity of short scenes produces a somewhat chaotic viewing experience. For those coming from a literary studies background, in particular, the fast cuts of the film highlight romance fiction's otherness from 'high' literature – the noise, the sociality, the predominance of women, the commercial imperatives. This disorienting effect could obscure the film's value for those who are searching for analytical frameworks to help them write about romance novels. Such frameworks are there in the film, touched

upon briefly: interviewees discuss themes such as heroism, courage and love, and recognise romance fiction's feminist commitment to women's pleasure and success.

In one interview that could spark discussion, novelist Jennifer Crusie notes that great literature is often "toxic to women" but in romance "you get rewarded for going after what you want." The more detailed case studies also open up important lines of inquiry. Author Eloisa James, for example, is a professor of English Literature but describes being advised to conceal her romance writing in order to secure tenure. Lengthy interviews with Beverly Jenkins and Radclyffe raise questions about the representation of African American and queer women in romance novels, and case studies of co-authors and a self-published author illustrate different models of how romance fiction is written and produced.

Students in graduate publishing, writing, and editing courses will benefit not only from the film's depiction of the multidimensional publishing process, but also its insights into industry change. Romance fiction leads the industry in digital innovation – uptake of ebooks, digital book talk and self-publishing – and the sector should be closely observed. In particular, the film's mixed accounts of self-publishing reward attention. Amongst comments from several interviewees about the pros and cons of self-publishing, the documentary offers the case study of Joanne Lockyer, an aspiring Australian romance author. Lockyer decides to self-publish her first novel; we see footage of the moment she uploads her book to Amazon, and the moment she delightedly unboxes the print-on-demand copies. This dramatic representation of the ease and satisfaction of self-publishing should catalyse discussions about the role of publishers in a changing industry.

The film shows romance fiction as an ecosystem, but a profoundly human and social one, and this is the aspect of the film that I found most interesting as a researcher of book culture. I was moved by the expressions of closeness between authors and readers – a feature of the romance genre, where authors often interact with their readers online and in person. This was beautifully captured through the film's interviews with Kim Castillo, an author assistant. "Nobody in my house read," Castillo recalls, but she connected with fellow readers when she started her first job, at age 14, as a sewing machine operator. Her co-workers mostly read romance, using a cardboard box as a lending library. Castillo struck up a correspondence with Eloisa James (in the film, James says "Kim was by far the most articulate who wrote to me"), and then came to work with James and other authors, handling events, newsletters, mail-outs, social media and more – "now I run a company".

The film shows Castillo surrounded by a rich community of friends and colleagues with shared interests in romance fiction. Other scenes in the film recognise the tensions and conflict that can arise within romance, but overall it is the expressions of intimacy and support that are striking. Hearing these stories of friendship and seeing the affectionate gestures and smiles shared amongst authors and readers is powerful. The scenes invite academics to reframe their understanding of contemporary book culture and recognise the roles played by emotion and friendship. Studying individual texts and authors will always have a place, but academics are challenged by romance fiction and this film to consider books within a web of economic and interpersonal networks. *Love Between the Covers* provides compelling examples of the ways romance fiction satisfies readers and writers, makes money, and nurtures a social world.

[1] I am one of the chief investigators on this grant, along with Dr Kim Wilkins, Dr Lisa Fletcher and Prof David Carter.

