

## Reader, I Included It: Reading Lists and Romance

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My engagement with romance when younger was not conscious despite my teenage reading (and watching) list consisting of paranormal romance. My choice was not framed by an understanding of genre since my naïve assumption was that romance was Mills & Boon and nothing more. (I was unable to work out how romance might connect to the appeal of sexy vampires and sexy fairies and sexy werewolves.) As far as I knew, I was interested in what these texts told us about good and evil, and the titillation of immorality. Yet, though I came for the monsters, I stayed for the romance. It was romance that offered complexity to evil and the possibility of redemption; whilst the monstrosity of the lovers, replete with ethical dilemmas, created a tension that deliciously deferred the romantic denouement. As I continued in education, I gained the language to be able to express my interest in the affect of romance in all its subgenres. Meanwhile, I continued to chase the exact thrill of discovering that Angel was a vampire seconds after he kissed Buffy; or, as Bella Swan puts it, “that first uncomfortable immersion in fantasy—the sensation that everything would disappear in the light of the rising sun” (Meyer, 2008, p.516). This play between academic analysis and enraptured reader continues to inform my decision making when teaching a creative writing module on popular literature.

I inherited the module ‘Genre Fiction’ as a Visiting Lecturer (code for zero-hour, casual worker, with no guarantee of employment in any given term) which meant I had few timetabled hours allotted for preparing classes or making drastic changes to the overall structure of the course. Instead, I supplemented the reading list with texts that had enriched my reading experience mindful of the need to complement the broader learning outcomes. The assessment for this module is twofold: a piece of creative writing—which can be an excerpt from a longer piece, or a short story—alongside a critical commentary discussing their own writing in relation to the wider genre. Thus, in the Romance week, I included on the reading list Akwaeke Emezi’s *You Made a Fool of Death with your Beauty* (2022), and to Hybrid Genres week, I added Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019). Both had left me breathless on first reading, which I had done without the intention of including them in my teaching. Emezi’s YA novel *Pet* (2019) interwove literature and art in a compelling

way—a theme which recurs in *You Made a Fool*—and I wanted to see how their effortless writing style translated into another genre. I'd seen the adverts for the film adaptation for McQuiston's novel, and having harboured a youthful crush on Prince William, I was happy to find it on my local library's shelves.

One evening, I sat outside to finish *Red, White & Royal Blue*. Under the stars, and listening to a 'dark academia' playlist, thraping through the final chapters, I put the novel aside to let my heart rate settle again. I locked myself in the bathroom to quietly weep at the exploration of grief in Emezi's novel during stolen reading time whilst my children watched episodes of *Bluey*. The somatic experience of reading these novels was overwhelming. I could explain to my students that McQuiston uses politics and royalty to create structural barriers to the happy ending, or that by including excerpts from historical letters of note the central love affair is imbued with significance, or that the epistolary form lends itself to exploring the dynamic between the public and personal whilst allowing the reader to feel an emotional intimacy with the main characters. I could argue Emezi's novel opens with a blunt honesty that asks us to put aside our expectations of romance, whilst the main character's widowhood foregrounds the risks of love immediately so that the reader enters a tentative pact with eros and eternity. But the alchemy of romance means that the affect of these novels is greater than the sum of their parts. In adding my own choice of texts, I uncovered a sense of vulnerability that felt peculiar to romance. Despite encouraging students to share their darkest fears (anonymously) for the Horror/Gothic week, it was romance where I found I must put my own feelings to one side. Moving them from my personal reading list to a module reading list was not easily done once immersed in these novels. It seemed to go against the perception that educators should—ideally—remain objective bastions of knowledge.

Since working in the Humanities currently feels a little like being in the orchestra of the Titanic, I always like to find pleasure when I can, and I wanted to pass this down to my students. These novels offered this—both through the affect of reading them and intellectual engagement in the classroom. It was once I'd pressed confirm on the reading list that I thought—but what happens if they didn't like them? When a few students found the opening of *You Made a Fool* difficult because the protagonist has unprotected sex, I wanted to shout, "Yes, yes, you should always use a condom, but this is someone who has been shattered by loss and is desperate to feel alive and life is risk." Instead, I posed questions about the effect of this scene and how it played against and into other romance tropes. To maintain sangfroid when discussing *Red, White & Royal Blue*, I adopted the vernacular of meme-culture and the highly self-aware, and even postmodern, quality of Gen Zers on social media. The self-referential quality of YA romance in which tropes are contorted and thwarted has been noted by others (see Henderson's "Genre-savvy Protagonists in Queer YA Rom-coms"). This teaching posture seemed to lend itself to the novel. Teaching texts that I cared about was hard since I worried they said something about how I understood love, desire, and relationships. I had been inculcated in the understanding that the educator should be objective and remain distant. And yet, romance works because it invites us in, and to a certain extent I had to accept the risks of what my students might presume about what I choose to read.

My inability to separate the personal from the pedagogical did provide space to reflect on one of the difficulties I had seen in my students' work. Having marked several creative pieces in this area, I found that I have had to warn students that romance might feel like the

'easy' option but, in my experience, often devolves into re-packaged tropes that speak to the author rather than the reader. The critical distance required to notice generic weaknesses and cliched turns of phrase seemed more difficult to achieve. When commenting on this, I drew attention to the difficulties I'd had in watching beloved texts dissected by my students. Or that during marking, I had to be attuned to my own biases in romance. We wrote down our most hated tropes and shared them with the group. Very few were mentioned more than twice. We discussed whether they weren't to our taste or were simply 'bad'. The consensus was that it was a matter of taste, and it would be possible to write them in an engaging manner. We went back to the texts and found our favourite lines, trying to unpack the effect of their language usage. When the students started the writing portion of the session, I encouraged them to try and keep this heightened awareness. And reminded them that even if what they were writing left them breathless, it probably still needed editing.

I plan to keep these books on the reading list, and possibly add some more of my most treasured reads. Teaching texts that I love allowed me to embrace the vulnerable and talk about how it is part of the thrill of romance. It let me model how it is possible to both adore something and be able to critique it. Most importantly, it let me show that I know that romance matters and that I wouldn't take the work they shared with me lightly.

## Works Cited

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