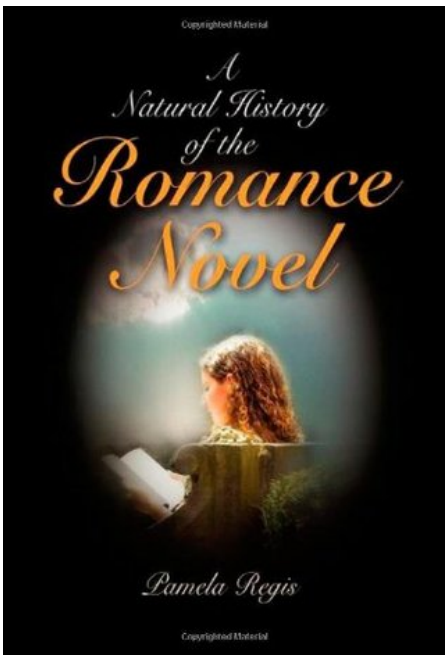

A Natural History of the Romance Novel

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The romance novel has the strange distinction of being the most popular but least respected of literary genres. While it remains consistently dominant in bookstores and on best-seller lists, it is also widely dismissed by the critical community. Scholars have alleged that romance novels help create subservient readers, who are largely women, by confining heroines to stories that ignore issues other than love and marriage.

Pamela Regis argues that such critical studies fail to take into consideration the personal choice of readers, offer any true definition of the romance novel, or discuss the nature and scope of the genre. Presenting the counterclaim that the romance novel does not enslave women but, on the contrary, is about celebrating freedom and joy, Regis offers a definition that provides critics with an expanded vocabulary for discussing a genre that is both classic and contemporary, sexy and entertaining.

Taking the stance that the popular romance novel is a work of literature with a brilliant pedigree, Regis asserts that it is also a very old, stable form. She traces the literary history of the romance novel from canonical works such as Richardson's *Pamela* through Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, BrontE's *Jane Eyre*, and E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*, and then turns to more contemporary works such as the novels of Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts.

A Natural History of the Romance Novel Details

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From Reader Review A Natural History of the Romance Novel for online ebook

Zayne says

An insightful, encompassing definition of the romance novel. Great look at the particulars of the genre without too many value-judgments (often a problem with pop. fiction studies). Great resource for any pop fiction fan or scholar.

Alice Gaines says

This book is absolutely essential for anyone who wants to write romantic fiction.

Andrea says

I was really hoping for a lot more out of this book. I understand it's a decade old, and was prepared for some of the arguments to be old-hat or out-of-date, but the problem is deeper: the arguments are weak, disorganized, and illogical. The author makes statements of opinion and expects the reader to take them as fact. She dismisses a lot of criticism out-of-hand, with little more than a "Nuh-uh". For example, in response to critics' accusations of romance novels glorifying the flawed institution of marriage, she argues that marriage in romance novels represents freedom because it's what the heroine wants, without even touching the fact that in real life, not all women desire marriage. It's the presentation of the desire for marriage as a given for all women that's the problem, and she ignores it entirely. She also fails to acknowledge any of the problematic aspects of marriage as a concept (especially historically). She goes so far as to discuss the concept of married women historically being *feme covert*, which is to say *literally the property of their husbands*, without once acknowledging the potential for abuse or neglect that concept entails. I'm sorry, if you're going to argue that women *literally being owned by their husbands* equals literary freedom, you're going to have to give me a little more than "because I said so" as a reason. She also talks about women in romance novels having power over men by virtue of their inherent qualities, e.g. on p. 133: "The heroine tames him through her inexperience, her danger, and her simple presence", without acknowledging the fact that such a depiction denies the heroine of the story any real agency. Here and elsewhere, the book raises far more problems than it puts to rest.

I checked this out from the library and got about 3/4 of the way through before it was due, but I'm not bothering checking it out again. Don't get me wrong; I'm a fan of romance. I would love to see this topic tackled by someone with the logical chops and the breadth of evidence to do it justice, especially from a feminist bent. I think there are strong literary and feminist arguments to be made for romance as a genre; unfortunately, this is not the book to make them.

Liz says

This book is referenced in Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance by Sarah

Wendell and Candy Tan, which I recently read & reviewed. Unfortunately, after reading their outspoken opinions, this well-researched book on romance novels can seem a bit dry. It is not without its merits however.

As promised in the title, Pamela Regis does go through the natural history of the romance novel from its not-so-humble beginnings to now. Pamela Regis uses examples from the early days of romance to today's books to explain the genre and its evolution. She also take time to defend its readers, who are often mocked by the world at large.

I thought this was very well done and if a romance reader is every in need of a defense of her (or his) reading choices, this is far more eloquent style than Wendell and Tan's 'Yeah. So?" approach.

Kristen says

As a married feminist, I was all ready to be convinced that romance novels are not anti-feminist. I mean, I obviously agree that marriage is the not the death of female individualism or liberty, and of course I do not think that any story line that ends in marriage is by definition oppressive; however, 200 pages later, I am not convinced. First of all, Regis criticizes the feminists who label Romances as anti-feminist for using too formulaic of a definition of romance, oversimplifying gender relations, and generalizing broadly based off of a few texts. She then proceeds to do all three of these things in defense of the Romance novel. She lists 8 "essential" elements and 3 "optional" elements that each romance must possess or else it is not a romance...hmm, that sounds very formulaic. She then sketchily defends the heroine-marries-her-rapist trope by saying that Pamela--a story about a maid who married the man who imprisons and repeatedly attempts to rape her-- "can be called oppressive only if one believes that marriage itself is an institution so flawed that it cannot be good for a woman." Hmm, or it can be called oppressive because it endorses the idea that a man may legitimize his desire to rape a woman by offering her money and property through marriage or that a man capable of imprisonment and rape will really make a charming husband once he's calmed down. So, first, I disagree with her argument and the way she tries to prove it. Then, the last 50 pages of the book consist of plot summaries of 20 or so contemporary romance novels. The point of all this summary? These women possess "affective individualism" and "financial liberty," and they choose to marry the Hero. That's all fine and well, but I really did not need to read 5 chapters of plot summary in order to gather that. So, overall, I am not convinced and I am not impressed, but I would be interested to see this argument made more eloquently and less problematically.

Cheryl says

Long scholarly slog, but worth reading for every wannabe romance writer (like self). Dry prose, but though it may not flow like fiction, it is full of useful details that prove the romance genre to be a worthy one. After reading, I'm no longer ashamed to be a fan.

Rebecca Maher says

The barrier and the ritual death: cool.

Korri says

read by torch-light during Snowtober

Why do we read romances if we already know how they're going to end?
Because the most important thing is the process, not the ending.

Regis posits a definition of the romance novel ('a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines') and its eight constituent elements that allows her to analyze the long literary history of the romance in *Pamela*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Jane Eyre*, to name a few. She refutes critics' arguments that romance novels reinforce the patriarchy by putting marriage as the resolution to women's stories. Regis argues that the romance novel centers on women negotiating their identities; developing self-knowledge and an understanding of other people (think Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice); and gaining freedom from internal and external obstacles.

This is a dry but fascinating defense of the critically-abhorred but best-selling genre.

Amanda says

Sadly not that well-put together in terms of its argument, and doesn't seem to add much to the existing scholarship on the romance. Interesting in terms of what it tries to do, but seems to rather miss the boat by falling into the exact same 'errors' that it points out in other scholarship (the use of single examples to stand for the whole, what is effectively a structuralist/formalist approach to a multi-faceted genre, etc.). It wouldn't have been an issue if these 'errors' weren't presented as such, but the writer does judge these to be failings, and therefore the piece seems deeply ironic.

Ana says

This book filled in certain gaps in my knowledge about the evolution of the romance genre, in particular from the American publishers, but what I really appreciated were the recommendations. I never know where to start with old-school romance, but now I have some ideas.

The first chapters are a defense of the romance genre, but I kind of skimmed though it to Part II, where the actual history starts.

Kenya Wright says

If you write romance, then read this book. Period. It's really great in giving the history of the genre. It teaches you the rules so that (I hope) you can break them.

Granted, I don't agree with all of the exact elements the author mentioned or her opinions on Civil Contract,

but I found the information to be really helpful in understanding the craft of romance writing.

Molly Westerman says

I found Regis's schema of "eight essential elements of the romance novel" thought-provoking and helpful for big-picture thinking, as a romance reader and also as a writer--and my main reason for reading this book was that I keep seeing references to her definition in other pieces of criticism, analysis, and writing advice. So the first 45 pages were pretty good.

After that, I ran into a lot of problems. I understand that Regis was writing at a different moment, when today's batch of seriously interested and engaged romance critics weren't writing (she didn't have Smart Bitches, Trashy Books and the likes to enjoy!), but I find it depressing and frustrating to read such a deeply defensive piece about the genre. In pushing back against overgeneralizing dismissals of romance as oppressive trash, she backs herself into overgeneralizing claims about ALL romance as liberating and good. This is a huge, diverse genre, and it bums me out to see the nuance left out.

I think because of this general impulse, Regis defends some really creepy examples of rape as a plot element (*Pamela* and *The Sheik*, about which she also basically says 'let's just set aside the racism here, because who cares, really?'). She writes, of *Pamela*, that "The story can be called oppressive, I think, only if one believes that marriage is an institution so flawed that it cannot be good for a woman," as though it's utterly impossible for a particular marriage not to count as a happy ending or as freeing unless all marriage is inherently terrible. And she seems to stick with this idea that ending up with the dude is inherently good for the female lead, no matter how terrible the dude's actions have been: later she claims that "A novel with hero and heroine not in love, not betrothed, is simply not a romance novel. [Okay.] The novel will not end in anyone's freedom [hahaha, no, given how this book depicts romance heroes, I think it might result in the heroine's freedom from a rapist-abuser or uncommunicative sad sack]."

I'm also bored and annoyed by the book's assumption that all readers are straight and that all sexual relationships are between a man and a woman: I realize that m/m and f/f romances weren't as available at the time of writing as they are now, but LGBTQ *people* sure were around, and that part of what the cited romances constructed/omitted seems completely overlooked here.

Finally, although the work may have been useful at a time when less scholarly analysis was being devoted to specific romance writers and texts, the final eleven chapters (applying Regis's definition of romance to the work of one author after another) feel formulaic and skimmable to me.

Lucinda Elliot says

I would ask any indignant defender of the 'anyone expressing criticisms of the genre or romantic novels or its defenders must be speaking from ignorance or doesn't understand the genre' school please to refrain, because I have read many romances, and sometimes, even write them.

To go to the positive, which normally I put first, I did think the style was lucid and would be very helpful for someone not familiar wiih the classics.

On the book in general, the style is concise and makes for an easy read. It was writtten, of course, circa 1999, and so naturally seems dated. It was written before so many romance writers went on the offensive about the literary value of the romance novel. Therefore, if some of the arguments seem unoriginal now, then I assume that they were more so at the time. The structure is well thought out, too.

Three stars, because I don't believe in giving low star ratings because I disagree agree with a writer's arguments, even when I think that they are weak and even absurd, as some of the ones stated here frankly are. I don't normally write such scathing reviews, but this book's soft treatment of rapist heroes really dismayed me.

The author falls over backwards to justify the heroine of 'Pamela' in her idiotic choice of marrying her one time would be rapist Mr B. In this, she makes the following astounding statement: - 'The story can be called oppressive, I think, only if one believes that marriage is an institution so flawed that it cannot be good for a woman.'

Excuse me! What sort of an argument is this? (Steam bursts from my ears…) I can't dispute that Professor Regis does think that, but it's not a valid inference. The story can be called oppressive because it romanticizes the relationship between a would be rapist and his victim in the most distasteful way. The story can be called oppressive, because the heroine is wholly oppressed by Mr B both before he puts the relationship on a nominally respectable basis, and afterwards, when he controls her every behaviour.

Not only that, but Regis has unfortunately neglected her research on Richardson's later views on the matter. I have come across a letter quoted from Richardson in another work which totally disproves that Pamela in any way finds 'affective individualism' or 'companionate marriage' even if she does obtain, through that distasteful alliance, 'property rights'.

I will return to that in a moment, and the quote from Samuel Richardson's correspondence, which shows why even the author the arch patriarch Puritan Samuel Richardson disagreed with Ms Regis over that.

On the structure, the author outlines this at the beginning. There's an bit on the critics and the romance novel, and Ms Regis considers that these criticisms didn't have a broad enough base. Very possibly that is true; I do think, however, that the critics have generally had more experience of reading romance novels generally than might appear, as I think there are probably very few women in Western Europe or the US who haven't read a few when they were growing up – whether they are prepared to admit it or not.

Anyway, leaving that aside as irrelevant here, Regis promises some thoroughgoing research – and then limits her own research, too. Lack of time, perhaps?

She argues that the feminist critics' complaint that the Marriage as Happy Ending extinguishes the heroine's freedom and confirms the values of patriarchy, is untrue because through making the marriage choice, the heroine in the notorious HEA in all romance novels finds independence, both emotional and monetary. In her choice of the hero, Regis inists that he heroine finds 'freedom'. This freedom is in fact, never defined except as 'affective individualism' a rather pretentious and vague term.

She argues that regarding the feminist critics charge that in reading romances the reader is reconciled to patriarchy through the mechanism of the fantasy HEA, that the romance novel isn't powerful enough to 'relegate woman to patriarchy and marriage' because readers are free to skip text, reject it, etc.

If so, then surely it is not powerful enough either to serve the function which she ascribes to it – to encourage

women to think in terms of emotional fulfillment, choice and independence, as she argues later on, either. There's an strong contradiction here.

She sets out the eight features that she suggests are essential to the romance novel, and then goes on to analyse a number of novels which are argued to be classic examples of romances using this definition. She picks ‘Pride and Prejudice’ ‘Jane Eyre’ etc from the nineteenth century, novels by Georgette Heyer and Mary Stuart from the twentieth century and then moves her area of interest over to the US and analyses the works of successful romance writers, the pre-plagiarist era of Janet Dailey, the work of Nora Roberts and so on.

When I came on the chapter 'The limits of romance', I hoped that we might come to some true literary criticism where the author points out some problems with the genre; but no, there is none in the book, and as for the quality of the writing, the novels of Janet Dailey are treated with the same uncritical admiration as the work of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte.

As Noah Berlatsky says, 'Regis’ difficulty is that she wants to defend all romance. She is fighting for the honor of romance as a genre, or as a whole. She never, once, in the entire book, admits that any single romance, anywhere, might be formulaic, or badly written. '

It can certainly be argued from her first premise that if one accepts the eight points she outlines as the definition of a romance novel, then works of literature acknowledged as great can be defined as romance novels. It also imposes a rigid formula on a genre which is already generally criticized as being too formulaic, and trapped into unreality and light fiction through the necessity of the fantasy Happy Ever After.

Through this definition, too, various books which many people do regard as exceptionally good examples of the genre are excluded - ie, 'Rebecca'.

Unfortunately, for a book which is meant to be a work of literary criticism, there is no more criticism in it than might be found in some work of positive thinking from a New Age guru. Pamela Regis at no point makes one critical remark about the writing of any of the authors – from Richardson to Nora Roberts. Her ‘analysis’ consists generally of praise for all of the writers, applying the eight factors to these novels, and saying that they all depict the heroines finding emotional satisfaction at the ending in their invariable choice of the hero - which she equates with 'empowerment' and 'freedom'. I don't quite see how it can be argued that there can be much freedom for the heroine within a genre which by definition gives her no choice - she must accept the hero and this must lead to 'affective individualism'.

This is why I think that insistance on the 'HEA' does a great disservice to the romance novel as an literary form, and a conditional happy ending would be a much more flexible option, or perhaps the 'HFN'. The same is true of the fantasy aspect which precludes realistic or inconvenient sordid details. I know that many, if not most romance readers would disagree with that.

The author, in fact, puts herself in an impossible position; in arguing that there have been some romances written which are great literature, pointing to the ‘canonical’ texts of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, but never admits that comparison means just that. If there have been excellent romances written, then by definition there have to have been some far from excellent ones churned out. But as a defender of romance, this is an admission that she cannot make. All that she can do, is to maintain a deafening silence on the topic.

This 'closing ranks' out of defensiveness and equating all criticism with negative criticism is an attitude of the romance community which contradicts the desire of its members for their genre to be taken seriously. Criticism by definition cannot all be positive.

For some reason, Pamela Regis makes no mention of the late Victorian/Edwardian best seller, Charles Garvice. Perhaps he is too much of an embarrassment to acknowledge as an ancestor of modern romance: but perhaps she would have been able to discuss his work with the same obliviousness to its notorious defects as she does that infamous novel by E M Hull, ‘The Sheik’.

This, of course, features a rapist ‘hero’. Pamela Regis does indeed quote a small piece sharp criticism of this, and then two women writers who somehow manage to find ‘female liberation’ in this story of women who becomes so attached to her violator that she chooses to attempt to kill herself rather than live without him. This wish to destroy herself is equated by the author with 'affective individualism'.
I would call it 'Stockholm Syndrome' myself.

Quoting a defence of the prevalence of rapist heroes in romances written before the 1970’s on the grounds that it was the only way to make readers accept the heroine’s engaging in pre-marital sex, she goes on to find the heroine strong and independent.

This brings me on to her depiction of Pamela, the heroine of the original best selling romantic novel who is happy to marry the man who has abducted her and subjected her to at least one rape attempt and many sexual assaults.

I’ve read this, and its tedious sequel, ‘Pamela in Her Exalted Condition’ (and also, Clarissa, but that’s irrelevant here) and I do not know how anyone who has, could seriously argue that Pamela obtains any sort of independence through her marriage with Mr B. I can't hep wondering if the author is relying on many reader's attention wandering during the long and tedious Pamela (and believe me, it is very tedious), let alone the dull sequel, to make the assertions that she does about the supposed liberating potential of Pamela’s marriage to Mr B.

When their relationship is put upon a nominally respectable basis, Regis is at pains to point out that Mr B makes Pamela over some money in the marriage settlements, holding this as evidence of her future independence. He also begins at once to lecture her upon wifely duty and obedience – a theme to which he frequently returns in ‘Pamela in Her Exalted Condition’. She is not even allowed to suckle her babies, as he thinks that this will take up too much of the time she should be spending on entertaining him.

But as for Pamela achieving any sort of freedom through her particular Happy Ever After with Mr B, her is the quote Samuel Richardson himself. This is a quote from one of Richardson’s letters of 1749. This says: -

“It is apparent by the whole tenor of Mr B’s behaviour, that nothing but such an implicit obedience, and slavish submission, as Pamela showed to all his injunctions and dictates, could have made her tolerably happy, even with a reformed rake.’

This quote from Richardson’s ‘Selected Letters’ comes from page 90 of Terry Eagleton’s book, ‘The Rape of Clarissa’ and is surely a refutation of Pamela Regis’ claim that Pamela in any way achieves independence of any sort through her marriage with Mr B.

I am astonished that Ms Regis could make the assertion that I quoted in the beginning of my review in defence of Pamela marrying the man who has attempted to rape her. The story can be defined as oppressive because it celebrates the union of a would be rapist and his victim in one of the most distasteful 'HEA"s one can imagine. After this he continues, as Richardson admits, to be totally controlling.

I find the defence of the HEA’s in romance novels that they all lead to great happiness for the heroine in her

achievement of ‘affective individualism’ in her choice to marry the hero, plus financial independence, unconvincing.

Regis admits to the ‘frankly individualistic’ nature of these, but she finds the ideology of individualism above criticism anyway, perhaps forgetting that all ideologies are an aspect of the thinking of a particular historical epoch.

It is arguable that the romance novel as it stands is a form of literature peculiarly suited to a form of society (advanced capitalism) and its ideology of individualism, just as the Grail legends were appropriate to the ideology of feudalism. Pamela Regis brings this out. The HEA for the main couple is an indication of this, though she goes in for some vague talk about the ‘transformation of society’ by their coming together.

For many uncritical fans of the genre – and the literary critic Pamela Regis writes as one, the fantasy element of the HEA is its chief delight. I am of the persuasion that a move to a more realistic, conditional HEA would be one of the factors that would lead to its acceptance as literature.

Christen says

3.5 Stars.

It's a "textbook" book for those interested in the genre, not just reading romance books. Regis quotes a lot of other authors Romance Lit Crit on the subject. I do like Regis' "Eight Essential Elements of a Romance Novel," because it made sense. She used Pride and Prejudice as the example (she belabored the point with almost too many details and examples).

Then she took five more literary classics that follow what she believes supports her eight elements (each a chapter). Again, I felt she belabored the point and wasn't sure who she was writing for because times it was textbook and other times attempting to win over the non-textbook readers. A list of books would have sufficed. Then she jumped to modern day, and I found that interesting.

The middle the recaps got long but skimmable and readable if you haven't read the books.

Phair says

Really enjoyed this- would prove very helpful for those involved in Romance Discussion Groups. Nice overview of the genre from historical perspective as well as pointing out necessary narrative elements & changes to the form over time. She won my approval for noting one of my favorites (The Sheik) as the first "modern" romance novel.
