A look at the new committed relationship between academe and romance fiction

When I was working on my master of fine arts (MFA) many years ago, one of my professors said, "Jenny, do you ever think about writing literature?" I said, "No" because I thought there was no way anybody in higher education was ever going to think that romance fiction was literature, no matter how brilliantly I argued that it was. Romance and academe were like two people who were meant to be together, but one of them was too controlling, too overbearing, too blind to see the beauty in front of it. It was Rochester and Jane Eyre all over again.

I was wrong.

And we now have academic conferences devoted to romance fiction such as Princeton University's "Love as the Practice of Freedom?: Romance Fiction and American Culture" weekend organized by Princeton Professor Bill Gleason and Eric Selinger in 2009; McDaniel College's "Popular Romance in the New Millennium" organized by Pamela Regis as part of the Roberts Foundation grants in 2010; and the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance's "The Pleasures of Romance" in York in September of this year. Meanwhile, existing literature conferences like the Popular Culture Association and the Comparative Literature Association have added romance sections, too.

Romance has its own academic journal: the Journal of Popular Romance Studies (http://jprstudies.org/), edited by Eric Selinger with an editorial board that is pretty much the Who's Who of romance scholarship. College and university libraries are making serious efforts to develop romance collections: the Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University is the gold standard here with its amazing romance inventory including more than 10,000 category romance novels, many more single-title novels, and an extensive manuscript collection, and McDaniel College's Hoover Library has begun its own American romance collection thanks to the Roberts Foundation grants, focusing on acquiring the entire canon of 21 romance novelists.

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Romance Fiction in the Classroom

These papers, conferences, and collections are all gratifying, but they’re not the only places in academe where attitudes are being challenged and changed. College literature courses that focus solely on romance fiction are becoming more common, and even when they don’t win converts to the cause, they change attitudes. Elizabeth Kavitsky, one of the students in Regis’s Popular Romance Fiction class, said that the course hadn’t made her a romance reader (although Lord of Scoundrels had made her a Loretta Chase fan), but it opened her eyes not only to the craft of the romance novel, but also to the world of romance writers and readers. “I realized I was a complete fish-out-of-water in this genre, something I never encountered before. Learning to understand romance novels’ form, their imagery, and the tight-knit circle of critics and authors that defined for this genre was incredibly eye-opening.”

The next logical step for romance scholarship was a creative writing course devoted solely to romance fiction, and once again Pam Regis at McDaniel College, drawing on the Roberts Foundation grants, broke new ground by proposing a five-course online creative writing program in romance fiction. Then, she invited me to help her design and teach the courses (thank you, Pam).

Even if creative writing professors have been open to the genre in their classes in the past, they were usually not well versed in the genre—the romance novel makes demands on the author that other genres do not. Regis and I had to design the McDaniel program so that it covered the same ground as most creative writing courses—craft and workshop—but we also had to address the demands of the romance genre and its readers. In general creative writing classes, it’s important to teach plot development and character arc, but in the romance writing classes, it was going to be important to teach relationship development and attachment arc, not just the way character changes in a story but the way falling love and beginning a sexual relationship changes people (not to mention how to effectively put that kind of emotion on the page). And while I’d taught creative writing in the classroom before, these classes were going to be online, which meant they were going to be very like the free-form communities of romance writers that so many of us belong to, but they were still going to have to provide a structured format. We were doing the academic tango backwards and in high heels, which seemed appropriate.

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The first class, designed by Regis, is a survey of romance fiction, aimed at giving students practice in the close reading of the genre; it’s no secret that reading romance makes you want to write it, but it’s also true that reading good romance and figuring out why it’s good makes you a better writer. The second class focuses on writing character, since romance is about relationships, studying how to write characters, paying attention to how they function in the story, how they interact in a community, how they fall in love and then into bed, is essential to the success of the story. The third class focuses on structure, showing how to parallel the romance plot with the action plot of the story and breaking down that structure into its parts. We designed the fourth class as a workshop devoted to polishing the proposals generated by the work in the first three classes, and the fifth and final class on how to understand and survive romance publishing.

We’ve just begun the first class, but it’s clear that the program is another testament to the marriage of romance and academe. In online classes, students are required to participate in discussions to ensure that they’ll take part in the class. The first week classes were in session made it clear that wasn’t going to be a problem: the romance classes are generating twice as much discussion as the usual college class because there’s so much to talk about. As student Micki Haller Yamada wrote, “The discussions and papers are great for thinking more deeply about our craft, and we also get a lot from side discussions—gossip about the best software to use, other writing resources that are available, and we get to hear the experiences of fellow writers.” That community is familiar to romance writers everywhere online, but in this case, it’s focused on going deeper into craft of fiction writing. All that discussion is more than chat, it’s helping clarify romance writing for students. Fiona Humphries, one of our British students, wrote, “I took this class because I wanted to learn how to write romantic fiction from someone who writes the sort of books I love reading .... The more I understand about the
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... craft, the more I realize how much I don't know. I have probably read thousands of romance novels—and loved and kept hundreds—but it's only now, after taking this course, that I'm starting to appreciate how good some of those authors really are."

The students' reasons for taking the class underscore the need for academe to take the genre seriously. Conferences and workshops can only do so much by approaching romance writing in increments. Where an academic approach to literature shines is in taking a look at a genre as a whole, the big picture over the long term. Student Jill Woodley pointed this out when she said, "The program is intensive and requires a heck of an investment (financial, time, and effort), which means that I'll spend 40 weeks getting to know a small group of romance writers who are equally serious about improving their work and who are able to commit to the same schedule. It's also a huge bonus that we get to apply our learning to our own WIPs [works in progress], and to critique one another, supported by [Jenny] and Pam. I suspect it would take me years to replicate the benefits if I tried to put it together piece by piece."

Kay Keppler, another student, summed up the benefits of studying romance writing at the college level when she said, "I wanted to take this course for two reasons: First, I wanted to commit deeply to thinking about and becoming a better writer. I've taken my share of classes and workshops; I've gone to conferences; and I've done some writing. Everything helps. But I felt that a demanding course that required a lot from me, that required both analysis and practice, would stretch me in new directions and make me see and think in new ways ... Second, I thought taking this course would be fun. I've been in jobs for several years that weren't; I've been in a rut. I thought it would be a blast to spend a year with Jenny Crusie, Pam Regis, and a bunch of really smart women who wanted to talk about romance writing. And it is. So far, the course has been everything I'd hoped it would be."

All of these things taken together mean not only that romance has breached the walls of academe, it means we've settled in and been accepted: we belong there. I'm pretty sure if I asked any of our students at McDaniel if they ever thought about writing literature, they'd say, "Of course, romance literature." They're part of the brand new committed relationship between academe and romance fiction, forged by academics and romance writers working together. Reader, we married them, and we're both the richer for that.