

## **Perceptions of Romance Readers: An Analysis of Missouri Librarians**

By Denice Adkins, Linda Esser, and Diane Velasquez

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### **Introduction**

The romance novel is a form of literature geared toward women, which presents a love story with a central female character and a focus on that character's emotional state. Feminist scholarship and library-related literature from the 1980s and 1990s suggests a bias against romance novels on the part of librarians. Some of the reasons for this opinion include the marketing of romance novels as commodities rather than literature, the presence of sexuality in those novels, and the suggestion that romance novels undercut the goals of feminism by maintaining that the key to women's happiness lies in male domination.

To counter that negative perception, some librarians have worked to foster positive views of the genre. Many female and some male librarians admit to reading romance novels. Some librarians proudly admit to writing those same novels. Scholars such as Mary K. Chelton and Janice Radway articulate the appeal of the romance, while others take romance as a staple of genre literature. The romance novel became, in effect, a battleground upon which librarians challenge one another in print. What has not been studied is the attitude of working public librarians toward these novels and their readers. In augmenting research on the subject, this paper addresses the following research questions.

- 1) How do public librarians and library staff perceive romance readers?
- 2) Do public librarians and library staff feel that romance reading is detrimental to women?
- 3) Are romance novels a significant element of the collection, as indicated by collection development funding and cataloging practices?

### **Background**

As analyzed in early articles, the academic response to romance novels was generally one of scorn. Academic articles from the 1960s through the 1980s focused on the negative elements of romance, making a clear distinction between romance and "high" culture. These authors provided multiple reasons why the romance novel was inappropriate or inadequate reading material. Principally, of course, romance novels were deemed to be less worthy of the reader's time than other works of fiction.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, however, romance was deemed pornographic for its inclusion of sex between hero and heroine, and the focus on the heroine's satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

Feminist critics had other concerns. They maintained that romance novels "perpetuated patriarchal structures" which were ultimately detrimental to women's happiness.<sup>3</sup> The novels showed women being economically rewarded for their appearance and their passivity, and that romance novels trained women to believe that their lives revolved around men.<sup>4</sup> Further, women who read romance novels were not able to organize and protest the social conditions that

encouraged their use of romance as escape or pain killer, and became reconciled to insensitive or abusive male behavior through the narrative structures of romance.<sup>5</sup>

Recent work on romance, inspired by Janice Radway's groundbreaking work in the late 1970s, has taken a different perspective. Romance has been re-established as popular literature, and women readers as deriving particular satisfactions from the novel's portrayal, or remaking, of the world. A point noted by Radway and acknowledged by her successors is that reading romance provides an "escape" from the strains of family life and a means of recharging and recovering.<sup>6</sup> Romance novels portray a world in which feminine values such as community-building and expression of emotion are valued, where heroes are able to use emotional language, and where heroes nurture the heroine.<sup>7</sup> The romance novel becomes a source of affection and nurturance for those women who cannot find it elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> It also allows women to explore their sexuality and demand orgasmic parity with men in their sexual relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Romance novels have undergone significant change throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The incorporation of feminist mindsets, women working outside the home, and women making substantial achievements has been noted in several analyses.<sup>10</sup> Romance novels are lauded for portraying strong female characters who are willing to pursue their goals.<sup>11</sup> They show women who engage in meaningful, personalized work.<sup>12</sup> Romance in fact poses a "site of resistance" wherein women challenge both patriarchal oppression and academic feminism.<sup>13</sup>

Despite changing attitudes in the academic literature, articles in library literature suggest that librarians are apparently not 100% supportive of romance fiction. Early articles offer backhanded support for their inclusion in the collection. In 1980, public librarian Rudolph Bold recommended stocking romance novels, even while denigrating the genre's literary quality.<sup>14</sup> His view was that librarians ought to realize that their literary standards might be "unattainable" for the members of the community. Roger Sutton's "Librarians & the Paperback Romance: Try to Do the Right Thing" in 1985 refers to teen paperback romances specifically as having the "trappings of mush" -- hyperbole, throbbing and heat." He described the genre in terms of poor writing, minimal characterization, bare-bones plots, hokey, and hoary. Sutton's language suggested that librarians are forced to accept these kinds of books only because of reader demand. The days of "uplifting" collections, he said, are gone. As late as 1995, Shelley Mosley, John Charles, and Julie Havir suggested that librarians treated the censorship of romance novels as a "social obligation."<sup>15</sup> Besides being derided for its effect on pleasure readers, romance is also scorned in research collections. Allison Scott refers to romance research collections as "a valuable, endangered species of research material, and a class of book that constitutes a major portion of the contemporary bibliographic marketplace in North America."<sup>16</sup> There are collections that support research in science fiction, detective fiction, and other genres. Romance, as a contemporary literary form, is ignored.

However, some articles offered support for the genre. In 1984, two Illinois public librarians discussed patron and staff support for their romance collection. With articles discussing the romance genre and its appeal, *Publishers Weekly* forcibly brought romance novels to librarians' attention in 1989 and 1991.<sup>17</sup> Mary K. Chelton discussed romance's audience appeal in 1991, and in a 1992 editorial, Francine Fialkoff cited format and item cost as the main reasons why *Library Journal* did not regularly review romance novels.<sup>18</sup> Two years later, in 1994, *LJ* initiated

a regular romance review column. Librarian-authored romance reader advisory tools such as Kristin Ramsdell's *Happily Ever After* (1987), *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (1999), and Ann Bouricius' *Romance Reader Advisory* (2000) suggest a tolerance for romance among some members of the profession.

The stigma directed toward romance novels in libraries, the academic literature, and the stigma that romance novel readers claim feeling, seem to be at odds with publication statistics which suggest that romance novels enjoy great sales and that romance publishing is a booming industry. Romance sales generated \$1.4 billion in sales in 2003 and \$1.63 billion in 2002. Romance fiction comprises 48% of all popular paperback fiction sold in North America, and 33% of all popular fiction sold (paperback, trade paper, and hardcover).<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps reinforcing strong sales data, the Romance Writers of America report that only 14% of romance readers obtain romance novels exclusively by checking them out from the library. Most romance readers buy brand new novels. Do women avoid checking romance fiction out of the library because of the stigma attached to being a romance fiction reader? Jayne Ann Krentz's introduction to *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* makes a powerful statement about romance fiction readers: "Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel on an airplane. She knows what everyone around her will think about both her and her choice of reading material."<sup>20</sup>

## Method

A survey methods was used to gauge Missouri librarians' opinions on romance novels and romance readers. A sample of public libraries were chosen from the *2003 Directory of Missouri Libraries*.<sup>21</sup> A purposive sample was chosen, in order to adequately represent urban, suburban, and rural public libraries. Though the sample included primary library facilities and branch service outlets, it did not include bookmobiles or deposit collections. Surveys were sent to 126 public library services outlets (central and branch facilities), with an option to be removed from the mailing list by returning an empty envelope. While 57 envelopes were returned as of October 1, 2004, three were empty. This gave a response rate of 54 surveys, or 43%.

The survey instrument included questions which explored librarians' attitudes toward romance novels and romance novel readers. Other questions asked about library practices with regard to collection development and cataloging of romance novels. Respondents were also asked whether they read romance novels themselves, and for some general demographic information. The variables provided by the survey were generally categorical or ordinal, with the exception of the question asking for the estimated size of the library's romance novel collection. Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS 12.0. Some questions on the survey were open-ended and respondents could include their comments. Qualitative analysis of these comments and responses was performed using nVivo.

## Results

Of the 54 surveys received by the cut-off date, 23 were from rural libraries, 12 from suburban, 18 urban, and one that did not indicate region type. Each library was asked to best describe their library's service to the community. These responses were based upon the Public Library Association's (PLA) 2001 book, *The New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach*. The top five responses were Current Topics and Titles, General Information, Lifelong Learning, Local History and Genealogy, and Basic Literacy. The responding library staff were overwhelmingly female, with only three male respondents out of 54 total. The modal age response given was 40 to 59 years old, with no respondents in the 20 to 29 year old age group. The respondents were moderately well-educated, with 46% holding the MLS or an Educational Specialist degree. The rest had either completed a bachelor's degree or had some college.

*Collecting and Cataloging:* Respondents agreed that romance novels were relatively popular. There was no difference in popularity between types of service area (rural, urban, or suburban). We found no significant difference in the library's Service Response answer and the size of the romance collection. More responses might clarify this issue, but it seems as if a library focusing on Current Topics and Titles is just as likely to stock romance as a library focusing on Basic Information.

We asked the libraries to tell us how many paperbacks and hardback romance novels were in their collection. Only 37 out of 52 respondents answered this question. The mean size of the romance novel collection was 3,452 for paperbacks and 3,239 for hardbacks. Most libraries obtain their collections from a combination of purchases and donations. From the comments, the majority of the libraries purchase hardback romance fiction and obtain donated paperbacks. When asked how much of the collection budget was allocated for romance fiction purchases, the 44 respondents most commonly indicated that they spent between 1-2% of collection development funds for romance novels. The majority of respondents (50 out of 54) indicated that their romance novel collection is accessible via the card/online catalog and that romance novels receive full cataloging records.

*Reader Advisory Practices:* Respondents were asked whether they read romance novels, and if so, whether they did so for personal or work-related reasons. Of the 36 respondents who answered this question, 21 read romance novels for personal reasons, while only 15 read them for work-related reasons. Most respondents, 52 out of 54, indicated that they never or rarely discussed romance novels with their colleagues. No significant relationships were found between romance readership and age or education.

*Attitudes toward Romance and Romance Readers:* Several questions asked librarians to indicate their attitudes and beliefs about romance fiction and romance readers. Each question represents a belief posited by the academic literature about romance novels. The respondent could choose her level of agreement with the statement. The table below shows how respondents answered.

<b>Attitude</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>No Opinion</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Romance novels are very popular, high-circulating items at my library.	4	5	5	29	10
Romance readers are less educated than women who read other kinds of fiction.	25	18	8	4	0
Romance readers learn attitudes and behaviors from romance novels.	7	14	24	6	0
Romance novels suggest that a woman's happiness is bound up in the traditional roles of wife and mother.	8	25	13	5	0
Romance novels show women as strong, active characters who forge their own destinies.	0	7	27	18	2
Romance novels are pornography for women.	12	25	14	1	0
Romance novels are instructional manuals on how to "catch a man."	14	25	14	0	0

## **Discussion**

How do practicing Missouri public librarians feel about romance novels? They seem to fall between the scorn manifest in the early 1980s and the wholesale acceptance and respect suggested by Krentz. In their responses, Missouri librarians say that they are relatively tolerant of romance novels, though some of their language and their reading behavior implies that they are less so. The fact that many libraries selected their primary service response as Current Topics and Titles suggests that entertainment reading is a strong service imperative. Romance readers' high volume novel consumption ought to be especially valued, and in some libraries, they are. However, this is not the case across the state.

Missouri public librarians do seem willing to purchase romance novels for their patrons. Though a substantial percentage of romance fiction is donated, most libraries purchase at least some romance fiction. However, much of that investment is in the form of hardcover books, which offer a limited selection of culturally-affirmed authors. Hardcover or trade paperback romance novels may be considered less stigmatizing than the traditional clinch cover romance novel. Romance authors who achieve this status may be marketing to a different audience than the traditional notion of the romance reader.

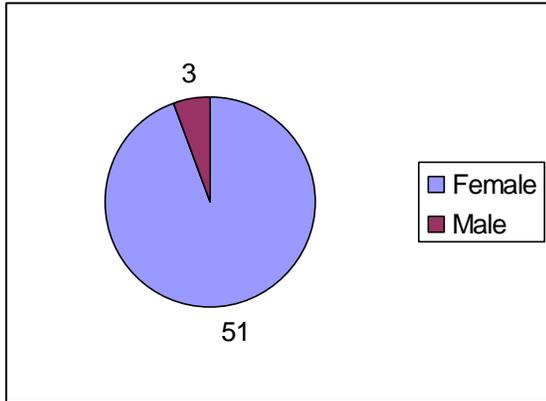
Missouri librarians are less judgmental toward the literary merit of romance novels, and more concerned about patron satisfaction. However, two strains of comments indicate an essential conflict between personal opinion and professional ideology. Some librarians seem to regard romance as low culture, with such statements as "I wish they'd grow up to read real literature." There seems to be a tendency to judge books written by women for women as less worthy and low culture. However, librarians seem to have been trained by the profession to avoid being seen making judgments about reading. Comments such as "we try very hard not to judge by reading

preference” suggest that librarians are indoctrinated into the non-prescriptive philosophy of reading provision, rather than reading guidance.

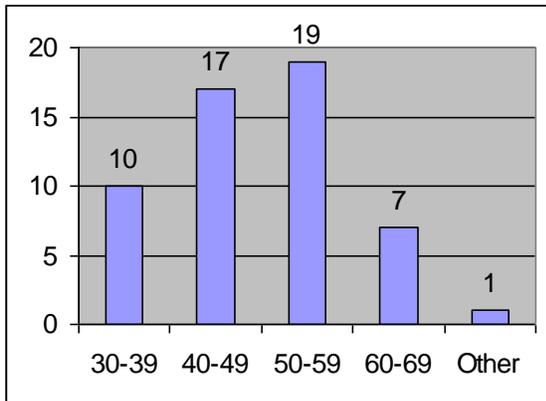
In Missouri libraries, genre literature co-exists with an information-oriented service response. Nonetheless, comments indicate a lack of awareness of reading motivations. Library professionals and paraprofessional staff seem not to have been sufficiently instructed in reader advisory and reader motivations. An interesting data trend was that respondents with the MLS/Ed.S. degree seemed to be less tolerant of romance novels than those with only a college degree or less education. This suggests an avenue for further research. Is this incongruity an effect of MLS education or a precondition of the students entering? Does MLS education reduce students’ tolerance for genre literature reading? If so, how?

## Demographics

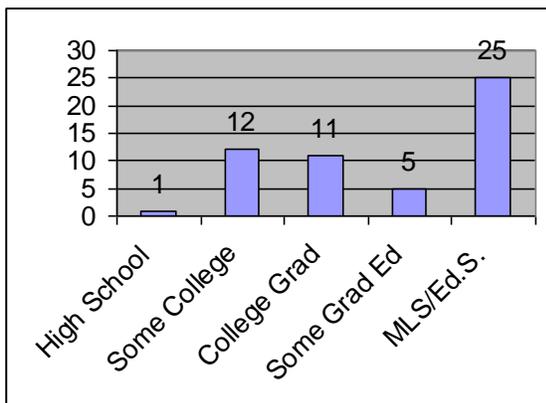
What is your sex?



What is your age category?

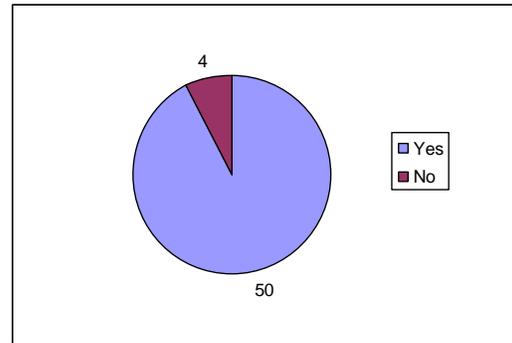


How many years of education have you completed?

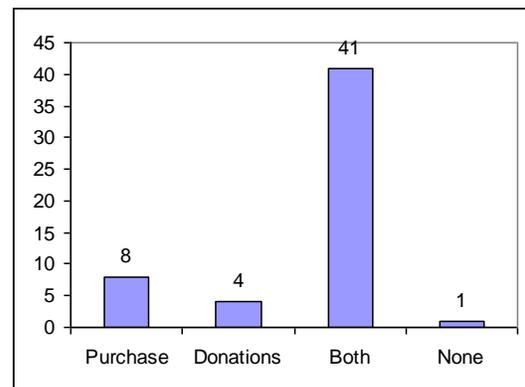


## Library Practices

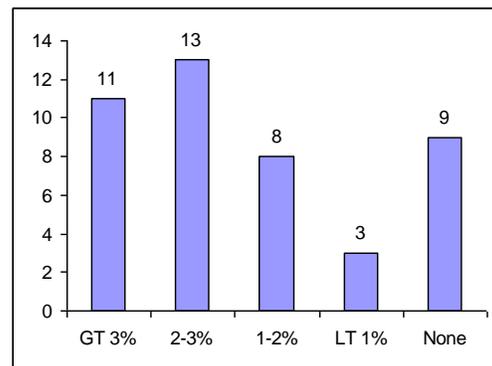
Does your library include romance novels in the card/online catalog?



How does your library acquire romance novels?



What percentage of collection development funds is allocated for romance novels (hardback and paperback)?



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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph Bold, "Trash in the Library," *Library Journal* (May 15, 1980): 1138-1139.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Parisi, unpublished talk given at Rutgers University, April 6, 1978. As cited in Ann Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different (1979)," in *Women and Romance: A Reader*, ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 307-322.

<sup>3</sup> Janice A. Radway, "Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context (1983)," in *Women and Romance: A Reader*, ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 323-341.

<sup>4</sup> Dawn Heinecken, "Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction," in *Romantic Conventions*, eds. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 171; Tania Modleski, "The Disappearing Act: Harlequin Romances," in *Gender, Language, and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 20-45; Jeanne Dubino, "The Cinderella Complex: Romance Fiction, Patriarchy, and Capitalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 103-118.

<sup>5</sup> Radway, "Women Read the Romance," 337; Ann Rosalind Jones, "Mills & Boon Meets Feminism," in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jean Radford, (London: Routledge, 1986), 195-218.

<sup>6</sup> Radford, Radway, Diana Palmer, Jennifer Maher, "Ripping the Bodice: Eating, Reading, and Revolt," *College Literature* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 64-83.

<sup>7</sup> Jayne Anne Krentz, "Introduction," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Anne Krentz (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 1-9; Patricia Koski, Lori Holyfield, and Marcella Thompson, "Romance Novels as Women's Myths," *Paradoxa* 3, no 1-2 (1997): 219-232; Sarah S.G. Frantz, "'Expressing' Herself: The Romance Novel and the Feminine Will to Power," in *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*, ed. Lydia Cushman Schurman and Diedre Johnson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 17-36; Jean Radford, "A Certain Latitude: Romance as Genre," in *Gender, Language, and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 3-19; Clover Williams and Jean R. Freedman, "Shakespeare's Step-Sisters: Romance Novels and the Community of Women," in *Folklore, Literature, and Cultural Theory: Collected Essays*, ed. Cathy Lynn Preston (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 135-168.

<sup>8</sup> Radway, "Women Read the Romance," 330; Suzanne Juhasz, *Reading from the Heart: Women, Literature, and the Search for True Love* (New York: Viking, 1994); Lynda L. Crane, "Romance Novel Readers: In Search of Feminist Change?" *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 257-259.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Thurston, *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Radford, "A Certain Latitude," 12; Lynn Coddington, "Wavering Between Worlds: Feminist Influences in the Romance Genre," *Paradoxa* 3, no. 1-2 (1997): 58-77.

<sup>11</sup> Krentz, "Introduction," 5; Jennifer Crusie Smith, "This Is Not Your Mother's Cinderella: The Romance Novel as Feminist Fairy Tale," in *Romantic Conventions*, eds. Anne K. Kaler and

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Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), pp. 51-61.

<sup>12</sup> Leslie W. Rabine, "Romance in the Age of Electronics: Harlequin Enterprises," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 1 (1985): 39-60.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Coddington, "Wavering Between Worlds," 75.

<sup>14</sup> Bold, "Trash in the Library," 1138.

<sup>15</sup> Shelley Mosley, John Charles, and Julie Havir, "The Librarian as Effete Snob: Why Romance?" *Wilson Library Bulletin* 69 (May 1995): 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> Alison M. Scott, "Romance in the Stacks; or, Popular Romance Fiction Imperiled," *Scorned Literature: Essays on the History and Criticism of Popular Mass-Produced Fiction in America*, ed. Lydia Cushman Schurman and Diedre Johnson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 213-225.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Iglesias, "Passion's Promise," *Publishers Weekly* 236, no. 8 (August 25, 1989): 13-18; L.

Fleischer, "Reacing Out and Touching," *Publishers Weekly* 238, no. 26 (June 14, 1991): 40;

"New Shades in Pink Ink," *Publishers Weekly* 238, no. 31 (July 19, 1991): 15-19.

<sup>18</sup> Francine Fialkoff, "Romancing the Patron," *Library Journal* (1992): X.

<sup>19</sup> Romance Writers of America, "2004 Romance-Fiction Sales Statistics, Reader Demographics and Book-Buying Habits," <http://www.rwanational.org/StatisticsBrochure2004.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Krentz, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>21</sup> Missouri State Library, "Missouri Libraries: 2003 Directory," <http://www.sos.mo.gov/library/libdir.asp> (accessed June 10, 2004).