



Romance Novels

by Tina Gianoulis

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The literary genre of romance is basically defined as stories of romantic love and passion, where the lovers face obstacles but are always happily united at the end in a permanent relationship. Other popular conventions, such as an historical or exotic setting and vividly steamy sex scenes, often figure in romance novels, but only the committed relationship and the happy ending are required.

In the past, these stories of romance focused almost exclusively on relationships between women and men. Indeed, some romance novelists rely heavily on gender stereotyping of the manly male hero and the fainting heroine with heaving bosom.

However, as queer relationships have come more and more out of the closet, the queer romance novel has also begun to come into its own. Especially lesbians, and to a lesser extent gay men, bisexuals, and the transgendered, who savor romantic fantasy have an increasingly wide selection of novels to choose from.

Early Lesbian Romance Novels

Since sexual orientation is generally defined in terms of relationship, much gay literature focuses on the budding sexuality, attraction, and passion of romantic relationships. It is the *de rigueur* happy ending that most clearly separates the romance novel from other forms of glbtq fiction. However, for queer readers, whose lives and loves have been too often problematic, this "happily ever after" convention makes the gay romance novel not only a satisfying read, but also a wildly radical demand for love lives without tragedy.

Because of this, the early lesbian pulp novels of such authors as Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor cannot be considered true romance novels. Their tones are too gritty, and their lesbian heroines too tortured. Written during the repressive 1950s and early 1960s, books like *Beebo Brinker* (1962) and *Whisper Their Love* (1957) could almost be described as anti-romance novels, reflecting societal assumptions that lesbians could not have happy endings.

A notable exception to the denial of happy endings is the 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, by Patricia Highsmith writing under the pen name Claire Morgan. Highsmith's heroines Therese and Carol neither die nor go straight, but choose to stay together at the end of the book.

The gay liberation movement that began with the 1969 Stonewall rebellion began to change gay men's and lesbians' expectations and hopes for their lives. An influential lesbian romance novel, also published in 1969, was devoured by many young feminists who were gathering courage to come out. *A Place For Us* (later retitled *Patience and Sarah*), written by Alma Routsong under the pen name Isabel Miller, is a classic historical romance novel, even though it is based on the real-life story of two nineteenth-century lesbians. For young lesbians developing a political identity, the idea of happily loving lesbian foremothers was deeply satisfying.

In 1971, a retired (and closeted) lesbian lawyer named Anyda Marchant, along with her life partner Muriel

Crawford, founded Naiad Press, which would become the best-known publisher of lesbian romance novels for almost the next three decades. Marchant wrote many lesbian romance novels herself under the pen name Sarah Aldridge, and she founded Naiad to publish her own work.

Later Marchant went into partnership with two Midwest lesbians, Barbara Grier and Donna McBride. Naiad expanded its author list and published dozens of romance novels and story collections, developing several sub-genres, such as mysteries and erotica. Katherine V. Forrest became one of Naiad's most popular authors, producing detective and science fiction romances, such as *Amateur City* (1984) and *Daughters of a Coral Dawn* (1984), as well as standard romance novels. Forrest's *Curious Wine*, first published by Naiad in 1983, is regarded by many as a classic lesbian romance novel.

Recent Lesbian Romances

Naiad's pioneering led to a wealth of contemporary lesbian romance novels, including the works of Kimberly La Fontaine (*Picking Up the Pace*, 2005), Diane Tremain Braund (*Bold Coast Love*, 2000; *The Tides of Passion*, 2005), and Jane Francis (*Reunion*, 2004), all of whom are published by Bella Books of Tallahassee, Florida, which has become one of the leading publishers of lesbian romance.

Among the best known new writers of romances is Radclyffe. A surgeon and black belt martial artist who lives in Philadelphia, she has used her medical knowledge and ju-jitsu expertise to create a number of hospital adventure romances and governmental intrigue romances, such as *Fated Love* (2004) and *Above All, Honor* (2004).

Australian author C.C. St. Clair, who has been called "the thinking woman's lesbian romance novelist," adds depth to her novels by exploring complex social issues. In *Far From Maddy* (2003), she describes the world of homeless queer street youth in the context of the love story; and in *Risking-Me* (2002), she looks at lesbian domestic violence (not between the lesbian heroes, of course).

Transgender Romance

St. Clair has also written one of the few transgendered romance novels in *Morgan in the Mirror* (2004), the story of the self-discovery and road to true love of a female to male trans.

A self-described "transsexual romance" is Brad Clayton's *The Queen of Hearts*, which originally enjoyed underground circulation, but was finally published by ER Publications in 1998. The novel, which depicts the pursuit of a transsexual prostitute by her straight lover, challenges the conventions of the romance novel by its comic perspective and explicit eroticism.

Gay Male Romance Novels

While romance has become a staple of lesbian fiction, that is not so true of gay male fiction. Still, gay men, while often seen as more erotically than romantically inclined, have also produced romance fiction.

Among the antecedents to the gay male romances are the 1950s pulp novels of Jay Little (Clarence Miller), which like the lesbian pulps were melodramatic enough for the romance genre but withheld the requisite happy ending. Another significant precursor is the Loon trilogy by Richard Amory, consisting of *Song of the Loon* (1966), *Song of Aaron* (1967), and *Listen, the Loon Sings* (1968). This series inaugurated a stream of romanticism in gay male erotic fiction, but its explicit eroticism and failure to valorize monogamy defy romance conventions.

Gordon Merrick's *The Lord Won't Mind* (1970) may be the first gay romance novel, combining as it does a

potboiler plot with a gay liberation perspective. It is also one of the first explicitly gay novels to make the *New York Times's* bestseller list.

Gaywyck, written by photography editor Vincent Virga in 1980, is a gothic romance featuring dashing gay heroes with plenty of campy Victorian sensuality. Virga followed *Gaywyck* with another Victorian-era sequel, *Vadriel Vail*, in 2001.

Also in 2001, two men named Scott met at a Boston gay bar and romantically discovered that they were made for each other. Two years later they decided that there must be a market among gay men for romantic stories like their own.

Attorney Scott Pomfret and advertising copywriter Scott Whittier decided to try their hand at writing romantic fiction and founded a company they call Romentics to publish, promote, and sell their books. Inspired by the Harlequin romances that Whittaker's mother and grandmother read, the two Scotts' collaborations, including titles like *Razor Burn* (2005) and *Hot Sauce* (2005) are filled with heat, passion, obstacles to true love, and, of course, happy endings.

Bisexual Romance

Bisexuals have not often received their share of attention in the romance market, and have frequently been villainized in both straight and gay fiction. However, at least one 2005 romance novel manages to leave a bisexual "happily ever after." In *Phyllida and the Brotherhood of Philander*, Ann Herendeen re-invents the gothic romance with a bisexual hero, as wealthy gay squire Andrew Carrington finds himself falling in love with the spirited Phyllida Lewis, his fiancée of convenience.

Conclusion

Glbtc romance novels may not be the most elevated form of literature, but, like their straight counterparts, they provide entertainment, escape, and a satisfying sense that true love will overcome all obstacles.

Queer writers have successfully translated every romance convention into glbtq iconography, creating dashing, brooding butch heroes who sometimes rescue and are sometimes rescued by shrewd and plucky femme heroines. These intrepid couples navigate intricately tangled plots in order to come together on the moors or in the emergency room or under a strangely colored sun on a planet far away to pledge their undying love forever.

In addition to Bella Books mentioned earlier, other publishers that issue queer romance novels include Alyson Publications, Harrington Park Press, and Kensington Publishing.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.

When you think "romance novels," what comes to mind? Book covers featuring heaving breasts and men with deep v-neck shirts and flowy, Fabio-esque hair? Mainstream kink like Fifty Shades of Grey? Time-traveling, sex-filled epics? Wonderfully weird, paranormal/horror/sci-fi thrillers featuring a cast of characters who all bang like bunny rabbits? Tragic love stories in which at least one of the leads is almost definitely going to die in a deeply heartbreaking way in the final chapters? In love with romance novels? You're not alone! Romance is today's most popular fiction genre

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