

# FEMINIST VISIONS

## LOVE BETWEEN THE COVERAGE OF THE TOPIC: A FILM ABOUT ROMANCE NOVELS

by Alison Gates

**LOVE BETWEEN THE COVERS.** 84 mins. 2015. Written, directed, & produced by Laurie Kahn. Blueberry Hill Productions, Watertown, MA; [lovebetweenthecovers.com](http://lovebetweenthecovers.com). DVD distributed by Passion River Films. Downloads available via Amazon, iTunes, & Netflix.

Laurie Kahn's film documents the experience of writers, readers, publicists, and publishers engaged in producing and consuming the subgenre of fiction known as romance. Like her earlier films — *A Midwife's Tale* and *TUPPERWARE! — Love between the Covers* features interviews integrated with visuals to smoothly move the narrative from verbal commentary to observational evidence. The experts will tell you that romance is big; then the camera will show you the lines at the romance convention and the stacks of romantic novels lining the bookstore shelves.

At just under 90 minutes, the film is not long enough to dig deeply into all aspects of the topic. Still, as an introduction to the genre of romance novels, it seems to at least scrape the surface of a cultural topic rife with opportunity for research and examination from many angles.

*Love between the Covers* is a good starting point for scholarly discovery, as Kahn introduces many fascinating people engaged in discourse on the topic at all levels. The film claims in the opening sequence to be "a story about pride...and a story about prejudice." Kahn seeks to give voice to the proud and to underline what prejudices can be examined using the romance novel industry as evidence.

Right away, we learn some romance lingo: an HEA is a "Happily Ever After." We learn that there is a formula and there are some rules. The HEA is actually part of the formula and definitely a cardinal rule in the genre. No matter what, the protagonist and the object of affection must wind up with at least the possibility of a Happily Ever After. This is the core psychological motivation for the readers, and, as it turns out, the authors. As Joanna Gregson (professor of sociology, Pacific Lutheran University) points out, "The writers are the readers...[and] we are them."

Within the genre, there are many, many categories, and the filmmakers underscore this by shooting footage of stacks and stacks of books arranged by readers' tastes: historical romance, new adult contemporary romance, mystery romance, sci-fi Romance, paranormal romance, gay and

lesbian romance, christian spiritual romance, etc. That there is a romance for everyone who wants to read romance might be news to some, and it's certainly good news for readers looking to escape daily life but not abandon their own sexuality, literary preferences, or ethnic identity in order to dive into a good story with a happy ending.

The vast variety of subgenres points to a key appeal of the genre: romance honors desires and the fulfillment



of them. Specifically, most romance-novel sex is woman-centered, and it empowers the reader to entertain the ideas of sex and romantic love in ways that women's magazine articles on "how to drive your man mad in bed" probably don't.

The film takes great pains to help us understand that it's a world of All Kinds of Women. There is a lesbian author (Radclyffe, aka Len Barot) and a black author (Beverly Jenkins, who, frankly, deserves her own feature-length documentary). There is an author who is an amputee — Susan Donovan, who writes both alone and with a writing partner, Celeste Bradley; both speak emotionally of their troubled marriages and overcoming financial hardship and lack of moral support.

**U**nderstanding that the writers and readers are all the same people seems key to understanding the entire \$41 billion industry, as the film points out at every turn. Author Nicole Peeler observes that romance reading doesn't seem to be a very solitary activity, which seems at odds with popular assumptions of reading as something one does alone and to be alone. Most romance writers today have blogs and Facebook pages and will email back and forth with each other and with their readers regularly. Many, if not most, romance writers were and are voracious readers of romance themselves. I have in my own life seen this happen. My friend Ruth, who writes successfully under a few different noms de plume, was admittedly a huge reader of romances; she entered a Harlequin-sponsored contest with a chapter of her first romance and won, among other things, mentorship in romance writing. Ruth and her partner Mary Ann (also a bestselling romance writer; they met at a romance book conference) now own and operate Brain Mill Press, the motto of which is "Love Books for Humans." Clearly, reading romances can and does lead to success in writing and even publishing romances.

But one must be brave to make this work. As is pointed out many times from the first minute of the film to the very end, romance is not very well respected. So marginalized is it as a literary category that even the publication of a romance typically happens in a much different manner than that of other fiction. In one of the more intriguing and enlightening segments of the documentary, romance publication is explained by mega-best-selling "chick lit" author Jennifer Crusie this way: "If you are taking [your book] to market, you are taking it from a work of art to a can of soup. If you can't make that transition, publication will break your heart."

The giant in the romance publishing industry is of course Harlequin, which typically promotes not authors, Crusie explains, but "lines": Harlequin Temptation, Har-



Romance writer Eloisa James (Mary Bly)

quin Intrigue, etc. This is good marketing for the publisher, but terrible for authors, since readers generally will buy anything from a line, assured it's the kind of thing that suits their taste — or as I would say, it's curated. Meanwhile, authors are treated more like contract employees, hired to churn out books at an alarming rate — two a year or more to stay on the publisher's radar. And of course, the majority of those writers are women.

**S**ince this is a film about stories, it's no surprise that there are some good stories told and some good lessons for the viewer to take away. Author Eloisa James tells about her experience in writing and academia. She published her first three romance novels while an untenured professor in Shakespearean literature, but was strictly instructed by her faculty mentor not to mention them, and especially not to bring up in her tenure process the fact that one of the books had been picked by *People Magazine* as a "must-read." Presumably her tenure committee would see publishing a steamy romance as proof she wasn't a serious scholar.

Eloisa James, it should be noted, is the nom de plume of Professor Mary Bly. She mentions in the film that she is the daughter of "a poet" and "a short story writer," as she laughingly recounts her own parents' distress at her choice of reading materials as a young woman. For classroom purposes, one may want to mention that her father is none other than poet Robert Bly, the author of the key text of the mythopoetic men's movement, *Iron John*,<sup>1</sup> and her mother was Carol Bly, writer of not only short fiction but also essays and books on writing and the recipient of a Minnesota Humanities Award for Literature in 2001.

Equally interesting is Radclyffe/Len Barot's experience in romance. As a surgeon, she wrote her books at night and on weekends. She speaks of absorbing her structure from reading "the Naiad Model" of lesbian romance, which she had first found at Giovanni's Room — one of the first gay and lesbian bookstores



Romance writer Radclyffe (Len Barot)

in the U.S. — in Philadelphia. One of the best moments for me, a visual artist, is when Len talks about the coded imagery in the covers of these vintage books, pointing to a cover that featured the iconic “lesbian backrub.”



Romance writer Beverly Jenkins

Disappointing, however, is the lack of attention paid to deconstructing visual formulas in other subgenres of romance. The film’s basic overview of which colors go with which subgenres (e.g., black and red means paranormal) doesn’t begin to explain why everyone on the covers of straight romance novels pretty much looks like the same couple in different clothes.

The roles of social media and self-publishing are covered in the film as well, although not in a lot of detail. There are no male writers featured, and very few men appear at all — except shirtless on the covers of books. One exception is the online publisher for Smashmouth books, who is on screen long enough to point out that romance readers are way more engaged, resourceful, and connected (through electronic means) than readers of any other genre.

Being engaged, resourceful, and connected is important if you’re reading a book a day (or more) and need to feed your addiction. You need to know when the next book in your series is coming out, and you need access to downloads if the library or your local bookseller lets you down, which they will from time to time. Wi-fi access really does seem to be the key to overcoming all obstacles on your way to an HEA.

The fact that certain authors eventually evolve into their own “brand” should not be surprising to anyone by the time the filmmakers cover it. In the first five minutes, authors like Eloisa James and Nora Roberts are compared to the Beatles by an aspiring novelist and romance fan. The entire field seems to foster a real intimacy between the writers, the readers, and the charac-

ters. Fandom, it turns out, can have its own consequences. Readers influence plot and characters because they have such intimate access to the writers of their favorite fictional worlds. We meet Kim Castillo, a fan of Eloisa James, who became James’s assistant after a series of email exchanges

about a secondary character Kim especially related to (because the character was “plump” like Kim herself). Castillo eventually took on an entire stable of authors to create a business maintaining romance author websites, media presence, and databases, and that “plump” character became the heroine of another Eloisa James romance novel.

Authors like Radclyffe and Beverly Jenkins host travel experiences and workshops for fans and aspiring novelists. Fans of Nora Roberts, for instance, can visit the inn where many of her more widely read books are based, buy a book from her husband’s bookstore, and eat at the pizzeria her son owns across the street. Beverly Jenkins leads bus tours, visiting some of the locations that appear in her historical novels.

There’s a strong sense of a kind of rebellion against guilt in the stories told here. The women in the film admit to having felt guilt, or the expectation of guilt, in starting to read this genre of fiction, but they eventually reject the notion that they are engaged in something shameful and “come out” as romance readers. Some only came to this point after having successfully published a novel (or three) themselves.

Eloisa James claims that romance writing is one of the last true meritocracies, along with cooking. That these are two primarily female pursuits is a fact not lost on me.

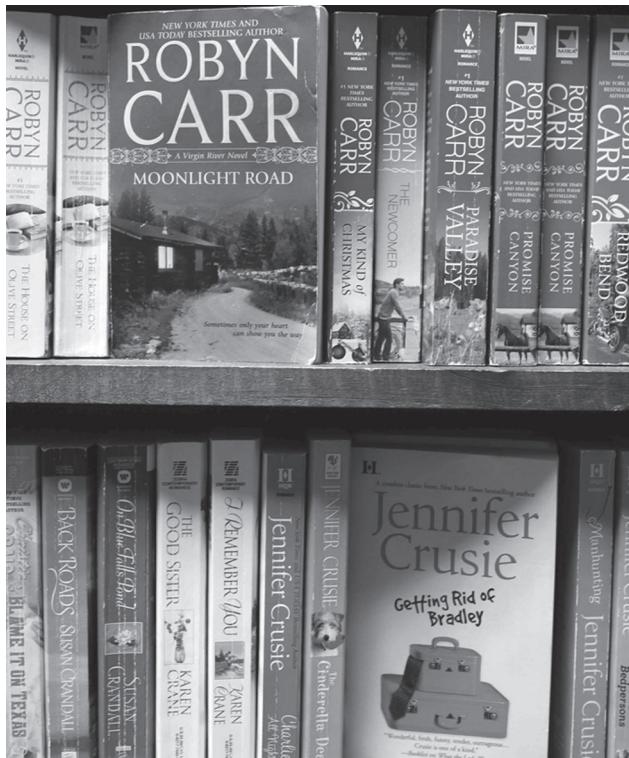


Beverly Jenkins on road trip with readers

As a woman artist myself who works in a medium (fibers and textiles) often discredited among academics, I thought of handiwork instead — especially quilting — when James

listed cooking. When I was in art school, I knit secretly and didn't ever reveal that fabric store visits made me euphoric.

Faith Levine, in her documentary film *Handmade Nation*, points out that many in the DIY "hipster handmade" movement were, in fact, art students who secretly indulged in knitting, sewing, and creating covers for hand-bound journals at night, while earning degrees in intellectually and physically "more demanding" (and masculine) subjects



like sculpture, conceptual art, and time art. The parallel between the world of the romance reader/writer and the textile consumer/producer is easily drawn, partly because both are worlds predominantly inhabited by women who "should know better" but instead rather rebelliously follow their hearts' passions.

The fiction world's double standard does not escape the participants in *Love between the Covers*. Deborah Chappel Traylor points out early on, "We don't see Ernest Hemingway as formulaic. But every single one of his novels ends exactly the same way."

That both fields seem to attract a diversity of participants would seem to indicate that the snobbish status quo in art and literature might be on shaky ground in the post-internet world where creative types now function. After

all, romance is what makes money in literature, and Forbes reported in 2014 that Craftsy had turned quilting tutorials into a \$23 million industry. Financially, there is no doubt that romance gets the last laugh in the book business. As author Celeste Bradley puts it so succinctly, "We keep the lights on in publishing." A quick look at Amazon's romance offerings shows most volumes of romantic fiction priced at \$7.99 for a paperback and somewhere around \$6.00 for an electronic Kindle edition.

Sheer volume has created the multi-billion-dollar romance industry, but the question remains: What exactly drives women to purchase and read these books? One of Kim Castillo's crew attempts to articulate it by saying, "Romance has gotten me through...because, when you feel like you don't get your own happy ending, just reading happy endings are *possible* [helps]."

*Love between the Covers* is a very accessible film that can introduce many topics into a classroom curriculum. It should enjoy enormous viewership among the fan base of romance readers eager to see their authors on the big screen, and it provides a tiny window into the life of a romance writer for those who are aspiring novelists in the genre. It works best as a case study of an industry, one very lucrative corner of which happens to be dominated by women. Classroom discussion can be facilitated toward examining the parallel universes that may exist for masculine practitioners of a craft and feminine practitioners of the same craft — using *Love between the Covers* as half of the comparison. At 84 minutes, it's the right length for a 90-minute class, and the film itself does not portray romance or sexuality. *Love between the Covers* is a pure celebration of writers and readers who embrace the Happily Ever After in infinite variations; and in that celebration, one finds much rich food for thought.

#### Note

1. One wonders why a man who writes poetry inspiring other men to go pound drums in the woods and pass a talking stick around a circle might be taken more seriously than his daughter, a writer of romantic fiction. For one thing, there's no National Book Award for Romance, at least not yet.

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