Reading Romance Novels: An Application of Parasocial Relationship Theory

Ann Burnett and Rhea Reinhardt Beto

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Abstract

Research has shown that television viewers form interpersonal relationships, called parasocial relationships, with various kinds of personalities on many different kinds of shows. The purpose of this investigation was to determine whether similar relationships form between romance novel readers and heroes and heroines. Fifteen women romance novel readers volunteered to participate in three focus groups in which they discussed romance novels and the impact of the novels on their own relationships. The results suggest that readers form intimate parasocial relationships with the characters in romance novels. The participants described situations in their own lives in which they have dealt with everyday interaction, conflict, and intimacy similar to the characters in romance novels. Discussion focuses on the implications of the findings.

Introduction

A young, beautiful woman is struggling and all alone in the world. Somehow, by fate, a strapping, young man enters her life. They interact, but maintain their distance. But love burns strong, and one night, their passion ignites. The woman is no longer alone; the man takes her away to a better life. Such is the typical story line found in a romance novel (Thurston, 1987). Despite the fact that most romance novels are structured in this predictable format, they are read by a large audience. Collins (1983) found that the market for romance books expanded from an estimated 15 million readers in 1979 to 25 million in North America in 1982. A more recent study found that romance novels represent 40% of all paperbacks published (Crane, 1994). Dyer (1996) reported that romance novels rack up $885 million in annual sales. Since inception into the mass media market in the 1970s, romance novels have carried the responsibility of affecting and being affected by the cultural milieu in which they exist (Thurston, 1987).

The purpose of this essay is to examine the relationship between romance novel readers and their own romantic relationships.

Review of literature

Parasocial relationships

The effects of parasocial relationships, or PSRs, have been studied in many genres, including television programs, news, soap operas, and home shopping shows. Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to use the terms "parasocial interactions" (PSI) and "parasocial relationships" (PSR). They argued that television viewers build relations with the television personae that are much like the current social relations in their lives. The television performers understand this phenomenon because they appear to adapt their performance to the audience's response (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215).

Several studies have examined the relationship between "real life" interaction patterns and the mass media. For example, Rosengren and Windall (1972) found that involvement with various types of media does not affect the actual interaction that takes place between individuals. Nordlund (1978) found that elderly persons, women, and low-educated people used mass media or programs that had a greater potential for interaction more frequently, especially when they had low occurrences of real interaction.

Researchers also have studied the impact of television on the lives of their viewers. A. Rubin (1983) found that information seekers thought television was a realistic portrayal of life, and they watched it frequently. Meyrowitz (1986) described the interpersonal effects of television on the viewer. He used the term "para-proxemics" to describe the distance between the television viewer and performer. The closer the shot is of the performer, the more intimate the simulated relationship with the viewer.

The effect of attempting to create such a relationship has produced mixed results. On one hand, Koenig and Lessan (1985) found that TV personalities were not rated as high as a best friend. Respondents tended to call the relationship with a TV personality a "quasi-friend" relationship. On the other hand, much research finds a strong relationship between mass media figures and PSRs. Caughey (1984), for example, discovered that "people characterize unmet media figures as if they were intimately involved with them, and in a sense they are--they engage in pseudo-social interactions with them" (p. 33). The relationship can become so strong that the individuals conjure up fantasy meetings and have imaginary discussions with media figures (Caughey, 1984; Hoffner, 1996). People perceive and respond to mass media characters through likeability, perceived similarity, and the desire to be like a character (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Turnor, 1993). In fact, some viewers become so emotionally involved with their favorite television characters that they know them as well as friends or neighbors. Cohen (1997) discovered that these viewers were found to have stronger PSRs with their favorite television characters than were men. R. Rubin and McHugh (1987) discovered that "parasocial interaction was related strongly to social and task attraction towards the media personality, and to importance of relationship development with the personality" (p. 288).

Other than situational television programs, another genre that has been researched concerning parasocial interaction and relationships is television news. Levy (1979) and Houlberg (1984) both found that newscasters are considered friends with whom participants

Return to index.
Romance novels as feminist critique

Romance novels have chiefly been analyzed through a critical lens. Such scholars argue that romance novels reflect and reinforce a patriarchal society. Modleski (1980; 1982) was one of the first scholars to analyze romance novels from a feminist perspective. She states, "The heroine of the novels can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, sacrificing her aggressive instincts, her pride, and--nearly--her life.... The reader is encouraged to participate in and actively desire feminine self-betrayal" (p. 435). She goes on to say that the novels contribute to the already oppressive nature of society.

Radway is well-known for her research of feminism and romance novels (1981, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1991, 1995). She came to the conclusion that the reader identifies with a heroine who is "either wrongly abused by men or who remains unusually independent" (p. 143). She also notes the irony that the heroine can only be happy when the male rushes to protect her. She concludes, "While the gothic superficially asserts the validity of a feminist goal, self-realization for women, its narrative structure demonstrates that achievement of it comes only with submission to traditional gender arrangements and assumption of a typically female personality structure" (p. 155).

Radway's 1984 study explained that women read romances as a form of escape. This escape is not unlike the feeling one gets from watching soap operas (Baehr & Gray, 1996). Radway's (1984) main conclusion was that women have to abandon their position of mother, wife, and/or nurturer in society in order to read a romance novel. The women in her studies explained that the men felt threatened by their very act of reading, which lead the readers to feel guilty about spending time and money on themselves (Radway, 1991).

In general, Radway (1986b) and others (e.g., Christian-Smith, 1987) argue that romance novels are patriarchal, and silence female readers. Crane (1994) emphasizes that the popularity of romance novels indicates a reactionary return to definitions of women as deriving their happiness only through men. However, Radway (1986a) reports that "many romance readers are genuinely outraged when they are told by cultural critics that their favorite fiction is a masochistic fantasy that reasserts the subordinate status of women" (p. 18). Similarly, Crane (1994) found that women believe their lives have improved over the last 20 years, and that feminism pressures women to adopt masculine traits at the expense of traditional feminine ones. These readers see romance novels in a positive light. Radway (1986a) responds that such readers are just accepting the general structure of patriarchy.

Romance novels as communication

Another way to study romance novels and their relationship to real life relationships is to actually look at the conversations that take place in the books. Alberts (1986) found that conversations in romance novels are somewhat stereotyped, but he believed them to be generally true of male-female romance conversations. Belsey (1990) contends that romance novels play a role in "constructing and reproducing the changing cultural meanings of sexuality and gender" (p. 907). For women readers, Hubbard (1985) argues that "the novels provide a way of looking at the world, interpretations of gender roles, a set of expectations, and implied guidelines for romantic success" (p. 114).

Doyle (1985) conducted a study using Bormann's fantasy theme analysis. Analyzing the formula characteristic of Barbara Cartland novels, Doyle discovered that the formula works to persuade women to be traditional in romantic relationships. This has a damaging impact because mature women feel guilty and blame themselves when they cannot achieve the young and thin look of the women in the novels, and teenagers feel the same when passivity and dependence on a man are depicted to solve all problems, and not the reliance on their own abilities.

Thurston (1987) found some connections between the material in the romance novel and the readers' lives. For example, one woman wrote, "I find myself comparing a lot of my dates and other men with the fictional men in romances, and they come up a very poor second or third" (Thurston, 1987, p. 132). Another woman wrote that she was "surprised at how romance novels can help me with my personal relationships with my boyfriend, for example, being more open with him (talking it out, communicating), especially when we have disagreements" (Thurston, 1987, p. 133).

The literature reviewed in the areas of parasocial relationships, feminist criticism, and communication studies reveals many avenues for conducting the research project outlined in this paper. First, while parasocial relationships have been studied with other forms of mass media, the possibility that romance novels can be a source of parasocial relationships has never been studied. Similarities exist between the medium, however. Romance novels present a visual stimulation for the reader through language. The words describe the characters, from the sound of their voice to the type of clothes they wear. Even the cover of the novel, with the picture of the characters, can be used as nonverbal stimuli. Since romance novels appear to be formulaic, it can be argued that readers create similar nonverbal pictures of the characters that are consistent from novel to novel. The impact of the parasocial relationship will be different, notably harder to study, but still worthy of deeming the relationship parasocial.

Second, few studies have been undertaken to demonstrate how romance novels impact the way women readers view the world. Some of the literature indicates that romance novels need to be investigated for their readers' responses (e.g., Radway, 1981). The perspectives of women readers could provide a rich set of data which would shed additional insight into their relationships. Only one of the studies (Radway, 1991) involved interviews with women who read romance novels; it was not conducted in the United States, and it
The main research design used in this research project was focus groups. Many reasons lead to picking this design. The group discussions inherent in focus groups are conducted by a skilled interviewer and allow the participants to share their ideas and perceptions, without pressuring the respondents (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups, specifically for this research project, are an effective research design over surveys due to the impersonal feel of surveys. Respondents are not able to think the questions through due to the inherent nature of surveys; quick answers are necessary given the closed nature of the questions. A traditional individual interview has a major disadvantage because "the respondent [is] limited by the choices offered and therefore the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer by oversight or omission" (Krueger, 1994, p. 7). Therefore, unlike other methods which tend to be more rigid and less open, the unobtrusiveness of focus groups allowed respondents to fully and freely answer the questions asked of them. The participants were informed that they would be audiotaped; the focus groups took place in a quiet conference room within a public building.

Some of the questions in the instrument used in this research project were adapted from A. Rubin et al.’s (1985) Parasocial Interaction (PSI) Scale. The PSI Scale has successfully been used in various studies (Auter, 1992; A. Rubin & Perse, 1987; A. Rubin et al., 1985; R. Rubin & McHugh, 1987). However, it is a close-ended survey, and since the research questions in this project had not been answered, the survey was adapted to open-ended questions for the focus groups. For example, “Are any of the romantic partners you have been with similar to any of your favorite characters in the romance novels you have read? Describe the similarities,” and “If you could meet any of the characters in romance novels, what kinds of things would you say to them?” After the first focus group, the researcher re-worded a few of the questions and added some probing sub-questions. Since research question #2 asks how these parasocial relationships impact the lives of the readers, three questions were developed that asked the participants how everyday interaction, conflict, and intimacy, which are common opportunities to communicate, have been impacted by their reading of romance novels.

Data Collection and Interpretation
Three focus groups were conducted, each comprised of five members. An interviewer and a note-taker attended each focus group. The responsibilities of the interviewer included initiating the questions for discussion, being a good listener, showing interest in the responses of the participants, and gaining their confidence while making them feel relaxed and willing to talk. She attempted to reflect the responses of the participants without agreeing with their opinion but keeping the group on the right track. The two-hour time limit allowed the interviewer to develop good rapport and elicit open and honest answers but had less of a chance of causing restlessness. After each focus group, the researcher transcribed the recorded tapes and checked them against the notes taken by the note-taker.

Since this was a qualitative research project, the data were gathered from one focus group at a time and interpreted shortly after. After transcription, the data were placed into recurring categories, similar to the qualitative data gathering method used by Pettus (1990). After all the categories emerged for each question, they were consolidated in order to allow for a more meaningful analysis of the data. When similar categories emerged, the data were saturated, and data collection was complete. A total of 246 comments were coded into the 15 sub-categories. The responses were then placed into three main categories that pertained to the research questions. A second researcher coded 10% of the data, or 25 units of analysis, yielding an agreement of .84. All disagreements were resolved through discussion, but typically the disagreements occurred due to lack of context, unfamiliar to the second researcher. The richness of the data reported in the last section of this essay sheds new light on the phenomenon of parasocial relationships.

Analysis
The following pages discuss the three main categories of results from the three focus group transcripts. They include

1) general comments about romance novel readers;
2) comments regarding the existence of parasocial relationships;
3) comments describing the influence romance novels have had on the participants’ lives.

Even though the total number of comments in each category is provided, the focus of this project is on the quality of the comment rather than its frequency.
Romance Novel Readers

The first part of the focus groups dealt with general questions about reading romance novels. A total of 51 comments were placed into this sub-category (see Table 1). Participants talked about their favorite genre of romance novels (e.g., historical, mystery), where they read the novels (e.g., vacation, workout), how they go about reading the novels (e.g., some read the last two pages first), and reactions of significant others. The readers commonly stated that romance novels are a form of relaxation, a response to loneliness, entertainment, escape, and replacement of missing romance in their lives. These reasons for reading the novels were not only similar to the reasons given by the participants in other romance novel studies (Brotman, 1980; Caughey, 1984; Radway, 1984), but they were also similar to those given by television viewers (A. Rubin & Perse, 1987a). If the spouse was absent or just not romantic, many of the women read a romance novel, similar to the notion of using the media to suppress feelings of loneliness (Nordlund, 1978; A. Rubin & Perse, 1987a; A. Rubin et al., 1985). Many of the reasons given described how romance novels are used as a learning device. Examples of such comments included, “You can learn about things and not just relationships”; “You learn about places”; and “I must confess. I had to [learn from romance novels] because when I grew up, we didn't talk about sex.” One focus group participant described how she used romance novels to “pick and choose what kinds of characteristics [she] likes in guys without having to date them.”

Another 54 comments were placed into the category called “Reading Habits.” Many of the comments given by the participants described the intensity of their hobby. A couple of the participants stated that they got their books from the library rather than spending money on purchasing new books. This discussion lead one participant to reply, “I don't care if its worn out. I just want to read [it].” Other comments referring to this intensity included, "I make time"; I've stayed up all night reading a book before”; and “I don't get anything done.”

Indications of Parasocial Relationships with Romance Novel Readers

The second main category, which consisted of 72 comments, was made up of the results from the adapted Parasocial Interaction Scale questions. The first sub-category that developed was called, “Evidence of the Existence of Parasocial Relationships” (see Table 2). One participant explained, “This might sound strange to you, but I am that woman in that book,” and “you become that other person.” The focus group participants said they would be friends with both the women and the men in the novels. One of the strongest pieces of data suggesting the existence of a parasocial relationship was as follows: “Sometimes I don't want to finish [romance novels] because I get sad when I'm done with the book because you're no longer with the book.”

The studies on parasocial relationship theory have determined many possible predictors of the development of parasocial interaction. One predictor found by Hoffner (1996) and A. Rubin and Perse (1987a) was the attractiveness of the character. Romance novel writers have editorial guidelines which instruct them to create attractive characters, thus creating an environment ripe for the development of PSRs. The participants in this research project discussed how they wished they could be the heroine in the novels because she is "beautiful, and he's handsome....” Many of the participants favored historical romance novels, and they discussed their wish to be beautiful like the heroine.

Similarity also triggers parasocial relationships. One of the questions asked of the participants was if any of the romantic partners they had been with were similar to any of their favorite characters in the romance novels they had read. They answered with 30 comments that described some similarities, including patience, kindness, and good looks. They described their partners as caring, protective, stubborn, irritating, honest, and chivalrous, which were similar, they said, to romance-novel heroes. The romantic partners also were described as similar to the heroes in the novels because they held the same job, such as in the military, which is typical of the historical novels some of the participants had read.

The participants said that they “would be friends with a lot of the females,” suggesting a similarity in attitude, a finding echoed by Turner (1993) who found that a similar attitude would be a stronger predictor of developing a PSR than appearance or background. In fact, Hoffner and Cantor (1991), Levy (1979), and A. M. Rubin et al. (1985) found that feeling like a friend to the media character is a strong predictor of PSI.

Another factor that predicts the existence of PSR is the idea of comparing your own ideas with those of the characters. Levy (1979) found that 80% of his respondents were involved in this activity. A. Rubin et al. (1985) had a very similar statement on their PSI Scale, which was found significant in their study. The women in this research project were asked if they handle conflict similarly to the characters, and half of the responses were “no” because, for example, one women said, "I wish I was...a little more able to hold my tongue like the women in the books." There was also a discussion about how one heroine ran out of the house and into the pouring rain after a fight, and she was only wearing a light nightgown. The woman describing this scene said that she would be smart enough to dress properly before running out into the rain.

The women readers in this project listed a number of statements that they would make to the hero or heroine. A. Rubin et al. (1985) found that television viewers sometimes talk to the characters during a newscast or would like to meet their favorite newscaster in person, which the authors discuss as predictors of PSI. In this study, some of the comments dealt with asking the hero out on a date, while others said they would not talk to the character because he was already involved in a relationship with the heroine. This finding itself is an indication of a parasocial relationship. Generally, in human interaction, we do not attempt to or wish to date someone who is already in a relationship, so the readers in this study viewed some relationships in the novels as "real." Some of the women reported that they would ask the women about history or why they had been "so dense for 200 pages.” However, some of the participants would not want to talk to the characters because they would figure out the answers to questions they would have on their own, or would not want to talk to the characters because they are “rich snobs.”

The final sub-category developed from the focus group question which asked the participants if they thought romance novel readers establish relationships with characters in the novels like soap opera watchers do. The initial reaction was an overwhelming "no" because...
romance novels have more details describing the characters, allowing the readers to get more involved. They also stated that "the books are more realistic than the soap operas cause there is no way a human being could live with all of [those] situations." Of the 16 comments made in this category, five of them described how the participants liked the ability to "incorporate [their] frame of reference" with each book. That way, "the book comes out how you want it to come out."

The finding that PSRs exist between romance novel readers and the characters validates the results and predictions of many studies. A. Rubin et al. (1985) and A. Rubin and Perse (1987a) found that parasocial interaction is more likely to take place when television is perceived as real. Another strong piece of evidence that PSRs exist came from the statement made by one reader who said, "I found [that] if I cheated on a book [by reading the ending first], I'll never read the whole book." In essence, the reader sees the novel itself as a relationship that would be hurt if she read the ending first. The choice in her language indicates her level of commitment to the novel.

### Influence of Parasocial Relationships on Romance Novel Readers

The third main category deals with the participants' comments to questions asking if romance novels had an impact on their everyday interaction, handling of conflict, or intimacy with their romantic partners. Sixteen comments were made following the questions about the impact on everyday interaction (see Table 3). The women agreed with Alberts' (1986) findings that the fictional conversations in romance novels inform and reflect the actual male-female conversations of the social world. One participant described how she used the communication in the novels to help her "communicate with the people around [her]." Some of the participants explained that they were able to have the right expectations of their romantic partners, but one participant explained that she "sometimes compares" her husband with the hero, which "flusters" him. Other influences of the romance novels include a change in their mood because "it helps you kind of get yourself out of the context of whatever is going on." A couple of the participants explained that romance novels help you to communicate better with your romantic partner, partly because the novels give "a guy's point of view."

The comments stating that conflict was handled similarly to that in romance novels were divided almost equally between "yes" and "no." Thirty comments explained how conflict is handled similarly. For instance, participants explained that they have experienced the same kind of up and down relationship as the characters do in the novels. Some of the women stated that they dealt with conflict by using violence; i.e., slamming doors, stomping their feet, or throwing something, while other women described how they either gave in or used the "silent treatment" during a conflict, both of which are styles the participants indicated are used by the characters in the novels. A couple of the participants said they enjoyed novels where "the woman overcomes the man." One participant stated, "I like that, and I even like that in my relationships."

However, 12 comments from the participants explained why they would not handle conflict like romance novel characters. For example, the women said that conflict is too "spur of the moment" to be able to really think about what you should do next. They also said that they are "going to react to the situation how [they] react to the situation." One participant stated that she wished she could "hold her tongue" like the heroines do, but another participant was glad she was not the heroine during conflict because she "couldn't live with the conflict for so long."

The participants made 11 comments discussing the relationship between reading romance novels and intimacy. The women explained how they were more affectionate, loving, giving, considerate, and romantic after they had read a book. They described how they "get in the mood" after reading a novel. In fact, one participant asked the group, "Have you ever read a book that excited you?" She explained that she gets sexually aroused and then finds her husband, stating, "Let's talk." Another comment went as follows, "I guess in romance novels, it seems so emotional when they finally...become intimate and...when I'm intimate with someone, it's more emotional." There is no question that the novels have an impact on the intimacy in their relationships.

The final question asked during each focus group was if the participants thought that romance novels have had an impact on their relationships. They explained that there were some comparisons in their relationships to those in the novels, but even when there was not, they still stayed committed to their "real life" partners. However, two of the women said that they now knew why some of their relationships did not work out--because they were not "looking for real substance." They were "looking for the fairy tale romance novel."

### Romance Novels as Patriarchal Suppression

This study provides further evidence that romance novels are patriarchal, partly because the readers form parasocial relationships with the characters and the book. While the women in this study acknowledge that there are differences between themselves and the characters in the novels, there is still some indication that they try to find or wish there were more similarities. They long to date the hero in the novel, and if they could have conversations with the characters, they would do so. In addition, for these women, the romance novels appear to have an impact on their lives. In fact, many of them used the novels to make changes, either by reading one to get in a better mood or by learning "techniques" for improving their love life. Some attempted to use the novels to maintain or improve romantic relationships by improving everyday interaction and communication with their significant others.

Forming parasocial relationships with characters entrenched in a dominant patriarchy can only further entrench those views in the readers. The editorial guidelines followed in the Harlequin romances, for example, include having a heroine who increases the knowledge of her value as the book progresses (Weisser, 1994) and a hero who must possess warmth and compassion (Thurston, 1987). Such character depictions place the male in the dominant position, assisting the "weak" female in gaining her strength. When readers emulate the heroine, wish to date the hero, use romantic suggestions from the books for their own relationships, or attempt to resolve their own interpersonal conflicts using strategies from romance novels, ultimately they are suppressed by a patriarchal structure.

Therefore, to subvert the patriarchal structure, Rabine (1985) suggests that romance novel writers identify themselves as feminists by realizing the successes women have had and try to incorporate them into the novels. Radway (1986a) agrees that the characters need
to be redefined. The editorial guidelines outlining the characteristics of the hero and heroine should be redefined to allow different sorts of people and relationships, thus creating different parasocial relationships. Even the ways in which romance occurs would need to change. For example, imagine a single, overweight woman who portrays the heroine in a series of books where she learns how to gain self-esteem, then becomes ready to accept her dream lover. First, she would not have to lose weight in order to form a relationship. Second, the writer would have to veer away from the traditional romantic methods of uniting the lovers, especially the idea that the hero would "save" the heroine.

Conclusions

It is important to recognize the limitations inherent in or that arose during the study. The results of the study are not widely generalizable. The participants were all from the Midwest, which is different from many other parts of the United States and, therefore, it cannot be assumed that the responses of other women would be similar. The actual number of participants was less than anticipated. Even though the maximum number of focus groups as set by this project (three) was reached, the eight expected participants was decreased to five for each group. Therefore, another nine to 12 people would have increased the number of diverse comments by bringing in more viewpoints. However, the comments given by the participants in the second and third focus groups were similar to those given by the participants in the first focus group. This fact lead us to believe that enough information had been gathered without having to set up a fourth focus group. In the future, data could be collected from both men and women, as well as individuals from different demographic groups, thus allowing for some comparisons between subjects and romance novel characters.

One obvious area of future research is to develop a study that determines the actual effect of romance novels on readers' everyday lives. This research project has begun this task, but much more needs to be done in order to make better use of the novels. For example, reading romance novels when feeling lonely could lead romance novel readers to either miss their spouses more, or it may, in fact, make them feel better and less lonely. Also, different genres of romance novels may fulfill different needs. Readers could be asked to describe which genre is read when they have different types of emotions such as sadness, happiness, excitement, or sexual desires. After they have read these novels, the researcher could determine what happens to their interaction with their spouses.

The results of this research project also warrant a second look at the patriarchal overtones of romance novels. A textual analysis of the different genres of romance novels could be compared to the definition(s) of patriarchy and how it is typically presented. Similarly, it would be intriguing to analyze pornography; men dislike romance novels but some like pornography, which can be considered patriarchal. This study could help readers have a better awareness of what patriarchy really is, leading them to demand and read non-patriarchal novels.

Researchers in the area of interpersonal relationship theory also could compare the findings of conflict and intimacy with those in this research project. The romance novels themselves could also be analyzed to determine the most common methods of dealing with conflict and intimacy used by the characters. The researcher could then ask readers if they thought those methods were effective or not and discover for themselves if they thought they should be used in real life, or the researcher could compare the methods used in the novels with actual theories of interpersonal conflict and intimacy.

In summary, romance novels are a prominent aspect of some women's lives. To disregard the impact of romance novels because of their unrespectable image (Collins, 1983) would be naive. The participants in the three focus groups held romance novels in great regard. This is unfortunate, as it appears that not only do readers establish parasocial relationships with the characters, but the novels influence their "real life" relationships. The fact that women are reluctant to acknowledge the adverse effect of these novels is evidence in and of itself of the influence of patriarchy. The PSRs that readers develop relegate women to a submissive status, only entrenching them further in our patriarchal society.

1. Since only 1% of men read romance novels (Hubbard, 1985), then it is most likely that, if relationships are affected by romance novels, women are the change agent. Thus, this study focuses on women romance novel readers.

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**Table 1: Examples of General Comments about Romance Novel Readers**

**REASONS FOR READING ROMANCE NOVELS--51 comments**

- "I started reading romance novels because I was lonely."
- "You can kind of pick and choose what kinds of characteristics you like in guys without having to date them."
- "Get away from the kids and the husband."

**READING HABITS--54 comments**

- "There are some books that I read over and over."
- "I read every one of my books while I was exercising."

**WHAT ROMANTIC PARTNER THINKS ABOUT ROMANCE NOVELS--8 comments**

- "None of my boyfriends have ever thought they were good reading material."
- "My husband said to me one time, 'why don't you read something with substance?'"

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**Table 2: Examples of Comments Indicating Parasocial Relationships**
EVIDENCE OF THE EXISTENCE OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS--5 comments

- "I would be friends with a lot of the females."
- "I think the men [in romance novels] are approachable. So you'll want to be their friend or want to be around them."

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ROMANTIC PARTNER AND HERO--30 comments

- "When you find the same characteristics in the one you are with, it's maybe just, oh yeah, I do have a good guy."
- "[Heroes] are always really protective of the female. My husband is like that."
- "I think [my husband] is like the patient guy that I read about. He knows that I'm going through a phase or something sometimes, and so he's just really able to exude patience."

THINGS THE PARTICIPANTS WOULD SAY TO THE CHARACTERS--10 comments

- "What are you doing later?"
- "Do you want to give your brother my telephone number?"

DISTINCTION WITH SOAP OPERA CHARACTERS--16 comments

- "You can read a romance novel at 4 o'clock in the morning if you want."
- "You can kind of ad-lib on your own, with the detail that isn't in there. When you see it (on TV), sometimes it might be disappointing."

Table 3: Examples of Comments Describing the Influence of Parasocial Relationships on Readers' Lives.

RELATIONSHIP OF ROMANCE NOVELS TO EVERYDAY INTERACTION--16 comments

- "I can sometimes compare [my husband to the hero]. He doesn't know where it's coming from. Sometimes he gets flustered."
- "Stories can be like a guy's point of view. It gives you a different take on it."
- "Cause you're communicating with the book and then through the book, you communicate with the people around you, too, and that's good."

HANDLING CONFLICT IS SIMILAR TO ROMANCE NOVELS--13 comments

- "When they have a fight, it's not the man [who] comes and brings the flowers to the woman. The woman will give in. And I've done that maybe once."
- "I have to stand in front of [my husband] and stomp my foot and yell in his face to get any reaction. I'm the one, like in the books, that keeps going on and on and on and on."

RELATIONSHIP OF NOVELS TO INTIMACY--11 comments

- "My husband can always tell when I've read a novel. I'll give him a back rub without him having to say, 'Oh, my back hurts.'"
- "You don't have to read [many] of them to get in the mood."
- "Our...love relationship is better now than it was when we first got married. And a lot of it was through the books."

References


