

## Confluent Love and the Evolution of Ideal Intimacy: Romance Reading in 1980 and 2016

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**Abstract:** Using data from interviews and surveys with groups of romance reading women living in 1980 and 2016, this research compares the content that romance readers — who are surrounded by more or less conservative gender-role structures — want from their novels. By investigating the link between the narratives of intimate relationships that romance readers find emotionally gratifying and their social contexts, this research attempts to answer a similar question to one posed four decades ago: In this new age of gender equality, why do women continue to read romances? This research shows the most dramatic change in romance reading is in the meaning of, and desire for, sexual content. Compared to 1980 readers, the group of 2016 readers wanted to see heroines with more than a deep emotional bond with their partner; passionate sex was a necessary part of a gratifying romantic relationship narrative. However, despite shifts towards wanting to read about women with sexual desires more equal to men’s, depictions of gratifying intimacy continue to represent femininity characterized by emotional adroitness and masculinity characterized by stoicism. This incomplete transition to depictions of egalitarian intimacy — where women and men’s sexuality but not emotionality are similar — may be at least partially explained by the importance of familiarity in narratives. The norms these narratives rely on may not correspond with readers’ rational and conscious values, but they remain affectively intuitive and thus allow readers to avoid the anxiety and effort that comes from rationally interrogating the rules of intimate heterosexual interaction. Romance novels, therefore, provide a window into the familiar structures surrounding intimacy that readers rely on to lose themselves in narratives. This study of romance reading may be used to deepen understandings of what has changed, and what remains “stalled” in the gender dynamics at work in intimate relationships.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a boom of academic interest in romance reading (Modleski; Radway “Women Read”, *Reading*; Thurston; Christian-Smith; Fowler). Scholars wanted to understand why this apparently anti-feminist pastime persisted into a new age of gender equality (Barra; Reid Boyd). One of the most influential studies to emerge from this research was Janice Radway’s sociological investigation of the practice of romance reading (*Reading*; Barra). Radway’s research was especially important for demonstrating how reader-response theory – which describes readers as not only passive receptacles of their novels’ content, but also active agents in creating their novels’ meanings – could be usefully applied to empirical studies of reading (Harkin; Scott).[1]

Reader response theory and Radway’s work – published around the same time as sociological models of culture were undergoing dramatic revision (e.g., Swidler, “Culture in Action”; Griswold, “Fabrication of Meaning”) – pointed to the utility of using studies of romance reading to understand the relationship between readers’ internal lives and meanings of gender. Radway showed that, on one hand, the content readers wanted from their novels was a product of their gendered social context, and on the other, the “Smithton” women she studied used the act of reading romance to resist the patriarchal structures they were part of.

In the romance novels preferred by the Smithton women, the hero – who is initially undifferentiated from other strong and aggressive men – is transformed into a softer man capable of caring for the heroine. Radway saw this narrative arc as central to what she calls “The Ideal Romance”: the underlying romantic fantasy whose plot elements recur in, and can be abstracted from, the novels identified by readers as “‘excellent’ or ‘favorites’” (*Reading*, 120). Novels built on this structure, Radway argued, helped readers make sense of masculine “reserve, indifference, and even cruelty” as the self-protective masks behind which a deeper tenderness lies (*Reading*, 129). The novels helped readers to vicariously and temporarily fill an emotional void left by their social positions as nurturers but never nurtured.

However, while the Smithton women’s romance reading habits derived from their status as economically dependent on reserved, non-nurturing men (Radway, *Reading* 139-40), they also allowed readers to resist social structures of female dependency. Through the act of reading romances itself – something the Smithton women’s husbands objected to (*Reading* 91, 101) – and through their preference for novels in which the heroine transforms the power dynamic in the intimate relationship to be more egalitarian, the Smithton women defied the dependent female role. In contrast to the non-ideal or “failed”

romances that readers disliked, which Radway described as “too close to the problems of patriarchy” (*Reading* 157-85) – e.g., books where sex is perceived as purely physical, rather than emotional, or when sex is exchanged for economic support –, the protagonists’ relationship in the “Ideal Romance” is characterized by mutual love, and sex flows between the protagonists only a symbol of their love. In this way, readers resisted the model of economically precarious and dependent womanhood that their social environment espoused.

While Radway’s study and much sociological research frames the practice of heterosexual romance reading as part of the cultural institution constructing meanings of gender, it is important to recognize that romance reading more specifically provides insight into gender negotiation in the context of intimate heterosexual relationships. This is an important specification because meanings of gender are not consistent across contexts and because the context of intimate relationships may be an especially significant but overlooked site for understanding meanings of gender more broadly.

Intimate heterosexual relationships are a site where bargaining and compromise between women and men occur on a daily basis, and where decisions made have an effect on the equal/unequal division of cognitive and emotional labor (Damingler; Carlson et al; Hochschild & Machung). However, while such relationships are important parts of everyday life and in creating gender (in)equality, they are difficult to study sociologically due to their sensitive nature. Although the large body of psychological research on intimate relationships is insightful (Rudman & Glick; Oliver & Hyde; Carroll et al), it fails to account for the link between social structures and the types of intimate relationship behavior that people see as desirable, or in Radway’s term, “Ideal.”

In the nearly four decades since Radway interviewed and surveyed the Smithton women, much has changed in the ways romantic partners relate to one another. Women are more likely to work full-time outside of the home, earn a larger portion of their household income, and share childcare responsibilities with a partner (Bianchi et al; Ridgeway). As the structural dimension of gender has changed, how has the meaning of gender in intimate relationships adjusted? Now as in 1980, romance reading preferences may provide insight. In this paper, I explore the relationship between social structures that are characteristic of the two periods and the practice of romance reading. By investigating the link between the narratives of intimate relationships that romance readers find emotionally gratifying and their social contexts, this research attempts to answer a similar question to the one Radway posed four decades ago: In this new age of gender equality, why do women continue to read romances?

Recreating Radway’s study 36 years later,[2] I collected data from interviews and surveys with a group of modern romance reading women, and conducted text analysis of their favorite books. I use this data to compare the content that romance readers, who are surrounded by more or less conservative gender-role structures, want from their novels. (For details on my methodology, see the “Data and Methods” section below.)

By comparing the data I collected in 2016 to the data Radway collected in 1980, I show the most dramatic change in romance reading is in the meaning of, and desire for, sexual content. In 1980, explicit sexual content was accepted by the Smithton readers exclusively as a way to symbolize love, and it was not seen as an essential part of a satisfying romance (Radway, *Reading* 66-68). In 2016, sexual depiction is accepted and sought after, even when the sex is depicted as independent of emotional attachments. In

contrast to the Smithton women, the Bay Area (BA) women I studied want to see heroines with more than a deep emotional bond with their partner; passionate sex is a necessary part of a gratifying romantic relationship narrative.

I also show that despite changes in women readers' desires for sexuality in depictions of romantic relationships, the gender dynamic between emotional and sexual desire in intimate relationships has not changed. In 1980, readers wanted to read about emotional connection between romantic partners. In 2016, readers want to read about both sex and emotional connection. Both groups of readers, however, searched for stories where unemotional "alpha males" are transformed into caring "lover boys" (terms used by multiple Smithton and BA readers; see Radway, *Reading* 106, 130). That is, despite shifts towards wanting to read about women with sexual desires more equal to men's, depictions of gratifying intimacy continue to represent femininity characterized by emotional adroitness and masculinity characterized by stoicism.

I argue that the incomplete transition to depictions of egalitarian intimacy – where women and men's sexuality but not emotionality are similar – may be at least partially explained by the importance of *familiarity* in narratives. This familiarity allows readers to "feel transported" and lose themselves in the immediate emotional experience being described. The norms these narratives rely on may not correspond with readers' rational and conscious values of, e.g., gender equality, but they remain affectively intuitive, and thus allow readers to avoid the anxiety and effort that comes from rationally interrogating the rules of intimate heterosexual interaction (e.g., with a feminist lens; Illouz 186). Romance novels, therefore, provide a window into the familiar structures surrounding intimacy that readers rely on to lose themselves in narratives, and studies of romance reading may be used to deepen understandings of what has changed, and what remains "stalled" (England) in the gender dynamics and expectations at work in intimate relationships.

## **BACKGROUND: ROMANCE READING AND INTIMACY**

After the sociology of reading moved away from studying literacy rates and towards studying practices, many investigations of reading have focused either on reading-as-taste or the relationship between reading and context (Griswold et al; Thumala Olave). The former type of study is interested in how novels create exclusive cultural knowledge among the privileged groups that are able to read and interpret them correctly (Griswold, "Recent Moves"; see Driscoll for an example). The second type focuses on locally situated practices that create socially meaningful reading (Griswold et al).

Popular books – books that are not as open to interpretation (Cawelti) and lack the "cultural power" of highbrow literature (Griswold, "Fabrication of Meaning") – have largely been studied in the second way, where reading is conceptualized as a part of a larger cultural institution orienting a particular form of meaning (Fiske; McCracken; Cawelti). Many of the early studies of romance reading, published in the 1980s, thus approached the genre as a form of feminized reading involved in the construction and reproduction of gender, with scholars such as Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell, and Radway attempting to understand how and why this apparently anti-feminist pastime persisted into an age of greater feminist enlightenment (Barra; Reid Boyd). More recent scholarship has begun to

read romance in the contexts of other cultural institutions, including the meanings associated with romantic love (Teo).

Beyond its role in the production of gender, romance reading is a part of the cultural construction of “intimacy.” Intimacy, or the deep emotional and physical connection between partners (Jamieson),[3] is at the core of the romance genre: “The main plot centers around individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work... In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love” (Romance Writers of America, “About”). By creating emotionally gratifying narratives of intimacy, the romance genre is part of the cultural process constructing what “good” intimacy means. At the same time, the genre is constantly being constructed by the ideas of “good” intimacy that circulate around it.

Using methods similar to the ones Radway used 36 years earlier, I compare what makes a story of “individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work” (Romance Writers of America, “About”) gratifying for women romance readers in 1980 and 2016. Within the world of romance fiction, what relationship pairings and relationship development narratives do readers find emotionally satisfying to consume? (These may not necessarily be relationships they want in their actual lives.)[4] This research asks the following question: how does this content – the things women find emotionally satisfying in “Ideal Romance” narratives – differ between groups of readers living in more or less gender-egalitarian contexts? For 1980s readers, the emotional connection between partners was the most important part of the gratifying relationship narrative; sex was not a necessary – or even desired – part of 1980s readers’ idealization. I find that for 2016 romance readers, passionate sex is an important part of the gratifying intimate relationship narrative. However, the most important part of readers’ gratifying relationship narrative remains a loving bond, where the traditionally masculine hero is drawn into the heroine’s female world (see Teo 478-79).

These findings show that, while the gendered desires described in prior intimacy research (Duncombe & Marsden; Rudman & Glick; O’Neill) have changed over time to resemble a more sexually liberal social context, emotionally gratifying narratives of intimacy nevertheless remain importantly gendered. Romance novel narratives enjoyed by BA respondents continue to depict emotionally vulnerable heroines using their love-skills to convert promiscuous and emotionally distant heroes into caring partners; emotionality is feminized, and stoicism is romanticized and masculinized. The persistence of this narrative arc, enjoyed in 1980 as in 2016, suggests some traditional gendered norms surrounding intimacy remain affectively intuitive for readers today.

### ***The transformation of intimacy***

In his book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens describes the exchange of desires between women and men in intimate partnerships before and after the “transformation of intimacy,” a development that followed the widespread availability of birth control, the sexual revolution, and the severing of sexuality “from its age-old integration with reproduction” (27). Before the transformation, women used sexuality as a means of controlling their futures and persuading men into committed relationships. While sexuality gave women a means of control, women were also dependent on and could fall

into the “trap” of marriage (56). After the decoupling of sex and reproduction, women began renegotiating the nature of intimacy. Women continued to value committed loving relationships and use these relationships as anchors in projections of their futures (49-53; also Thompson), but the types of intimate relationships available to them expanded. Importantly, Giddens points out that the break between sex and reproduction allowed for the possibility of “confluent,” as opposed to “romantic,” love.

According to Giddens, romantic love is a sublime loving attachment greater than sexual fulfillment that “completes” the individual (40) and that was normatively idealized starting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (39). Romantic love was a “feminized love” (43), created by the mothering, softness, and sexual persuasion (I refer to these as “love-skills”) that were part of the normative female personality. Within the confines and confinement of the domestic sphere, women used these love-skills to bring men into the worlds of domesticity and respectable sexuality, as opposed to the transactional and pleasure-oriented sexuality associated with “the mistress or whore” (Giddens 43-44). During and after the transformation of intimacy, women’s sexual and economic independence allowed for the possibility of “confluent love,” a relationship built not on the *forever and always* characteristic of romantic love, but rather on the contingencies of emotional and sexual satisfaction, and emotional and sexual equality. Partners knowing one another deeply and reciprocating emotional vulnerability is central to the development of confluent love, and when the emotional warmth and mutual benefit dissolves, so too does the relationship.

One of the key differences between romantic and confluent love is sex’s function. In romantic love, sex is secondary to a reflexive narrative of mystical togetherness and is deferred until *forever* has been sealed in marriage. Sexual satisfaction is assumed to be guaranteed by the force of the romantic bond (Giddens 62). In confluent love, by contrast, sex is primary, such that “the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure [is] a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved” (62). Confluent love liberates sexual skills from the domain of concubines, prostitutes, and other marginalized groups, Giddens argues, and thus dissolves the schism between respectable non-sexual women and disreputable sexual women. Female sexual desire is no longer pathologized and “for the first time women collectively, rather than as specialists in an *ars erotica*, are able to seek out sexual pleasure as a basic component of their lives and relationships” (67).

At the time of his writing, Giddens documented the shift from romantic toward confluent love in its early stages (the late 1980s). Drawing on Thompson’s work, for instance, Giddens showed late-teen girls wanted and achieved sexual experiences outside of committed relationships but were strained by the incongruence between their desires for futures with a long-term sexual/romantic partnership and their partners’ resistance to commitment. Only a few of the teens Thompson interviewed saw work as a major source of meaning in their futures, and even then, work was complementary to a loving bond that these young women still envisioned in the familiar, feminized terms of what Giddens calls “the romantic love complex” (52). For these girls in the late-1980s, then, confluent love was not fully accessible. However, 24 years have passed between the time *The Transformation of Intimacy* was published and my data collection. In those years, women have become more autonomous, and work has gained importance in women’s lives. How, then, have intimate relationships responded to these changes?

Rather than investigating changes in intimate relationships directly, I am interested in changes in the fantasy intimate relationships that women find gratifying. In the late-

1970s/early-1980s, Radway documented a loving bond in romance novels that closely resembles Giddens's description of romantic love, where the loving bond is prioritized above sex, appears somewhat spontaneously and largely without mutual confidence, and is fully realized through marriage. In parallel, Giddens, like Radway, described romance novels as reworking the unsatisfying conditions of real-life love-based partnerships into validating quests where heroines are able to actively produce love and be loved in return (45-46).[5] The consistency in Radway's and Giddens's findings suggests that romance novel narratives popular at the beginning of the "transformation of intimacy" described fulfilling versions of *romantic* love relationships, even as romance readers negotiated the challenges of an environment shifting toward the *confluent* love model. Given that the conditions of intimate partnership have changed over the past several decades, how has the content women romance readers' find emotionally gratifying responded? Have the narratives of loving relationships that women find gratifying to read about become more similar to Giddens's descriptions of confluent love or do they continued to portray variations of romantic love?

These questions matter because their answers tell us something about the codified norms that emotionally resonate for women readers, so that they seem intuitive, rather than consciously learned. These codified norms, in turn, tell us something about the possibilities of gender dynamics in intimate relationships. Building on Illouz's argument that "enchanted" emotional experience depends on intuitive understandings that arise from codified norms, I contend that romance literature provides a window into the codified norms surrounding intimacy. The meanings these norms generate do not necessarily correspond with rational (and relatively observable) meanings; rather, these meanings are immediate and emotional. By both relying on and working to produce codified norms of intimacy, romance novels' narratives may help us to more deeply understand the affective structures contributing to equal or unequal distributions of power in intimate relationships. While romantic love has been characterized by sharp gender divisions and inequality, confluent love allows for a more reciprocal relationship. I investigate the degree to which these different types of love were represented in romance reading of the Smithton and BA readers in 1980 and 2016.

## DATA & METHODS[6]

Intending to partially duplicate Radway's methods, I similarly sampled, interviewed, and surveyed[7] a small group of devoted romance readers. I recruited participants by attending a recurring national romance reading convention in San Francisco during the summer of 2016 and randomly approaching fellow women who were also attending. My final random sample consisted of 65 survey respondents, a subsample of the women I approached from the few hundred San Francisco convention attendants. From this pool of 65 initial respondents, I also interviewed 12 respondents who expressed willingness to be interviewed about their reading tastes and habits.[8] The convention hosted 29 authors representing a variety of subgenres and attracted readers from as far as Alaska and South Dakota, although the majority of attendees drove to the event and lived in northern California. Convention participants were primarily white or Asian with some Black and

Latinx attendees, and were almost all women.[9] All of the attending authors wrote heterosexual stories.

The 65 participants varied by age, relationship status, religion, education, and area of residence. The average age of the group was 36, with a range from 21 to 54 years old. Fifty-nine percent of the women were married, 23 percent were single and never married, and the remaining 18 percent were either in long-term relationships (9 percent), divorced, dating, divorced and dating, or separated. The largest number of BA respondents (37 percent) reported being non-religious, followed by Catholic (25 percent).[10] Seventy-seven percent of respondents completed or attended college, 13 percent of women had a high school education, and 11 percent had some form of graduate education. The majority of respondents (86 percent) considered themselves to be living in suburban areas. Only one respondent lived in a metropolis of 1,000,000 people or more (despite the convention's metropolis location) and only 8 lived in rural areas. Again, my sample was not intended to be representative of all romance reading women; rather, I mean to compare two case-studies of readers living in particular contexts in order to understand the ways specific contextual factors may influence reading tastes and motivations.

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted around an hour on average, ranging from 45 minutes to over two hours. Half were conducted in person and the other half were conducted via video chat or phone. My questions were primarily related to reading tastes, reading habits, leisure habits, and reading interactions. Because my initial research plan was to extend Radway's findings to understand the relationship between social context and subgenre tastes, and because I did not anticipate the way readers' reading motivation appeared to change over the past four decades to include more emphasis on sexual descriptions, I did not directly ask readers about their actual intimate relationship behaviors, nor their preferences for sexual content. Instead, these topics arose organically in interviews; in the case of the latter, usually after I asked "what makes a romance novel good?" or "why are romance novels better than other types of books?"

In addition to interviews and surveys, and again like Radway, I read books that interviewees named as their favorite novels. I coded each of the 42 novels (see Tables A and B in the Appendix for titles and coding terms) with a focus on three elements: heroine, hero, and plot. In the heroine and hero sections, I coded for common character themes including personality, behavior, and character foils.[11] In the plot section, I coded for common events such as marriage and "hero physically rescues heroine." I developed my coding scheme inductively as I read and observed motifs in the novels. In an attempt to ensure the validity of my coding practices, I recoded the memos I made for each of the novels after I finished all coding and compared these to my original coding labels; I found coding labels were consistent.

While my research design intended to recreate Radway's to increase comparability, I made two noteworthy changes. First, whereas Radway recruited privately through shared connections with a central figure, I recruited from a semi-public venue. It is possible my sample over-represents women who are comfortable identifying as romance readers. However, 12 out of the 16 Smithton interviewees also attended events that functioned as semi-public displays of their romance reader identities (e.g., author book signings).

A second difference is that the BA respondents may be more liberal and less religious than the Smithton women. Sampling a group of women more liberal should inflate



differences in reading preferences. Therefore, findings of similarities between reader groups should be more robust and findings of differences less robust.

A final but important methodological note: It is possible that my findings and the stark contrast observed between the Smithton and BA women's tastes for sexual content may be exaggerated if the BA women were more comfortable talking with me about sexual topics than the Smithton women were with Radway. There are two reasons this seems unlikely: 1) Radway spent significantly more time with the Smithton women than I did with the BA women and got to know them better; presumably, their comfort speaking with her increased over the course of their relationship. 2) Although Radway and I were both women interviewing racially and regionally similar women, Radway was more similar in age to her respondents than I was to mine. Whereas Radway was about thirty years old when interviewing women who were also generally about thirty (*Reading* 55), I was not yet twenty years old, and was interviewing women who were, on average, over a decade older than me. It seems likely, therefore, that the Smithton women were more comfortable talking with Radway than the BA women were talking with me, and that my findings regarding sexual tastes are unlikely to be a consequence of my social position relative to my interviewees.[12]

## **KEY FINDINGS: ROMANCE READING TASTES IN 1980 AND 2016**

What has changed and remained the same in the content that readers want from their romance novels over time? I find that, despite massive differences in social contexts, Smithton women reading in the early 1980s and BA women reading in 2016 enjoy surprisingly similar idealizations of romantic relationships. Romance novels' narratives continue to focus on love as a constructive bond between main characters (Teo 478-79; see Lowell 90) and include love-conquers-all happy endings (Roach). Yet while these core narrative elements appear largely the same, the romance novels preferred in 2016 include significantly more sexual content. Building off prior research, I argue this increase in sexual content not only evinces increased female sexual liberty, but also has important implications for the meaning of intimate relationships.

### ***The romance-quest is the same in 1980 and 2016***

Since the inception of the modern American romance genre in 1972,[13] and despite changes in women's place in society and women's relationship to men, the definition of a romance novel has changed little, and many character types and plot points from the 1970s and 1980s remain popular today.[14] The BA readers favorite novels (see Appendix Table 1) continue to depict a strong alpha male[15] who physically fights for or rescues a heroine, and a beautiful independent heroine who emotionally transforms a hero by showing him how to feel a deep loving connection for the first time (Fisher & Cox; Appendix Table 2). The stoic, emotionally detached, and sexually promiscuous hero provides emotional comfort and care in ways he has never done before and reacts aggressively and protectively when the heroine is threatened, often using his physical strength to defend or save the heroine (Appendix Table 2). The heroine is emotionally vulnerable but strong. She is valued for her love-skills as a caring, unique, beautiful woman

who is incidentally sexually persuasive. The heroine uses these love-skills to transform her hero from a promiscuous “alpha male” into an affectionate and caring “lover boy” (Appendix Table 2).

Just as in 1980, the stakes of the romance novels preferred by the BA readers rest on two things: the heroine’s ability to convert the most unemotional man into one that can care for a woman, and the hero’s ability to change for the heroine. This plotline, which appeared in over 71 percent of novels BA readers named as favorites, introduces a gendered asymmetry into the narrative. The romance novel is a character-driven form, where the focus of the novels is on exploring characters and showing their individual development, as well as the development of the relationship. As Fisher and Cox observe in their analysis of Harlequin novels, however, although sometimes the heroine begins as emotionally scarred from past relationships and must learn to trust again over the course of the narrative, she is generally aware of her emotions and desires right from the start, and primarily lacks the fulfillment she could find from a satisfying partnership. The hero undergoes the more dramatic change. He transforms from a man driven by sex and physical competition to a man that displays his emotional, and not just sexual, desires for the heroine.[16]

Despite living in a society that is more accepting of male emotionality (E Anderson), readers are still attracted to heroes who are initially characterized by their emotionless but physically and socially powerful masculinity. For both readers and heroines, however, this attraction conflicts with the heroine’s long-term goal of having an emotionally satisfying lasting relationship. To fulfill her romance-quest, the heroine must convert the man she feels intense passion towards but who she is incapable of maintaining a lasting relationship with, into a man who she both feels passion towards and with whom she has a deep loving bond. The paradox of this attraction was at the center of the romance plot that the Smithsonian readers preferred in 1980 and it remains at the center of BA readers’ favorite books in 2016.

### ***More sexual content in romance novels today***

Although the genre’s central themes have remained intact over the past 36 years, there have been at least two significant changes in romance novels’ content. Popular romance scholar Kristin Ramsdell, who I interviewed for background during my research, summarized the alterations that have taken place within the genre since the 1980s:

At its core, the romance is still the same genre with its message of hope, optimism, and the “love conquers all” theme. That being said, romance heroines have gotten much stronger and have taken control of their own lives, feelings, and goals. Romance heroes have learned to appreciate the stronger, dynamic heroines and not be threatened by them. Romances have gotten more sexually explicit and heroines have learned to take ownership of their own desires, asking for and/or taking what they want. [...] None of this was true to any great degree before the 1980s.

Following this description, two large changes in the genre are 1) more sexually liberated, independent heroines and 2) more sexually explicit content. Radway’s research captures a

moment near the start of this transformation, both in heroines' depictions as well in sexually explicit content.

Romance novel content has become more sexually explicit, deploying a more direct, less euphemistic discourse in sexual descriptions. This change is documented in Markert's *Publishing the Romance*, where the author describes the history of the romance genre from 1939 to today. The increased sexual explicitness is also visible in differences between the BA and Smithton readers' favorite books. The BA women's favorite novels include explicit sexual content that uses direct language, such as "vagina," "clitoris," "erection"; includes thorough descriptions of tastes, smells, and physical sensations; and includes sex involving "punishment" and toys. The Smithton women's favorite novels, in contrast, use evasive terminology and include only brief sexual descriptions. For instance, the Smithton readers' favorite novel, Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, includes few explicit sex scenes that are contained to single paragraphs. The most explicit of the three sex scenes I identified is copied below in its entirety:

Then her arms were slowly drawn upward on either side of her head and held there easily in one of his hands. His other hand cupped a breast and he played with it to his pleasure while she twisted and fought against his overpowering strength. His knee slowly forced open her thighs and spread them and again she felt his manhood deep within (Woodiwiss 35).

While *The Flame in the Flower* contains much sensual description, including bathing and sexual gazing scenes, there is limited depiction of sexual acts. The brief and euphemistic sex scene above is characteristic of the sexual language used in the Smithton books as compared to the BA books more broadly.

Not only did BA readers' books include more sexual content than the Smithton women's, but the function and meaning of sex appears to have also changed. Whereas the Smithton readers' preferred books focused primarily on the gradual buildup of love and removal of emotional barriers between the hero and heroine, and rarely named sexual content as an important feature (Radway, *Reading* 67, 119-156), the BA readers' novels contained more sexual material and sexual encounters that were independent of a loving bond. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for instance, a novel familiar to most BA respondents,[17] there are at least 15 vaginal sex scenes, all of which are explicit and usually span multiple pages.

The diversification of novel focus, from almost entirely centered on the emotional relationship between protagonists to also valuing the sexual relationship between protagonists, is evinced in the heroines' increased sexual independence. While the Smithton women strongly objected to sexual promiscuity (Radway, *Reading* 73-74), heroines in the novels I analyzed often had sexual lives prior to their relationship with the heroes and sexual desires outside of emotional bonds (22 of the 42 novels I read included sexually independent heroines). For instance, in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the heroine begins her relationship with the hero as his sexual submissive. Her love for the hero grows through the sexual relationship, and when the hero is unable to acquiesce to her demands for a deeper emotional bond, she leaves the relationship altogether: a decision in keeping with Giddens' "confluent" relationship model. Although the trilogy as a whole makes this departure merely a step along the way to the hero's transformation – which is more in

keeping with the “romance quest” – throughout the first volume, the heroine’s sexual independence facilitates a plot based largely on a mutually beneficial sexual relationship between protagonists.

For the Smithton women, in contrast, heroines were committed to one hero for life and readers strongly preferred sexual descriptions that focus on “a heroine’s sense of emotional fulfillment,” rather than simply her physical pleasure, since only these “can offer the reader the imaginary experience of feeling cared for and attended to by another” (Radway, *Reading* 180). Further, while most heroines in the Smithton women’s novels were virgins at the start of the narrative, only 13 of the 42 BA women’s novels included virginal heroines; and while 7 out of 20 of the Smithton readers favorite novels included marriage between the protagonists in the first quarter of the book, none of the 42 novels I read included marriage until the last quarter. Only 21 of the 42 books favorited by the BA women included marriage at all, something Radway describes as a practical necessity for the Smithton readers (*Reading* 102).

While romance novels continue to focus on the gradual development of a loving bond between heroine and hero, and depict a heroine being attracted to an “alpha male” and then converting him into a “lover boy,” the changes in the meaning of sex provide some evidence of a shift in the type of love readers find gratifying. BA readers read about love that is not bound by marriage, does not necessarily last forever, understands sexual gratification as central, and allows for sexual exploration: a bond Giddens might describe as *confluent love*. However, traces of romantic love remain in the narratives readers find especially gratifying (e.g., in at least 30 of the 42 novels BA readers named as favorites, the heroine acted to make the hero more emotional). Importantly, in these narratives, a desirable man continues to be represented as a stoic womanizer who is converted into a caring lover by a special woman’s exceptional love-skills. Love and emotionality remain, in Giddens’ term, “feminized.”

In sum, romance novels have changed to incorporate more female sexual independence and sexual content in a way that makes heroines’ sexuality more similar to heroes’. However, the central plot of the romance, where an emotionally capable woman converts an emotionally incapable man into someone who can love her by using her own love-skills remains the same.

## POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

What explains the changes and similarities in tastes between two very different groups of romance reading women? Between 1980 and 2016, the types of people reading romances and the social contexts where those readers read have changed dramatically. Perhaps changes in *who* is reading explain *what* readers and reading? Or perhaps changes and similarities in romance reading are partially explained by broad social/cultural variations in the mores surrounding sexuality? I explore these possible explanations in the following section.

### ***Differences in romance readers***

Demographic changes. Estimated at between 15 and more than 20 percent of total adult fiction sales in 2013 and second in readership only to “mysteries, thrillers, and crime” for women fiction readers (Harris Interactive), romance is one of the most popular literary genres. The genre’s popularity and diversity have increased since its inception and continue to do so. While romance sales accrued about \$510 million in revenue in 1981 (Anon),[18] sales were up to \$1.35 billion in 2013 (Norris & Editors of Simba Information).

As the genre has grown, so has the diversity of its readers. Romance readers are increasingly non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-female. Between 2000 and 2014, there was a 92 percent increase in the number of multicultural consumers (P Anderson) and between 2002 and 2017 the percentage of male readers increased from 7 to 18 percent.[19] The rapidly growing romance self-publishing industry (Markert) is also making a wider variety of romances available, allowing for increased representation of ethnic and sexual minority groups: for example, according to a survey conducted by BookNet Canada, LGBT romance novels saw just under a 30,000 percent growth in Canadian sales in the 4 years between 2013 and 2017 (Hirschberg).

Although neither the BA nor Smithton groups are representative of the romance reading population, both samples resemble the populations from which they are drawn. The BA women are more diverse than the Smithton women in terms of ethnicity, age, and reading tastes. While the Smithton women were all white, the women attending the BA convention were White, Asian, Hispanic, and African American. The Smithton women ranged from 24 to 49 years old, whereas the BA women ranged from 21 to 54 years old. Forty-eight percent (32) of the Smithton readers listed their favorite subgenre as historical and another 29 percent (20) listed contemporary. When asked to mark the genres they read most frequently, 87.7 percent of BA women marked contemporary, 75.4 percent erotica, and 40 percent fantasy.[20]

Table 1: Demographic overview of Smithton and BA readers

	Smithton readers	BA readers
Age	24-49	21-54
Married	76%	55%
Single	7%	22%
Keeping the house last week	38%	2%
Working fulltime	9%	68%

The BA readers were also more independent than the Smithton readers in the sense that they were less likely to be married and more likely to work outside the home. While 76 percent of the Smithton women (32) were married, only 55 percent (38) of the BA women were married. While only 7 percent (3) Smithton women were single, 22 percent (15) BA women were single. Thirty-eight percent (16) of Smithton women reported they were “keeping house and/or caring for children”[21] in the past last week, rather than working outside the home, but only 2 percent (1) of the BA women reported they were keeping the

house fulltime. Twenty-one percent (9) of Smithton women were working fulltime; in contrast, 68 percent (43) BA women were working fulltime.

The Smithton and BA readers also related to their romantic partners differently. While the Smithton readers were primarily stay-home mothers financially dependent on their husbands, the BA women were economically independent and less likely to be married. Unlike the Smithton women who spoke frankly to Radway about their sense of “confinement within their homes” due to childcare responsibilities and the need to “provide a supportive environment for their husbands” (Radway, *Reading* 112), the BA women’s jobs meant they both generated their own income – important for affording their reading habits and something the Smithton readers lamented not having – and had the mobility to go to work.

The majority (8:10) of partnered BA interviewees also affirmed that their partners were both supportive and emotionally available. Contrary to the Smithton women, whose primary source of guilt stemmed from husbands pressuring them to stop reading (Radway, *Reading* 90, 102-105), none of the 12 women I interviewed said that their partners interfered with their reading. In fact, several women volunteered that their husbands felt that their romance reading enhanced their sex life, and one reader explained that when she is in a bad mood, her husband will suggest she read a romance to make herself feel better.

Not only do the BA women’s relationships with their partners appear more emotionally supportive, but BA readers also had more support resources available outside the home. Of particular importance and a significant change in the genre, is the growth of the online romance reading community (on online reading communities see Long 206-18; Fister). BA readers described the online community as an important source of companionship and emotional support.

Radway argued that women read romances to fill a need that remained unfulfilled by their actual relationships. In the context of the Smithton women, that need was for nurturance; consequently, Smithton women’s fulfilling narratives focused on aggressive men who changed into nurturant men. While Radway’s argument may be correct and women may be reading to fill an unmet need, over the past 30 years, women’s needs have changed. Relative to the Smithton women, the BA women appear to receive more emotional support and may not have the same unmet need for nurturance. Therefore, under the assumption that Radway’s argument is correct and unmet real-life needs manifest in reading tastes that satisfy unmet needs or desires, why might women who did not have the same unmet need for nurturance continue to prefer novels with the same narrative arc? And what does it mean that they expressed an additional preference for novels with explicit sexual content? If Radway’s argument is incorrect or no longer applicable, what led BA readers to prefer books with similar narrative arcs but different depictions of sexuality as the Smithton readers? To more deeply understand BA readers’ motivations, I consider changes in the ways that readers understand sexual content in romance fiction.

### ***Socio-historical changes: The meaning of sexuality for Smithton and BA readers***

Not only has more sexuality been incorporated into the content of the BA readers’ romance novels, but the BA readers’ understandings of sexuality also differed from the Smithton women’s. Unlike the Smithton readers, BA women wanted to read books for their

sexual content. Seventy-eight percent (49) of readers checked erotica as a “most frequently read” subgenre and BA interviewees described the importance of sexual excitement. Sarah talked about how, when reading a new novel, if she reads 20 percent (based on the percentage calculations of her Kindle) and there is no sex scene she will be annoyed, reassess whether the book is worth finishing, and often stop reading it. Tracy, another BA respondent, talked about how romance gives her the “rip clothes off and fuck you against the wall” heat she cannot have “now that [she’s] married.”

One interviewee also described the importance of the sex depicted in romance novels for its education. Anna shared an emotional story about her personal difficulties having sex and explained how reading romances has helped her overcome them. Anna expressed considerable regret for not having started reading romances in her 20s and encouraged me to read them so I could also benefit from their sexual education. This description is especially noteworthy because of its contrast with the Smithton women’s description of the educational value of romances. Unlike Anna, Smithton women valued romances for their more traditional educational properties, describing how they learned about foreign places, history, and cultures (Radway, *Reading* 111). This change in the educational properties of romances evinces that content readers are taking away from their reading may differ between the groups, where sexual content is more salient for BA readers and less salient for Smithton readers.

In addition to wanting to read and learn about sex, the BA women also talked about sex more comfortably than the Smithton women. The Smithton women disparaged promiscuous sexual relations using the term “bed-hopping” (Radway, *Reading* 73, 104-05) and refused to discuss their own feelings of sexual excitement when reading (Radway, *Reading* 67). The Smithton women emphasized that sex in romance novels is about love; they insisted that romances are not meant to be “pornographic,” and “they do not like explicit description because they prefer to imagine the scene in detail by themselves” (Radway, *Reading* 66).[22]

In contrast, the BA women used explicit sexual language in their interviews with me,[23] talked about the sexual pleasure of reading romances, and sometimes connected their romance reading with their actual sex lives. The ways the BA women talked about, learned from, and used the sexual content in their romances suggest that, like the heroines they read about, these women may be more comfortable with their sexuality and are more willing to take ownership of sexual desires than the Smithton readers.

Although the unmet nurturance need that may motivate BA readers reading is unclear, the BA readers were explicit about the motivational power of romances’ sexual content. This finding suggests that the energizing and motivational content in romances may have shifted to include exciting sex, possibly in addition to nurturance. The addition of readers’ desire for sexual content, and depictions of female sexual independence and pleasure, in the context of plots that continue to revolve around the transformation of the hero, may suggest that possibilities for emotionally gratifying intimacy have expanded. This expansion may capture the *sexual* equality, but not necessarily the *emotional* equality, dimension of confluent love.

### ***Similarities in romance reading***

More surprising than differences in who and what readers are reading is the similarity in reading content. Despite all of the demographic and socio-historical changes, the romance quest has changed little. *Why?* Why would women in 2016, many of whom identified as feminists, choose to read about the same intimate relationship arc that was seen as “Ideal” by women in 1980, who were living under much more restrictive patriarchal structures? To begin to provide an answer to this question, I briefly set aside the topics of romantic and confluent love and attempt to understand how and why readers read.

While some parts of the act of romance reading have changed over time, like the content of the books, the practice of romance reading is far more similar for Smithton and BA readers than it is different. Both Smithton and BA readers find reading emotionally exciting yet easy. A theme in the BA women’s descriptions of their reading experiences was the powerful feelings that romance reading generated. When asked, all 12 interviewees agreed that reading romances alters their moods and most also talked about how they use romances to do so. BA readers described experiences crying, feeling angry, excited, aroused or using romances “to feel better.” Amber described her most enjoyable experiences reading romances as, “when I get sucked in and have that ‘awwww’ moment...if I’m crying I know it’s a really good book.” Sarah described how romances must have a happy ending – seven of the 12 interviewees volunteered that happy endings are especially important for good reading experiences – because she “wants to feel transported, to feel good.”

Escape was another important theme among BA respondents. For instance, Beth described how, if her house was on fire, she would be too lost in her book to notice. When survey respondents were asked what makes romances more enjoyable than other kinds of books available today, the most common responses took four forms, where two described escaping: *join another world* and *escape from the stress of real life* (the other two were *the love story* and *happy endings*). One survey respondent wrote, “I love living vicariously through the various romance stories that I read. I love feeling what the characters are feeling and just imagining that that ‘perfect’ guy is out there somewhere.”

The themes of escapism and having powerful emotional experiences while reading were also important for the Smithton readers. In the third chapter of *Reading the Romance* – titled “The Act of Reading the Romance: Escape and Instruction” – Radway writes about posing the question “what do romances do better than other books today?” and being surprised by responses. Rather than concerning themselves with the novels’ plots, responses described the “*effects* of romances on the people who read them” (*Reading* 87). Like me, Radway notes how the word “escape” not only appears on many questionnaire responses but is the principal way that respondents described the power of the romance reading experience. Like the BA readers, these illustrations of Smithton readers’ escape were highly emotional. Radway writes, “Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where [readers] feel liberated...by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy” (*Reading* 93).

That these readers chose to read romance novels at the opportunity cost of engaging in any other of the many forms of entertainment available today – and despite the considerable stigma associated with romance reading (Lois & Gregson; Brackett) – points



to the value of the emotional experience romances provide their readers. In response to the question, “when do you do most of your reading?” several BA interviewees volunteered remarkably similar anecdotes of staying up until the early morning hours to read a book, getting few hours of sleep, and then lugging themselves to work. Elaine described how, if a book was too good, she simply could not put it down and would continue reading under other papers at work or reading on the toilet. Penelope admitted to canceling appointments with friends and keeping partners awake late into the night by refusing to turn off the light. The 9 BA readers who said they sometimes feel bad about their reading explained their guilt was a consequence of being too involved in their book (8) or allowing reading to take up too much of their time (1).

Smithton readers evidenced similarly intense habits. Over a quarter of Radway’s participants *most preferred* to finish a book they started in a single sitting. Another 30 percent read “as much of it as I can until I’m interrupted or have something else to do.” No one read “a few pages a day until done” (Radway, *Reading* 59). Radway also noted that readers characterized their books as “quick reads” or “fat books,” and described how the Smithton women strategized their reading based on what they knew they would be able to “make it through” in a given reading occasion (59). As Radway clarified, romance reading is much more than simply a remedy for boredom; romance reading is about being transported into a fantasy that feels good.

This intensity was also evinced in the quantity of books BA and Smithton readers consumed. The BA readers reported reading an average of 10 books per month[24] – over two books a week and 120 books per year – and over a quarter of survey takers (27) read more than 16 hours each week. Describing the Smithton women’s similarly “voracious” consumption, Radway reports that more than a third of her participants said they read five to nine romances weekly. Radway goes on to write, “an additional 22 (55 percent) completed between one and four romances every week, while four women indicated that they consume anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five romances during that same period of time” (*Reading* 60) – although she points out that this latter figure seems implausible.

Interestingly, while escape was described as emotionally intense, both Smithton and BA readers also associated escape with the ease and predictability of reading. A Smithton reader explained the power of romance as, “they are light reading – escape literature – I can put down and pick up effortlessly” (Radway, *Reading* 88). BA interviewee, Sarah, noted how she can no longer read the canonical fiction she once did: “I don’t want to work, I want to be sucked in.” A BA survey respondent described:

Once you find your preferred genre/subgenre and favorite authors, there’s running themes. The CEO billionaire, or angsty MC prez – you know the storyline, so you know it’ll be enjoyable to you, yet it’s still “new” because the characters are new. It’s almost relaxing. No feeling of “I just spent \$10 on something I hated.”

The way these women used romances for their effortless ability to transport suggests part of romances’ value is the ease with which readers emotionally resonate with the novels’ plots.

In addition, romance novels are valued for their guarantee of enjoyment. Respondents described their books as providing an optimal ratio of predictability and

freshness, and the respondents' mention of concern over having wasted money on an unsatisfying book suggests romance novels ensure the readers' desires are going to be honored and met. In a book that is *not* a romance, readers are uncertain whether they will finish the book with a sense of closure and optimism, of love having been affirmed, of the characters they have come to love being happy and safe and rewarded. In romance novels, those guarantees are built into the structure, and the only question is whether the execution will be effective. Indeed, several BA interviewees volunteered that when reading a good story, unless the writing is so bad that it interferes with their ability to get lost in the story, the quality of the writing does not matter.

Romance reading, for the BA and Smithton readers, is an activity about easily escaping *away* from everyday life and escaping *into* a gratifying fantasy. For a BA or Smithton romance reader to engage in a fulfilling romance novel means she is interested in the developing love story between a couple and this interest is strong enough to pull her away from daily life and into the world of her book. Why though, is she so interested?

### ***Enchantment, traditional norms, and relationship orientation: Insights from Illouz***

Romance reading has changed to incorporate parts of confluent love but retains parts of romantic love. In the novels BA readers discussed in 2016, narratives involved more sexual liberty and more equality in sexual desires and behaviors, but there was still an emotional gap between the way women and men were depicted. Heroes were still less emotional and less capable of love and care than heroines, and it was only through the feminized love-skills possessed by a special heroine that the hero was able to access his caring. Just as Giddens describes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century "romantic love complex," emotionality remains feminized, and stoicism remains romanticized and masculinized.

I posit one explanation for the "stall" in women's tastes for confluent, egalitarian love is that — despite changes in the BA readers' wider milieu — the BA women enjoy reading traditional plot structures because those structures are familiar, add to the ease of reading, and allow them to see value-structures that they have internalized reaffirmed. Romance novels provide a moment of proximity to still-normative cultural formations of gender and romantic love, presented in a familiar and stylized format, which offer readers relief from the more complicated negotiations of gender roles and gender performance that people confronted and negotiated in 2016.[25]

Illouz describes the ways familiar — albeit power imbalanced — gender and intimacy norms allow for enchantment and self-abandonment, and that using these familiar norms of codified femininity and masculinity with small adjustments creates excitement. Following Weber, she describes enchantment as an immediate and unquestioned mobilization of feelings and beliefs that is not necessarily rationally justifiable. For instance, Illouz points out that, as opposed to the emotionally distanced experience where a man asks permission at each progressive stage of physical intimacy, an enchanting experience can feel "spontaneous and unreflexive" (192) because neither partner is concerned with any knowledge beyond their tradition-instilled intuition and feelings. The insertion of "political correctness" (Illouz 192) rationalizes the experience, stripping away its intense emotionality.[26]

Illouz describes the ways ambiguity leads to excitement through, e.g., sending mixed signals, insinuating meanings, stirring desire and confusion, and mixing pleasure and pain (191). Ambiguity, Illouz writes,

is made possible when stabilized meanings are played with and twisted... In contrast, the emptying of romantic relationships from power relationships has the semiotic effect of making gender signs less marked, and thus of decreasing the capacity to generate ambiguity, often thought to be an ingredient of seduction (190).

Without codified norms of gender and intimacy, ambiguity is replaced by uncertainty, and this uncertainty leads to anxiety because it presses people to interrogate themselves in the rules of the interaction (193). Rather than feeling the emotions elicited by the interaction itself, people are focused on self-monitoring and the highly emotional part of an exciting and enchanting romance is lost.

In the prior section, I showed that BA and Smithton readers consistently describe the ease with which romance novels transport them, and that readers highly value this ease. Readers also get sucked into the emotional content of their reading, sometimes neglecting other responsibilities in order to remain in the fantasy. These characteristics of the act of romance reading may suggest that women continue to read traditional story arcs because those arcs allow readers to feel “transported” into an experience of enchantment. In Illouz’s terms, traditional story arcs act as structures of “stabilized meanings.” These stabilized meanings provide certainty and thereby allow for both ambiguity and play, and for experiences of self-abandonment. While these enchanting narratives’ allure may not be rationally explainable, the stories are easy, affectively intuitive, and emotionally powerful.

The BA readers may have chosen to read romance novels with the same story arc as the Smithton readers because, for the BA readers, the gendered norms surrounding intimacy – where a man is responsible for being emotionally removed and a woman is responsible for being emotionally aware – have remained sufficiently normative that they feel intuitive. Although BA readers’ stance towards sexuality clearly differs from the Smithton women, as visible in the ways different groups of readers talk about sex and describe their own sexuality, readers’ stance towards gendered emotionality may not have changed. This possibility is supported by evidence of the BA reader’s focus on caring relationships. That is, despite having access to alternative value structures (e.g., career orientation), like the Smithton women, the BA women continue to prioritize their caring roles. Although I do not have data on male partners’ participation in care- and relationship-oriented tasks, data showing BA readers prioritize relationships and relationship-work as central in their lives suggests broader norms of emotionality may be consistent across groups of readers.

Relationships were an important part of both the Smithton and BA readers’ lives. For the Smithton women, this is evinced in their everyday routine, working as homemakers and caring for their husbands and children. While the BA women were not full-time homemakers, were more independent from their partners, and had careers, they still appeared to highly value caring for others and seemed to organize their daily lives around their partners, children, and family. When asked how many books she reads, Grace hesitated and described that she reads and works while her husband is in the Yukon for

three months stretches, and dramatically reduces her reading and working when he returns. Jenna, who was one of two single respondents, described how, in addition to working her full-time job, she cares for her sickly brother, adult daughter, daughter's boyfriend (all three live with her) and her ailing father – listening to romance audiobooks all the while she does it.[27] Sarah described how her children are the most important part of her life and her daily activities and career choices revolve around them. Sarah was particularly emphatic when describing that teaching her children to respect her reading time, the only time she takes for herself, was one of the hardest things she has ever had to do.

The time in BA women's lives when they do their reading also suggests an association between romance readership and the importance of relationships and caring tasks. Without being asked, 9 of the 12 interviewees volunteered descriptions of taking a break from reading in their 20s, in college, or when "life got in the way," and resuming when they found a stable job or became a mother in their late 20s to mid-30s. Readers appear to be reading romance novels, a character-driven and relationship-focused genre, at times in their lives when they are focused on characters and relationships in their own lives (e.g., children or partners), rather than working to overcome external challenges (e.g., college or getting a job) and thus advancing their life's "plot" toward some non-relationship goal.

Interestingly, between 1980 and 2016, the average age of romance readers changed from 24-49 years old (Radway, *Reading* 55) to 30-54 years old (Romance Writers of America, *Reader Statistics*). This difference, which shows average contemporary readers are about four years older than readers in the early 1980s, corresponds to the 3.6-year increase in the age of first time mothers between 1970 and 2006, from 21.4 to 26 years old (Matthews & Hamilton). While not all BA respondents were mothers, the age of motherhood serves as a useful proxy for when people begin shifting priorities towards family life.

However, the characteristic shared among all of the romance readers Radway and I studied that is perhaps most indicative of the importance of caring relationships in readers' lives is that all respondents were women. Research in medical sociology (see the cost-of-caring hypothesis, Kessler & McLeod), the psychology of intimacy (Rudman & Glick; Oliver & Hyde; Carroll et al), and the sociology of intimacy (Duncombe & Marsden) indicate that caring relationships tend to be more valued by women than men. Although not all women value caring relationships more than all men, the evidence from these literatures shows there is a meaningful correlation between womanhood and highly valuing caring relationships.

That the BA and Smithton readers were women, read during "character-driven" moments in their lives, and organized their daily routines around their relationships all suggest relationships and caring for others were important sources of meaning for them. The investment readers show in their relationships parallels the investment the romances' protagonists show in their relationships. Romance novels are not about suspense, violence, or watching the good person beat the bad person (though that plotline sometimes exists in romances); romances are about the development of a specific type of loving bond. This "Ideal" relationship is similar to confluent love in that sex is central, the heroine is sexually satisfied, and sexuality is desired by both heroine and hero. It is, however, also similar to

romantic love, where the heroine's special feminine abilities to create love transform the stoic hero into a caring lover.

Although both groups of women readers may find this focus on caring and loving bonds to be central in their lives, it may not be as central to their male partners. As in 1980 (e.g., Thompson), male partners today may be relatively more focused on work than relationships.[28] Assuming orientations towards relationships and caring for others demand and engender more emotionality than orientations toward work, real social structures may resemble structures depicted in romance novels, both in 1980 and 2016. In such a case, real gender differences in the relative valuation of emotionality may contribute to the maintenance of, and be maintained by, the story arc where stoic heroes are transformed by emotional heroines into caring lovers.

Therefore, although they may not conform to readers' intellectual ideals for equality in romantic relationships, story arcs enjoyed by 1980s readers may remain enjoyable to readers in 2016 because the social structures and norms surrounding gendered orientations toward work and intimacy have not changed enough to alter the "stabilized meanings" that allow readers to effortlessly engage in the narrative's emotional experience. If the norms surrounding masculinity and/or femininity shift, future research may consider investigating whether reader preferences also shift. Similarly, if readers in the 2020s state preferences for other story arcs, investigators may ask whether those new preferences correlate with other shifts, especially in stabilized meanings surrounding gendered intimacy.

## CONCLUSION

This research compares the tastes and practices of two groups of romance reading women reading in different contexts. I find that, despite changes in women's lives across the two groups, the stories both groups enjoyed are largely the same. The romance narrative each group preferred consistently depicts not only a heroine and hero overcoming challenges to develop a strong and affirming love, but also a heroine using her feminine love-skills to transform a stoic hero into a caring lover. Unlike the group of women reading in 1980, the group of 2016 readers enjoyed stories infused with much explicit description of sexual acts, heroines with clear sexual desires, and independent heroines. While the fundamental narrative arc of the romance novel, where love conquers all, is consistent across reader groups, changes in sex's meaning in romance novels evince an important shift in the nature of ideal intimacy.

Heroines and heroes are described with similar sexual desires, where both are allowed to want sex for its own sake, outside of emotional bonds. This is a momentous shift in gendered dynamics in intimate relationships. In contrast to earlier portrayals of intimate relationships, where heroines were more dependent and passive in relation to their sexuality (Douglas; Greer; also see Radway, *Reading* 15), this new meaning of sex alters the power dynamic between men and women. In Giddens's description of "romantic love" (the type of love idealized before the "intimacy transformation"), for instance, where a woman's sexual satisfaction is assumed to derive from her emotional bond with her partner and where a man may seek sexual satisfaction from a non-respectable woman (43), men and

women are not equal. In this unequal dynamic, a woman devotes herself to her partner (and is unsatisfied by him), and a man understands that “love” is a means of organizing his personal life (59) and accessing sex (60). When sexual desire is de-gendered, however, male sexual conquest — whereby a man asserts power over a resistant woman — loses its meaning, or “principal dynamic” (84).[29] The balance of sexual desire, therefore, is an important step towards an equality of power in intimate relationships.

While the depiction of sexual desires in ideal intimate relationships have changed, emotional desires appear to have remained gendered. Heroines are depicted as more emotionally skilled, with more desire for emotional intimacy, and heroes are depicted as emotionally removed and more indifferent towards emotional intimacy. Unlike in confluent love, which “presumes equality in emotional give and take” (Giddens 62), an imbalance in desire for emotional intimacy creates a power dynamic where a man’s relative emotional removal may create a form of authority and a source of leverage over his female partner.

This research has shown differences and similarities in the gendering of narrative depictions of ideal intimacy in 1980 and 2016. Why, though, do these ideal romance narratives matter? Romance novels’ narratives of ideal intimacies provide important insight into invisible social structures; structures that matter for directing peoples’ feelings and affective perceptions, but that may not be otherwise obvious. This research shows the ways both BA and Smithton women read were the same, where both groups highly valued the ease of escaping away from their current world and into a novel’s fantasy. The value of this ease and readers’ descriptions of being swept away into a fantasy suggests women want to be enchanted by the stories they consume. Readers want to connect to their stories by shedding the distance of rational thinking and instead engage in an intuitive, emotional experience. In order to achieve this experience, readers demand familiar structures. Familiar structures/codified norms allow readers to avoid the distancing process of rationally questioning their uncertain feelings (Illouz 192-95). At the same time, familiar structures allow readers to be absorbed into the heightened emotional experience created through ambiguity and the twisting of codified norms (Illouz 190-91).

Romance novels, therefore, tell us something about the familiar structures that readers rely on to lose themselves in narratives. Further research is needed both to investigate the way intuitive, affective stances towards intimacy and gender matter for women and men’s equality, and to continue investigating the window romance reading provides into dynamic intimacy norms. Have readers’ tastes, for instance, changed since 2016? How might the disruptions of the past five years — e.g., Trump’s presidency, the #metoo movement, the BLM protests, and COVID-19 — affected the narratives readers find affectively intuitive? If narratives have not changed, or changed only for particular groups of readers, what does that imply for the process through which affectively resonate norms evolve? This research shows that the norms BA readers — in contrast to Smithton readers — rely on related to sexuality have changed to be more gender equal, but the norms related to emotionality remain gendered. While research has suggested that progress towards gender equality has “stalled” as a consequence of heterosexual men not changing enough to match their progressive female partners (England), these findings suggest the norms of intimacy that women readers find intuitive may also be “stalled.”

**APPENDIX**

Table A: Novels BA readers named as their favorite romances, read and coded for this research.

Title	Author	Year
A Rose in the Storm	Brenda Joyce	2013
Archangel's Enigma	Nalini Singh	2015
Beautiful Bastard	Christina Lauren	2013
Beautiful Disaster	Jamie McGuire	2012
Blurred Lines	Lauren Layne	2015
Chained by Night	Larissa Ione	2014
Deeper	Megan Hart	2019
Fifty Shades of Grey	E.L. James	2011
Frenched	Melanie Harlow	2015
Hammered	Elizabeth Bear	2004
If You Only Knew	Kristan Higgins	2016
Ink	Elizabeth Hunter	2018
Inked Armor	Helena Hunting	2014
Island of Glass	Nora Roberts	2016
Kaleb	Nicole Edwards	2014
Legend	Katy Evans	2016
Lost Rider	Harper Sloan	2017
Making Faces	Amy Harmon	2015
Mine	Marie York	2015
Nearly Broken	Devon Ashley	2013
Never Close Enough	Anie Michaels	2013
November 9	Colleen Hoover	2015
Obsidian	Jennifer Armentrout	2012
Out of Bounds	Lauren Blakely	2016
Perfect	Judith McNaught	1993
Raze	Tillie Cole	2015
Rowdy	Jay Crownover	2014
Ruin and Rule	Pepper Winters	2015
Seven Years	Dannika Dark	2014
Sincerely, Carter	Whitney G.	2015

Stormy Persuasion	Johanna Lindsey	2014
Tear You Apart	Megan Hart	2017
The Santangelos	Jackie Collins	2015
The Sun and the Moon	Leslie McAdam	2016
The Wingman	Natasha Anders	2017
This is Falling	Ginger Scott	2014
Thoughtless	S.C. Stephens	2012
Three Simple Rules	Nikki Sloane	2015
Truth or Beard	Penny Reid	2015
Unveiled	Courtney Milan	2014
Wild Embrace	Nalini Singh	2016
You Were Mine	Abbi Glines	2014

Table B: BA readers favorite romances novels' content codes.

<b>Hero</b>		<b>Heroine</b>	
Sex is emotionless	25	Emotionally needy	27
Loner/ Prefers to handle things alone	25	Sex is emotionally powerful	18
Must control aggression	28	Makes hero more emotional	30
Physically dominates heroine	27	<b>Plot</b>	
Naturally sexually-needy	27		Threat of sexual violence towards heroine
Physically saves heroine	27	Male-dominated aggressive sex	12
Cannot control himself around beauty	21		

[1] Radway's work has been called "reception theory" because it looks at the different ways readers use their books rather than a phenomenological model describing what happens when a reader reads. This is a slight distinction (Harkin).

[2] Thirty-six years passed between 2016 and 1980, the midpoint in Radway's data collection.

[3] Intimacy is also defined more broadly as "the familiarity resulting from close association" (Jamieson).

[4] The distinction between relationships readers find emotionally satisfying to consume versus relationships they want in their actual lives relates to the difference between emotional versus intellectual desire (e.g., see Swidler, *Talk of Love* on passionate versus prosaic love).

[5] Like Radway, Giddens also describes romance novels as centered on a plot where "the heroine tames, softens and alters the seemingly intractable masculinity of her



love object, making it possible for mutual affection to become the main guiding-line of their lives together” (46).

[6] This research received human subject ethics approval from UC Berkeley’s IRB.

[7] Although I made modifications, my interview guide was based on Radway’s Appendix 1: Oral Interview Response Record (*Reading* 223-25) and my survey on Radway’s Appendix 2: Pilot Questionnaire (*Reading* 226-30). I made modifications to interview and survey instruments to account for differences in context (e.g., significant increases in average household income and the availability of e-readers), I excluded some interview questions from the “Knowledge and Evaluation of Romances” section, I added questions based on Radway’s in-text descriptions (e.g., on page 87 she describes asking “what do romances do better than other novels today?”) and my hypotheses, and I asked questions that arose organically during conversations. (For complete interview/survey schedule, contact the author.)

[8] The survey responses from the 12 interviewees, subsampled from the 65 total respondents, appeared consistent with the other 53 survey responses.

[9] I was unable to access a precise demographic breakdown of convention attendees.

[10] Answer options did not include “Christian,” but rather specified denominations such as “Baptist” “or “Lutheran.”

[11] Following Radway (*Reading* 123), I defined character foils as rival characters that serve as a point of comparison and contrast for the hero/heroine. For instance, in my memo for *Chained by Night* by Larissa Ione, I noted, “The heroine is hard-working, smart, rebellious, clear-headed and a bookworm. Her sister is overconfident—especially about sex—, power-hungry, and sexually driven. Throwing away her virginity too easily makes her sister feel used.” I coded the sister as a foil.

[12] Also see Radway’s chapter on the books the Smithton readers disliked the most, usually because of their overly sexual content: Ch. 5, “The Failed Romance” (*Reading* 157-85). These findings further indicate a difference in BA and Smithton reader sexual-content preferences.

[13] The modern romance genre coalesced after the 1972 publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and The Flower*, whose unprecedented popularity marked the transition from gothic and “sweet” to sexier, more erotic novels (Markert).

[14] For instance, the definition of romance novels used by Radway in the 1980s (*Reading* 65) and the one on the current (2020) Romance Writers of America website are largely the same.

[15] Heroes were coded as “alpha” if they were described as physically overpowering the heroine, being aggressive, being overprotective, acting compulsively, being unable to focus when in the presence of a beautiful woman, often being/preferring to be alone, and taking control of situations. Usually, a combination of these traits was present, although not necessarily all of them.

[16] Other plotlines do exist, including reversals of this asymmetry (e.g., Talia Hibbert’s *Take a Hint, Dani Brown*), but these reversals exist in dialogue with, or as departures from, this more common set of gender norms.

[17] Seventy-one percent of BA respondents indicated they had read all three of E.L. James *Fifty Shades* books. Many women readers who attended the BA romance convention

attributed both their own readership, as well as a widespread romance “boom,” to the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

[18] Adjusted for inflation.

[19] According to “The Romance Book Buyer 2017: A Study by NPD Book for Romance Writers of America” (Romance Writers of America, “About”), 18 percent of readers were male in 2017. According to a 2002 RWA report, no longer accessible online, 7 percent of readers were male in 2002 (see Selinger 320, footnote 13).

[20] The question included eight subgenres. A total of 176 subgenres were marked. Contemporary was marked 57 times, erotica 49 times, and fantasy 26 times.

[21] This phrase was used in Radway’s survey and means they were not working outside of the home.

[22] Thurston (points out that Radway’s choice to conduct group interviews may have curtailed respondents’ honest disclosures about their enjoyment of sexual content (197). While this is possible, Radway also conducted many individual interviews that supported her finding that the Smithton readers wanted to read about love, not sex. Even more convincing, however, is Radway’s discussion of the Smithton readers least favorite books. Radway shows that one of the primary reasons readers found these books distasteful was because they overemphasize sexual content; especially distasteful was their depictions of sexuality without emotional connection.

[23] For example, when asked to describe what ties her favorite romance authors together, Anna described that she prefers books writers that, “spell cum c-u-m and not c-o-m-e...it’s classier. I prefer a dirty author with a bit of art, like *Playboy* instead of *Hustler*.” Anna went on to clarify that she nevertheless reads books where cum is spelt “come.”

[24] The average of 10 of the 12 BA interviewees’ monthly number of romance novels read is 12.4 without the two outliers, and 31.2 including outliers. (One interviewee read over 100 romance manuscripts a month as part of her job and one interviewee read only one romance because of her current life situation.) The average of the 62 survey takers who answered the question was 9.8 when the response “21 or more” was coded as 27.5.

[25] Indeed, this observation — that BA readers appear to appreciate the ease of familiar norms — is similar to Thompson’s observations of teenage girls’ dating preferences.

[26] Interestingly, more and more romance novels seem to be incorporating/eroticizing step-by-step consent.

[27] Jenna was the only interviewee who appeared to me to not have a clear emotional support system (except for the online romance reading community). The other women, for instance, Sarah, seemed to rely on their husbands for their emotional support.

[28] See Teo’s review of research showing men demonstrate intimacy by doing things, whereas women continue to be responsible for the actual management of intimacy (459).

[29] While the de-gendering of sexual desire may imply the “man asserting power over resistant woman” dynamic loses its meaning, at least to some extent, the motif endures. This endurance may be understood similarly to the way I have argued we understand 2016 women reading the same stories as 1980 women, where the narrative structure remains familiar, and/or as balanced sexual desire playing out in a context that is gender dimorphic and stylized.

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