

The “Popular Romance Canon”: An Academic Librarian’s Response

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At the opening keynote panel presentation at the 2013 Popular Romance Author Symposium (Princeton University, October 24, 2013), a member of the audience asked, “Who will we be studying in 100 years?” At the time my mental answer was “no one,” because academic libraries do not systematically collect popular romance novels.

Unfortunately, my ongoing research project[1] has shown that academic libraries, in fact, do not collect popular romance novels at the rate that they collect titles in other fields of genre fiction. In point of fact, award-winning science fiction titles are well represented in two specific types of academic libraries, Association of Research Libraries and Oberlin Group Libraries. Similarly, award-winning popular romance titles rate less than one percent representation in the same library types. The broader question of collection development of genre fiction titles in academic libraries has long since been answered, because academic libraries *do* collect genre fiction, just not popular romance novels. The question is, will academic libraries begin to collect popular romance fiction as well, if a specific canon exists?

According to research conducted by Goldman in 2012, academic libraries are doing a good job of collecting the scholarship about popular romance fiction. Goldman’s list of core

titles of scholarship from 2012 may be a bit dated, but it demonstrates that academic libraries have scholarship about popular romance novels. What academic libraries do not have are the primary source materials, i.e., the popular romance novels themselves, that will be needed to support future scholarship as the study of popular romance novels continues to grow and evolve.

Many libraries use an online selection tool that automatically sends titles that meet certain established criteria. These “approval plans” may be selecting popular romance novels’ scholarship without any librarian engagement. If a book meets a certain number of criteria elements (e.g., a specific subject heading, price, content level, or format) the book is automatically purchased and shipped to that library. Unfortunately, it may be the case that neither the departmental faculty nor the librarian is aware of what is being missed by the approval plan unless a specific title is actively requested.

As stated by Goldman (2012) and Sheehan (2015), academic libraries support the curricular and research needs of their students and faculty. If faculty are researching popular romance novels or are teaching specific classes featuring popular romance novels, the academic library then has a responsibility to support those studies. Depending on how engaged the academic librarians are with each department, and, conversely, how engaged the departmental faculty are with the library, it is possible neither party is aware of the lack of popular romance scholarship or primary texts needed by students or researchers.

Another concern academic libraries may have with adding specific titles from any type of popular romance canon is the ability to actually purchase these titles. Many titles, especially category titles such as Harlequin in the US and Mills & Boon internationally, were not and currently are not considered by many as important for either cultural or literary research and as such will be either out of print or hard to find. Many popular romance novels will not be available via the standard library ordering platforms, meaning additional staff time will need to be devoted to their acquisition. While this should not be a significant problem (academic libraries do this all the time), it may slow down the ordering process and thus increase staff time.

In addition to the ordering-process issues, the cost of many of these titles may be prohibitive for any type of large-scale collection development program. At the beginning of building the collection of popular romance novels at George Mason University, many titles by Kathleen Woodiwiss were out of print, with the attendant high price attached. It is not inconceivable for many older or rare titles to cost over \$100 to obtain a monograph in good condition. With the move to ebooks, one would expect that would bring title costs down, but many academic libraries do not have the necessary platforms such as Kindle or other electronic book software to host electronic titles. Or if they have access to an online platform, the title may be leased, not owned by the library. What that means is the library is dependent upon the service provider for access to the specific title on a long-term basis. As a title may drop in views or hits, the service provider may remove the title in order to add a newer, more popular title. Depending on each specific academic library’s situation, any popular romance novel may need to be acquired in print format.

Another collection-development criterion that academic libraries may use is what is specifically of local interest. Does the library collect local authors, or does it collect titles about a specific area? Is a well-known author a graduate of the institution? By identifying best-selling local authors or authors writing about the immediate area, the academic library has an established collection-development policy to include popular romance authors as

part of the collection. That specific criterion was used at the beginning of the Mason collection-development project: who were well-known popular romance authors local to the metro DC area? Those authors, such as Mary Jo Putney, were given a higher priority for purchase than an author of similar works from outside the DC area.

Giving priority to local and alumni authors also has the advantage of decentering awards as the primary criterion for acquisition. As Julie Moody-Freeman discusses in her contribution to this forum, and as controversies over the Romance Writers of America RITA and Vivian awards have shown, any canon limited to award-winning popular romance titles will be suspect, because these awards have always been weighted against BIPOC authors (especially Black authors). While I appreciate the need to identify a core list of authors and/or titles, and award winners seem like an obvious starting point, a canon that shows the honest and true development of the popular romance genre needs to include broader sources. As someone trying to build a popular romance collection without the benefit of a traditional canon, the use of blogs, Twitter, and other nonacademic review resources is required in order to create a more accurate picture of the popular romance novel. Many such resources are readily available; those I have found useful include @WOCInRomance, @sparkjoyromance, and @mance_whoa on Twitter; #latinxrom on Instagram; the blog Shelly's Book Corner and the influential website Smart Bitches, Trashy Books.

The concept of an "iconic" book, as proposed by Dr. Jodi McAlister, could also be of great assistance to creating a collection for an academic library. Unlike award- or review-based decisions, which are subject to inherent biases in the award and review systems, acquisitions centered on iconic texts will bring in texts that have not received such attention, either because of those biases or because they simply predate the existence of romance awards or reviews. A member of the first generation of American popular romance novels and widely studied in popular romance novel scholarship, Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* predates most awards for popular romance novels, but it is an ideal candidate for iconic status. Another example of an iconic title might be Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*. While all her Bridgerton family novels achieved a level of popularity within the romance-reading community, only one of the titles in the eight-book series was a RITA award winner, the final book in the series, *One the Way to the Wedding*. It could be argued that the Netflix miniseries has now made *The Duke and I* iconic and thus of interest to scholars not just researching popular romance novels but to scholars in media studies, communication, and popular culture. Because of this icon status, *The Duke and I* should be included in any academic popular romance novel collection.

To a librarian actively engaged in the creation of a popular romance collection in an academic library for the purpose of research and preservation, the discussion of canon is greatly appreciated, and any assistance in helping to create a strong, balanced, and representative collection is highly welcome. As the conversation moves forward with regard to what *should be* included in the canon, academic librarians need to be part of the discussion. Academic libraries will be an important place to make sure the canon, whatever it is, will be accessible to future popular romance novel scholars.

[1] Ongoing research comparing 30 years of award-winning science fiction and popular romance novel collections in academic libraries. Hopefully to be published in the near future.

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