

## The Feminist Possibilities of Heteroglossic Spaces in Contemporary Young Adult Romance Novels

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Published online: June 2023

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**Abstract:** Drawing on third-wave feminist and Bakhtinian literary theories, this article argues that the feminist possibility of young adult romance novels largely lies in the extent to which the authors' narrative choices encourage readers to grapple with questions related to love, pleasure, and relationships, rather than in parsing the author's intended or unintended feminist (or anti-feminist) messages. This article examines the techniques diverse authors of young adult romances use to open up heteroglossic spaces in their texts. Specifically, it examines how these authors of young adult romances invite readers to consciously attend to the ways that love and relationships might operate in their lives. In particular, the analysis explores the feminist possibilities of love triangles and the use of dialogue to raise reader questions about their own beliefs about the nature of love. These dialogic craft choices are contrasted with more authoritative ways of approaching issues of love and pleasure in fiction to argue that romance is at its most liberatory when it poses questions rather than provides answers.

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**Keywords:** Bakhtinian Analysis, feminism, Young Adult romance

Romance novels, which have historically been read primarily by girls and women, have long been seen as containing problematic messages, particularly when aimed at young people (e.g., Christian-Smith; Jarvis; Radway). For example, in their exploration of young adult (YA) gothic novels, Smith and Moruzi wrote that "by emphasizing the romance, these novels reinforce heteronormative, patriarchal ideologies that privilege love over learning and safety" (17) seeming to suggest that a novel that centers romance necessarily reinforces anti-feminist ways of thinking. Similarly, in one of the first major studies of

romance readers, Radway wrote that living in a patriarchal society encourages women to adopt “relational identities” (207) as wives, lovers and mothers and that “the romance denies women the possibility of refusing that purely relational destiny and thus rejects their right to a single self-contained existence.” (207). From perspectives like these, romance novels are seen as inherently problematic. Arvanitaki, for example, argued that romance novels that embrace feminist themes, such as self-actualization through work or liberation from problematic families, ultimately undermine their feminist commitments by maintaining “boy meets girl” (27) storylines.

In contrast, some scholars have argued for the feminist possibilities of romance (Moore & Selinger). For instance, Dugger suggested that romance novels offer women and girls opportunities to imagine a future free from gender-based oppression, to challenge the culture’s fascination with individualism, and to read stories that center women and girls and particularly female pleasure in ways that the literary canon often does not. Roach argued that in many romance novels, the male love interest “stands in for patriarchy itself in a vision wherein gender unfairness is repaired and all works out” (167). From the perspective of scholars like Dugger and Roach, romance conventions can be seen as feminist fantasies that provide girls and women with ways of imagining more equal gendered relationships and of living in a world where it is possible to fall in love with a boy or man and still be a feminist.

Regardless of whether they argue that romance novels are feminist or anti-feminist, most analyses of YA romance novels have focused on the perceived messages young people receive from the texts. In contrast, this article argues that at least some of the feminist possibility of YA romance novels lies in the extent to which the authors’ narrative choices encourage readers to grapple with questions related to love, pleasure and relationships rather than to absorb the authors’ intended (or unintended) messages. This stance grows out of my engagement with feminist literary theories that argue “that women’s reading is of consequence, intellectually, politically, poetically” (Rooney 4), regardless of the topic or the message of the works being read. Rooney argued that feminist readings of literature support “self-questioning and an unwillingness to settle in a single location” (7). From this perspective, the goal of reading a text is to engage in intellectual and emotional struggle not to acquire received wisdom or appropriate messages.

More broadly, I locate my analysis within conceptions of third-wave feminism (Heywood & Drake), which center narrative, lift up traditionally feminine interests (such as the reading of romance novels), embrace personal experiences and take seriously the idea of intersectionality in relation to race, ethnicity, ability and class. Third-wave feminisms can be understood as growing alongside, rather than replacing or following second-wave feminist movements, and as responding to concerns (particularly young) women had with second-wave feminist movements in relation to diversity, inclusion and treatment of popular culture (Snyder). Of particular relevance to this article, third-wave feminism tends not to locate femininity as the result of oppression but makes space for these choices to be considered agentic or even liberatory. For example, in their analysis of women’s choices around sport fan clothing, Sveinson and colleagues argue that “sexy” (739) clothes do not need to be seen as oppressive but as potentially sex-positive, agentic choices that illuminate “the performative, the subversive, and contradictory aspects of contemporary gender expressions” (739).

These sorts of analyses have led some to critique third-wave feminist theorists for their inclusive stance toward all choices women and girls make and for not attending sufficiently to the ways that societal structures (such as the patriarchy) constrain those choices (McKeown & Parry). However, I agree with Heywood and Drake who argue that second and third-wave feminisms are not in opposition but are compatible sites of analysis for different projects. As McKeown and Parry write, third-wave analyses are particularly productive in looking at “narrative representations to attune other women to important issues in their own lives and social worlds” (194). This focus makes third-wave feminist theories a productive lens for the analysis of young adult romances because narratives about falling in love can be constructed in ways that can attune girls to consider how they want love, pleasure and romance to operate in their lives.

This perspective is related to ideas of *intimate justice*, “a theoretical frame that links experiences of inequity in the sociopolitical domain with how individuals imagine and evaluate the quality of their sexual and relational experiences” (McClelland 1010). For example, many (even most) YA romances engage readers in questions related to how girls understand the role of romantic relationships in their lives, how they make choices about romantic partners and how they negotiate their romantic and sexual relationships. For this reason, I see young adult romance as potentially contributing to a broader third-wave feminist project of helping people achieve greater equality in their intimate relationships.

This analysis focuses on romance novels that feature relationships between straight CIS girls and boys. I made this choice in part because space limitations allow the discussion of relatively few books and in part because critics of romance have argued that “boy meets girl” (Arvanitaki 27) storylines are particularly problematic. Unlike queer love stories, which can be seen as challenging heteronormativity and patriarchy simply through their existence, romances between straight characters can be seen as reinforcing patriarchal norms. However, for girls interested in romantic relationships with boys, romance novels can provide spaces to imagine possibilities that may not currently seem possible in the real world. Research has shown that teens in heterosexual relationships are more likely to rely on traditional gender scripts than adults (Pearson). Young people tend to believe that boys should be more aggressive than girls in romantic and sexual relationships, and that girls should value romance over sex (Orenstein). These scripts can seem normalized in day-to-day life and certainly can be normalized in fiction. Nevertheless, romance novels written with the intention to engage readers in intentionally considering choices around romantic relationships can make space for readers to imagine the world in more feminist ways.

Third-wave feminist perspectives that emphasize narrative and diversity among women’s experiences and perspectives are closely related to dialogic notions of literacy (Bakhtin), where texts are seen as interactions between readers and writers and among diverse ideologies and identities. In the words of Bakhtin, “the word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it” (279). This means, among other things, that readers do not passively absorb productive or unproductive messages in texts, but actively negotiate ideas as they encounter them. Similarly, authors do not put ideas out into the world without always already responding to the words of others. Characters, themes and plot points become textual tools that readers can use to make sense of themselves and their worlds. Bakhtin’s notion of the relationship between the author and the reader differs somewhat from post-structural approaches that posit the “death of the author” (e.g., Barthes). While Bakhtin did not see authors’ intentions as unquestionable, he did describe the text as

mediating a relationship between the author and readers (Dyson). Thus, the intentions of the author are mediated by readers, but are still relevant to analysis.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, readers of YA romance might agree or disagree with the decisions of protagonists, but either way, the feminist power of the text grows out of readers' active engagement. Any book might be read with a feminist lens, but authors wishing to explicitly engage with feminism can intentionally open up spaces in their texts for readers to grapple with questions and ideas related to gender, equality, and love. Bakhtin described these sorts of invitations to readers as the creation of "heteroglossia" in a novel, which is the inclusion of "a multiplicity of social voices" (263) in a single text. Thus, having characters speak from different perspectives or including multiple genres within the same text creates a worldview within the novel that is contested rather than monolithic. Negotiating the heteroglossia encourages readers to make sense of contested spaces and ideas, rather than to accept the message of the author.

All books, in fact all language as Bakhtin points out, are necessarily heteroglossic, as language is "populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (294). However, through their rhetorical choices, authors can work to minimize this heteroglossic space by drawing instead on what Bakhtin calls "authoritative discourse" (342). Authoritative discourse "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" (343). In other words, authoritative discourse tells readers what to think or feel, and what the correct course of action would be for themselves or the protagonists of the story. A romance novel deploying authoritative discourse might have a feminist message, but it would not open up spaces for readers to ask themselves questions about their own desires or choices because the proper outcome would be obvious.

## Modes of Analysis

Before I describe my analysis, I want to make clear my own positionality. I am a straight, CIS white woman, who, over my lifetime, has exclusively been in romantic and sexual relationships with straight CIS boys and men. These experiences necessarily inform my sense-making around romance novels. In keeping with third-wave feminist perspectives, I included authors, protagonists and love interests with a variety of racial and ethnic identities with the goal of making my analysis intersectional. However, I analyzed texts through a lens that privileged gender, and more specifically, the perspectives of teen girls. In the analysis, I identify the race of the main characters to make clear that the perspectives on relationships described in the article are not drawn exclusively from white authors and characters; but the limits of space and the focus on gender mean that race and ethnicity are not central to the analysis.

All the books included in this essay meet the Romance Writers of America definition of romance (i.e., a central love story and an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending), although stories varied in the complexity and seriousness of the subplots. As part of a broader research project, I identified and read thirty young adult contemporary romances (Appendix A) published between 2015 and 2020 that focused on relationships between straight boys and girls. To select these books, I drew on reviews from *Kirkus* and *School*

*Library Journal* as well as reader-curated lists on the website Goodreads. I read no more than two books by each author, and I worked to ensure that the pool of authors included were racially and ethnically diverse. For the broader project, I was interested in which books trade reviews called “feminist” as well as in the relationship between the storyline of a book and the designation by a professional reviewer as feminist. More particularly, I was curious about the relationship between trauma in a book and the labeling of it as feminist.

As I read each book, I took notes on when issues of intimate justice (e.g., consent, pleasure, pursuit of romantic relationships, decisions about sex, communication about relationships) were addressed in the story, identifying places where authors invited readers to ask questions and places where authors delivered more didactic (if feminist) messages. As I did this work, I became interested in the techniques authors used to open up spaces for feminist analysis for their readers. The current study is the result of that more specific interest.

While there are no doubt many ways of creating heteroglossic moments in love stories that invite feminist analysis, in this article, I focus on two techniques that I took note of across multiple books: (1) creating competing and credible love interests and (2) using dialogue to state competing theories of love and romance. From my larger pool of thirty books, I selected a smaller number of books for closer analysis, seeking out books that provided substantive insight into the two named techniques above and books that would ensure my smaller sample maintained racial and ethnic diversity of the authors and protagonists. I re-read each of the books discussed in this essay, took notes in the margins and wrote analytic memos. The analysis presented below was developed through multiple iterations of those memos.

## **Craft Techniques for Creating Heteroglossic Spaces for Feminist Analysis**

The analysis presented below uses Bakhtinian frames to examine narrative techniques that romance authors used to open up spaces in their texts for readers to consider questions important to creating equitable and pleasurable romantic relationships — an inherently feminist concern.

### ***Competing and Credible Love Interests***

Love triangles get a lot of flak. They’re called overdone, unrealistic, and easy solutions for introducing conflict. Yet, credible love triangles—particularly those in young adult romances—do the critical feminist work of inviting readers to ask questions about what they desire and value in romantic partners. A book centered on a love triangle may have a message that challenges feminist commitments, such as, suggesting that the most important goal in a girl’s life is to win the love of a boy or by having a protagonist choose to stay in a relationship with a love interest who does not seem to be committed to her autonomy. A dialogic feminist reading would say that even in cases where protagonists make questionable choices, the potential for self-questioning still allows readers to have a feminist experience by examining their own desires, beliefs about romance, and

construction of gender roles. Presenting readers with multiple compelling love interests can create the possibility for this sort of self-examination.

In *P.S. I Still Love You* by Jenny Han (2015), Lara Jean Covey, a bi-racial Korean American girl, and Peter Kavinsky, a white American boy, continue the romantic relationship that they began in Han's previous book. Peter, to Lara Jean's frustration, maintains a close friendship with his ex, while Lara Jean finds herself drawn to John Ambrose, a childhood friend who has recently come back into her life. Han never makes Lara Jean's choice between Peter and John Ambrose obvious. Both boys respect Lara Jean, are kind to her little sister, and are conventionally handsome. By making both boys worthy candidates for Lara Jean's affections, Han creates a space of unsettlement, where readers are encouraged to ask themselves which boy would be best for Lara Jean and which boy they prefer themselves. Peter is familiar. Readers, along with Lara Jean, learned to know and to love him in the previous book. John Ambrose is new, but in many ways, seems more suited to Lara Jean. Like her, he is bookish, quiet, and as comfortable as Lara Jean with the residents of the nursing home where she volunteers. In addition, Han gave John Ambrose the most romantic scenes in the book—playing with Lara Jean in the snow and dancing at 1940s USO dance.

Han also creates credible cases for both boys by describing Lara Jean's pleasure as she interacts with them. While playing in the snow with John Ambrose, Lara Jean thinks, "I'm so happy in this moment, and I realize, it's because I haven't thought of Peter once. I turn to look at John, and he's already looking at me with a half smile on his face. It gives me a nervous flutter in my chest" (283). Han makes it clear that John Ambrose engages both Lara Jean's emotions and her body. With Peter, Lara Jean thinks, "he looks at me in such a way—that I know for sure he's never looked at another girl quite like this. And then, I'm in his arms, and we're hugging and kissing, we're both shaking because we both know—this is the night we become real" (337-338). Again, by attending to Lara Jean's embodied reactions and highlighting the joyful physical experiences Lara Jean has with both boys, Han encourages readers to ask themselves questions about the role of physical pleasure in romantic relationships and to consider the ways in which physical reactions might or might not be reliable guides in making romantic decisions.

Despite John Ambrose's appeal, Han ultimately has Lara Jean choose Peter, her first love. But it does not matter if Lara Jean makes the correct choice. She is fictional and cannot be harmed by selecting the wrong boy. Rather, what matters is the way Han makes readers grapple with the choice. Protagonists do not exist primarily as role models for readers. They are textual tools that readers can use to explore their own feelings and desires.

Han's in-text explanation for Lara Jean's choice is somewhat unsatisfying from a feminist perspective focused on delivering empowering messages to girls. Lara Jean tells John Ambrose, "of all the boys, you're the one I would pick" (329) before telling him she still loves Peter: "I can't help it. He got here first and he...he just won't leave" (329). This, one might argue, is a somewhat problematic message—that girls should choose the boys who showed up first, rather than the ones they want. However, by putting the words in Lara Jean's mouth, rather than in the voice of an omniscient narrator, Han makes them questionable, or in Bakhtin's words dialogic—a craft technique that will be explored in greater depth in the next section. By having Lara Jean articulate a reason for choosing Peter that transcends his qualities as a person, Han encourages readers to accept or reject Lara Jean's thinking as a rule that extends beyond the pages of the book.

In addition, Han's decision to have Lara Jean choose the boy who is not, on the surface, perfect for her, encourages readers to examine their own feelings and thoughts more carefully than if Han had employed a more authoritative discourse as the author. If John Ambrose had been unattractive as a partner—or if Peter had done something reprehensible—then, regardless of Lara Jean's choice, readers would have nothing to grapple with. However, because the decision is not at all clear, Han's book invites readers to actively reflect on the qualities they value in a romantic partner and how they might make romantic choices in their own lives. In addition, by creating love interests who bring out different aspects of Lara Jean's identity—John Ambrose shares her academic interests while Peter is similarly family focused—Han invites readers to think though the role of identity in their own desires for romance.

Peter and Lara Jean's story extends over three books, so the ending of *P.S. I Still Love* is not final. In the third book of the trilogy, Han continues her dialogic relationship with readers and encourages them to participate in imagining their own endings to the story. While Lara Jean ends the book still involved with Peter, she plans to go to college in another state at a university that John Ambrose is likely to attend. Rather than offering an authoritative statement on Lara Jean's future, Han's ending provides a path for readers to collaborate with her in imagining an ideal future for Lara Jean. In the process, readers are likely to consider their own thoughts and beliefs about long-distance relationships, starting over in college, and romantic commitment more broadly.

In many ways, the relationships in *99 Days* by Katie Cotugno (2015) are even more complicated than those in Han's books. Recent boarding school graduate Molly Barlow, a white American girl, returns to her hometown the summer before college. A year earlier, she fled her familiar life after her boyfriend and childhood sweetheart, Patrick, (along with the whole rest of the town) learned that Molly slept with Patrick's older brother, Gabe, during a brief separation in their relationship. (Both Gabe and Patrick are also white.) In *99 Days*, Cotugno uses a different but equally effective strategy than Han's for unsettling the reader with her love triangle. Rather than having the climax of the book be Molly's choice between two equally good options, Cotugno shifts readers' opinions of the two boys Molly is involved with over the course of the story so it is never entirely clear which boy Molly will choose.

In the beginning, Patrick is presented as a sweet childhood-friend-turned-boyfriend. Readers get flashbacks of them cozily reading together in barn lofts or going on long distance runs, while learning that Patrick's reaction to Molly getting a scholarship to a boarding school was not immediately supportive. As readers, we forgive him (as Molly did), because it comes in the immediate aftermath of his father's sudden death. Beyond this, Molly and Patrick's physical relationship is described as sweet and slowly evolving. Although they were together for years, they never had sex. In contrast, readers meet Gabe as a confident and cheerful player. He seems relatively unaffected by his father's death, engaged with Molly very little when they were children, and had sex with her literally moments after she and his brother broke up. When Molly returns to her town—disliked by almost everyone because the story of her betrayal of Patrick with Gabe is public knowledge—Gabe hangs out with her to cheer her up, and they attend a lot of alcohol-fueled parties, suggesting that Cotugno's story arc will be about Molly finding her way back to her introverted childhood friend and love.

However, over the course of the book, Cotugno slowly chips away at this assumption. Contradicting his party-boy image, Gabe appears devoted to Molly. He convinces his family—including the sister who will not forgive Molly for coming between her brothers—to welcome her back into their home. He affirms that Molly's decision to go away to the boarding school had been the right one, revealing that he had a crush on her long before the night they slept together. Molly begins to officially date Gabe. Yet, she cannot stay away from Patrick, even though he is also dating someone else.

Through the use of flashbacks, Cotugno continually underscores Molly and Patrick's connection in the past. In the present day, they begin running together, which eventually turns into intense, spontaneous make-out sessions. Throughout the middle of the book, Cotugno lingers on Molly's lightness in the present moment with Gabe, the intensity of her connection to Patrick in the past, and the physical pleasure Molly gets from occasional moments with Patrick. Molly has sex twice with Gabe in the book, once in the past and once in the present, but both encounters fade-to-black. Yet, every touch from Patrick, from the most casual brushing of fingers to the stripping off of clothes to go swimming in a secluded lake, is described with full sensory details. This strategy creates reader unsettlement with the love triangle. The vivid, emotional language Cotugno uses to describe Molly's encounters with Patrick seems to suggest that Patrick will ultimately be Molly's choice, and the warmth of their relationship in the past gives this choice credibility. When Patrick shows up at Molly's house in the middle of the night, Molly and Patrick seem to be moving toward having sex for the first time. This gives the feeling that Cotugno is about to resolve the love triangle. But then Molly, in a desire to be honest, reveals something to Patrick about her relationship with Gabe, and Patrick calls her a whore.

Cotugno embeds so many small moments of Patrick's unacceptableness—his desire to pull Molly away from her friends, his unwillingness to support her ambitions and his failure to be clear about what he wanted from Molly in the present day—that when Patrick's ugly word snaps Molly out of the dreamy spell created by their idyllic childhood and physical chemistry, she realizes all at once that Patrick is the wrong choice. Because Cotugno dropped clues about the relationship but waited for them to play them out, teen readers are likely to go through a similar process in their own reading. This slow discovery mirrors the experience many people have in real-life romantic relationships, where the sense that a partner is perfect is slowly replaced by a more complicated picture.

Cotugno gives Gabe, the other character in the love triangle, a similarly slow unveiling. His extroversion, which initially made him seem superficial, becomes a strength as he works to maintain relationships with friends and family. At the end when Gabe learns that Molly has been physically involved with Patrick throughout their relationship, his reaction is a quiet statement that she could have told him. This reaction underscores his genuine feelings for her, and yet, he also seems to have pursued Molly, at least in part, as a way of competing with his brother.

Cotugno creates a heteroglossic space full of competing messages. In the finale of the book, Molly hears from her mother, Patrick's current girlfriend, her best friend, and Gabe and Patrick's sister about her relationship decisions. Different characters argue that Molly shouldn't have lied to Gabe, that Gabe and Patrick shouldn't have used Molly as a point of competition, that Patrick shouldn't have called Molly a whore or pursued her once he knew she was involved with his brother, that Gabe shouldn't have acted on his feelings for Molly the night she was devastated by her breakup with Patrick, and that Molly should leave both



boys. By not privileging any of these messages, Cotugno works against an authoritative discourse about the “right” way to conduct romantic relationships, encouraging readers to sort through their feelings and beliefs for themselves.

Like Han, Cotugno creates a dialogic space in her ending, leaving room for readers to imagine their own preferred path for Molly (and by analogy, themselves). While Molly never fully forgives Patrick, he does apologize, saying, “I shouldn’t have said what I said to you” (358). Molly tells him that she’ll miss him, and he says he’ll miss her back. Later, Gabe tells Molly that he may reapply to a program that would put him near where she is going to college, and she tells him that he should. He kisses her on the cheek before he goes. Cotugno certainly implies that Molly is likely to reignite her romantic relationship with Gabe (and in the sequel, this is what happens), but she leaves enough openness in the ending that her vision of Molly’s future doesn’t completely overpower her readers. Even though the message in Cotugno’s book may be more feminist on the surface than Han’s—walk away from boys who won’t support your dreams—the real power lies not in this moral, but in the dialogic work readers have to do to form their own opinions about the characters. The feminist reading comes from constant questioning of all three character’s interactions with the others in a heteroglossic text.

Girls are unlikely to stay with the first boy they fall for, simply because Han gave them a role model who made that choice. Similarly, they are unlikely to walk away from a harmful relationship because Cotugno provided a model for how that might be done. Rather, the potential power of a well-executed love triangle lies in its ability to encourage readers to unearth their implicit beliefs for more careful examination, so they can make intentional choices about the kinds of intimacy and autonomy they want in their own relationships.

### ***Using Dialogue to Share Theories of Love and Romance***

As Bakhtin noted, novelists create heteroglossia in their texts by having characters present different perspectives through dialogue. Having characters explore their thinking about love through dialogue invites readers to critically evaluate characters’ claims. Unlike internal narration, which privileges the perspective of one character, dialogue necessarily brings multiple viewpoints to bear. This not only gives readers more perspectives to engage with, but also presents a more tentative worldview, since it is open to being challenged by other characters.

For example, when Han puts Lara Jean’s assertion that she loves Peter because he showed up first in dialogue instead of in the narrative of Lara Jean’s thoughts, she makes it open to questioning. In addition, by making a more universal claim—that who shows up first is important—Han provides readers with a specific proposition to consider in relation to the world beyond the book. Because Lara Jean makes this claim to John Ambrose, who would certainly disagree with her, at least in this case, Han makes Lara Jean’s proposition even more tentative.

Han then takes this one step further by letting John Ambrose make his own claim about love in dialogue. Lara Jean tells John Ambrose that she is sorry and that she wishes that they could have gone to their eighth-grade formal together years ago. In response he says, “I don’t think it was our time then. I guess it isn’t now, either...But maybe one day it will be” (230). Here, Han again gives readers a broader proposition to consider: if love is

meant to be, then it will happen when the time is right. This comment—which is reinforced in the last book of the trilogy when Han leaves open the possibility that Lara Jean and John Ambrose will end up at the same college—encourages readers to imagine for themselves what Lara Jean’s long-term romantic happiness looks like. In addition, by putting both Lara Jean’s and John Ambrose’s claims about romance in dialogue, Han encourages readers to consider the principles of staying committed to the partner who showed up first and of trusting fate to take care of the timing around true love. The point isn’t whether these views of love are correct (or feminist). Ultimately, the point is that by taking big assertions about how love works and tucking them into dialogue, Han invites readers to analyze their own beliefs about love instead of asking them to accept her authoritative claims.

Nicola Yoon’s *The Sun is Also a Star* (2016) is particularly successful in its creation of a dialogic text that invites reader engagement and analysis. Not only are readers consistently given the perspectives of the two love interests, Natasha, a Black Jamaican immigrant, and Daniel, a Korean American, but Yoon also provides the occasional perspectives of secondary (and tertiary) characters as well as alternative texts, such as excerpts from science textbooks. The multiplicity of perspectives invites the reader to continually engage with the central question of the book: is it possible to fall in love over the course of a single day?

Many of Natasha and Daniel’s conversations take up this question, and the sparring between the two of them—often with explicit claims about the nature of love—invites readers to engage in their own analyses of how love works. For example, early on Natasha tells Daniel that she doesn’t believe in love at all.

“It’s not a religion,” he says. “It exists whether you believe in it or not.”

“Oh, really? Can you prove it?”

“Love songs. Poetry. The institution of marriage.”

“Please. Words on paper. Can you use the scientific method on it? Can you observe it, measure it, experiment with it, and repeat your experiments? You cannot. Can you slice it and stain it and study it under a microscope? You cannot. Can you grow it in a petri dish or map its gene sequence?”

“You cannot,” he says, mimicking my voice and laughing.

I can’t help laughing too. Sometimes I take myself a little too seriously.

He spoons a layer of foam off his coffee and into his mouth. “You say it’s just words on paper, but you have to admit all those people are feeling *something*. (76-77)

By putting her characters on opposite sides of the argument, Yoon provides readers with a chance to decide which character they identify with. This is particularly effective in Yoon’s dual point-of-view story because readers have access to both Daniel’s and Natasha’s

internal thoughts, making it easy to connect to both characters, so readers are not pushed to align themselves with either point of view. Instead, they're invited to make sense of Daniel and Natasha's arguments for themselves. In addition, the playful, rapid-fire exchanges between Daniel and Natasha not only draw readers in, but also teach readers to expect a rebuttal. As Natasha asks and answers her own science-based questions, Yoon leads readers to believe there can be no counter argument—love obviously cannot be studied under a microscope. But she ends the scene with Daniel's slightly more vague, almost wistful question, leaving readers to go through the rest of the book wondering about this "*something*" that people feel.

The technique of embedding philosophies of love in dialogue, as Han and Yoon do, can invite teen readers to question the romantic scripts they rely on unthinkingly, as well as to formulate their own philosophies of love and romance. This sort of active engagement provides an opportunity for teen girls to disrupt traditional scripts about romance that scholars have found problematic (Pearson).

Like Han and Cotugno, Yoon uses openness in her ending to resist making an authoritative claim as an author or to take the process of analysis away from readers. At the end of the main part of the story, Natasha, an immigrant, is deported to Jamaica, leaving Daniel behind. In the epilogue, which takes place many years later, Natasha and Daniel meet again on an airplane, although the story ends at the moment of their meeting: "time stumbles back into place. The plane and the seats reform. The passengers solidify into flesh. And blood. And bone. And heart. 'Daniel,' she says. And again, 'Daniel'" (344). Yoon points toward a happy ending here (which is what makes the book a romance), but she leaves unanswered the central questions of the book: Can you fall in love over the course of a single day? Have Daniel and Natasha remained in love all these years or are they poised to fall in love for real now? The questions are left in the hands of readers, rather than answered authoritatively.

## **Authoritative Discourse in Young Adult Romances**

In this article, I've argued that romances that actively engage readers in questions about love and relationships by building heteroglossia into their texts do more powerful feminist work, than books that are organized around conveying authoritative feminist messages. To fully illustrate this distinction, I want to look closely at a book that was heavily shaped by the author's desire to communicate a message: Laura Steven's *The Exact Opposite of Okay* (2018), which received a starred review from *Kirkus*, calling it "essential for opening and fueling dialogue about slut-shaming and toxic masculinity." (Kirkus n.p.). Steven's unflinching critique of slut-shaming is powerful. However, a number of the craft techniques Steven employed shut down opportunities for readers to use Izzy's story to critically think through their own romantic and sexual desires by creating a single authoritative (if feminist) discourse, rather than a heteroglossic one. In many ways, Steven made craft choices opposite to those made by the authors discussed in the first part of this essay—the solution to her love triangle is obvious from the beginning, her statements about love and romance are authoritative instead of dialogic, and her ending is fully

determined. These craft choices ultimately limit the feminist potential of the book for teen readers.

The inciting incident of the novel is a party where Izzy, a white American girl, has consensual sex with two boys, in rapid succession, once in the backyard on a garden bench. Later, at the request of one of the boys, she willingly sends him a nude picture of herself. A photo of her on the bench and her nude selfie both go up on a website devoted to portraying her as a whore. The revelation at the end of the book is that the website was created by her best friend, who is in love with her. This set up is particularly effective because it pushes readers to think through their feelings about the word 'slut' and what it means to be okay with a girl owning her sexuality. Steven's outrageous-as-possible set up creates such powerful cognitive dissonance that readers have no choice but to confront the many damaging internalized messages they have learned over a lifetime about girls' sexuality.

Unfortunately, Steven undercuts the power of this opportunity for self-interrogation by lacing the book with authoritative claims. Instead of letting readers grapple with their feelings of discomfort around Izzy's sexual choices, Steven lectures readers at the moments of greatest tension (and possibility for the development of new understandings). Sometimes, this happens in the text through Izzy's narration, as at the end of the chapter where the events of the party are described: "I know you're probably reading this thinking Oh my god! What an unbelievable whore! Even if you generally consider yourself to be pretty progressive, but don't worry later in the book I plan to address your concerns about my promiscuity in a personal essay titled *Old White Men Love it When You Slut Shame*" (84).

Unlike making proclamations about love and romance in dialogue, Steven's use of direct address works against readers' real engagement with the themes of the book. By explicitly aligning any discomfort with Izzy's choices with slut shaming and old white men, Steven attempts to shut down readers' interior monologues about the extent to which they feel comfortable with Izzy's decisions. Letting this feeling of discomfort linger would have encouraged readers to explore their feelings, to note how they change as the story goes forward, and to think through their own feelings about intimacy and autonomy. Instead, anytime questions about Izzy's decisions pop into readers' minds, Steven tells readers that even entertaining these questions means they are slut shaming. Rather than opening up spaces for questions, Steven shuts them down. The direct address operates as authoritative discourse, demanding "that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally" (343).

Second, the essay about old white men and its companion essay *The Friend Zone is as Real as Narnia* are actually included in the back of the book (Steven). These are supposed to be examples of posts Izzy and her friends include on their blog, *Bitches Bite Back*, started in response to Izzy's online (and offline) bullying. As part of the narrative structure, the idea of ending the book with Izzy reasserting control over her story makes sense, however, by actually including the essays, Steven ends her book with what feel like didactic sermons as much in the author's voice as in Izzy's. For example, "slut shaming is not really about women's sexuality. It is grounded in the belief that men have the right to assert themselves and women do not. It's not a new phenomenon—just ask Monica Lewinsky—but in the social media age, it's becoming more toxic than ever" (332). In terms of voice, this is improbable at the very least—Monica Lewinsky was a national story years before the main character of the novel would have been born. The whole essay feels less like it belongs in a

novel than in a progressive sex education class. Unlike the examples from previous books where authors asserted views on love and sexuality through dialogue, which made them permeable for readers who might think differently, the authoritative voice of these essays turns readers into passive receivers of the singular feminist message.

Beyond the messaging about slut shaming, the treatment of sex in the book also works against teen girls asking questions about the role of physical pleasure in the romantic relationships of their own lives. While Lara Jean notes her body's reactions to Peter and John Ambrose, and Molly puzzles about the meaning of her continued, overwhelming attraction to Patrick, Steven never allows Izzy to think critically about her own sexual experiences or to describe the ways they are pleasing or awkward or exciting. Izzy has three love interests: the two boys she has sex with at the party – one of whom (Carson) turns out to be the end-game love interest – and her best friend, who she kisses once, but does not have sex with.

Steven gives readers very little support in imagining pleasurable sexual encounters for Izzy or for themselves. For example, when Izzy has sex with Carson, the boy she happily ends up with at the end of the novel, Izzy says, “ten out of ten would recommend having sex with Carson Manning. You can do it at least three times in one commercial break” (84). Even in Izzy's own head, the message about sex with Carson is authoritative. Izzy never imagines how the encounter might have been more pleasurable for her, nor does any other character suggest a possibility for a more satisfying physical outcome. In fact, because Steven links any critique of Izzy's sexual activity with slut shaming, readers may feel guilty for even asking themselves if Izzy could truly enjoy a sexual encounter that began and ended during a single commercial break.

Rather than offering competing love interests whose varied attractions might create a heteroglossic space in which readers are invited to think through their own desires, Steven presents Carson as Izzy's single viable choice. Vaughn leaves Izzy to deal with the fallout of their public sex on her own. Izzy's best friend, enraged because she does not love him back, humiliates her by posting nude pictures. Carson, while unfortunately unconcerned with Izzy's pleasure during sex, is at least a nice guy and therefore becomes the only possible option. There is nothing to consider or evaluate as a reader about Izzy's choice of a romantic partner and no space to think about what she could do differently. In addition, there is no openness in the ending; the best friend never apologizes, and no hint of a more promising relationship presents itself. Instead, the book makes an authoritative statement on Izzy's future (at least in the near term) with Carson.

## Conclusion

First, I would like to address some limitations of the current study. This analysis centers books, rather than readers, examining the ways in which texts create openings for readers to consider questions about love and relationships. To achieve a deeper understanding of the impact of these books and other romances, ethnographic work, similar, to Radway's study of adult romance readers, would need to be undertaken. One possible area to explore in this work would be the extent to which teen girls talked back to texts or objected to authors' messages, even when the authors themselves did not create

space for such pushback. Certainly, readers may argue with even the most didactic text—as I did when I wrote about *The Exact Opposite of Okay* in this essay. However, it is possible that this sort of pushback is easier for someone who has multiple theoretical tools as well as many years of experience as a reader and as a person in romantic relationships than for a teenage girl. An ethnographic study could shed light on this.

In addition, this analysis was heavily shaped by third-wave feminist perspectives. Other perspectives would certainly find the books analyzed here problematic in a variety of ways, perhaps most significantly because all the stories end with girls finding (or moving toward finding) happiness through romantic relationships with boys. Radway wrote that changes in gendered power relations can only occur, “if women also come to understand that their need for romances is a function of the dependent status as *women* and of their acceptance of marriage as the only route to female fulfillment” (220). Given that the young adult romances I analyzed featured girls with active intellectual commitments and did not end in marriage, I suspect many current cultural critics might make similar arguments about these more modern love stories.

However, this argument leaves many girls in an awkward position—one where their desire to read romantic stories about girls falling in love with boys (in addition to possibly desiring such experiences for themselves) lies in opposition to their identity as feminists. From such a perspective, books about queer romantic relationships definitionally challenge the patriarchy, but books about straight girls cannot do similar work because they embrace the “boy meets girl” narrative structure (Arvanitaki 27). The current analysis uses third-wave feminist theory to argue that romance narratives in popular culture *can* do feminist work by looking at “narrative representations [that] attune other women to important issues in their own lives and social worlds” (McKeown & Parry 194). When adolescent girls read romance novels, particularly those that intentionally create heteroglossic spaces rather than provide authoritative answers, they are invited to consider the ways in which they want romantic and sexual relationships to function in their own lives. Therefore, these adolescent girls may be able to act with greater intentionality. As with the “sexy clothes” that Sveinson and colleagues discuss, romance novels provide a safe space for girls to explore contradictory ideas about gender—genuinely wanting to both go to college and to have a boyfriend, to be in a committed relationship and to explore new possibilities, to believe in true love and to be practical.

In the end, my argument is that, in the long run, it is more emancipatory—and more respectful of the agency of teen girls—to invite readers to engage in feminist analysis of texts and their lives, even if they come to some problematic conclusions. The habit of doing the analysis is what holds the possibility for feminist change.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want to thank Corey Ann Haydu, my thesis advisor at Vermont College for the Fine Arts, for her thoughtful feedback on early drafts of this article.

## Appendix A

### 30 Young Adult Romance Novels 2015-2020 Read for Broader Project

- Bennett, Jenn. *Alex, Approximately*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.
- Bennett, Jenn. *Chasing Lucky*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Cantor, Jillian. *The Code for Love and Heartbreak*. Inkyard, 2020.
- Chao, Gloria. *Rent-a-Boyfriend*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Cohn, Rachel and Levithan, David. *Mind the Gap, Dash & Lily*. Knopf, 2020.
- Cotungo, Katie. *99 Days*. HarperCollins, 2015.
- Cotungo, Katie. *9 Days and 9 Nights*. Harper Collins, 2019.
- Elston, Ashley. *10 Blind Dates*. Scholastic, 2019.
- Forest, Kristina. *Now That I've Found You*. Roaring Brook Press, 2020.
- Grant, Vicki. *Questions that Changed My Mind About You*. Running Press, 2017.
- Han, Jenny. *Always and Forever, Lara Jean*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.
- Han, Jenny. *I Still Love You*. Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Light, Alex. *The Upside of Falling*. Wattpad, 2020.
- Lord, Emma. *Tweet Cute*. Macmillan, 2020.
- Lund, Cameron. *Best-Laid Plans*. Penguin Random House, 2020.
- Perkins, Stephanie. *Isla and the Happily Ever After*. Speak, 2015.
- McCahan, Erin. *The Lake Effect*. Penguin Random House, 2017.
- McDowell, Kara. *One Way or Another*. Scholastic, 2020.
- Menon, Sandhya. *When Dimple Met Rishi*. Simon & Schuster, 2017.
- Namey, Laura Taylor. *A Cuban Girl's Guide to Tea and Tomorrow*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Namey, Laura Taylor. *The Library of Lost Things*. Inkyard Press, 2019.
- Philippe, Ben. *Charming as a Verb*. HarperCollins, 2020.
- Philippe, Ben. *The Field Guide to the North American Teenager*. HarperCollins, 2019.
- Smith, Jennifer E. *Fieldnotes on Love*. Random House, 2019.
- Solomon, Rachel. *Today Tonight Tomorrow*. Simon & Schuster, 2020.
- Steven, Laura. *The Exact Opposite of Okay*. Electric Monkey, 2018.
- West, Kasie. *By Your Side*. Scholastic, 2017.
- Wibberly, Emily & Siegmund-Broka, Austin. *Time of Our Lives*. Penguin Random House, 2020.
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