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Romancing the Darkness: Understanding Trauma in the Romance Genre

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Abstract: In response to the increasing global awareness of trauma, this article argues for a trauma-informed approach to the study of the romance genre. It introduces and defines three trauma-themed romance subgenres—trauma romance (TR), transitional post-trauma romance (TPTR), and post-trauma romance (PTR). Each subgenre features distinct representations of trauma, its effects, and recovery within a romantic narrative. Drawing on original doctoral research, the article outlines the core features of each subgenre and provides comparative analysis supported by exemplar novels, a typology table, and appendix of novels. By articulating how these subgenres vary, this article demonstrates their literary, ethical, and scholarly value. It also explores why researchers must adopt trauma-informed practices and offers guidance around practical entry points for starting that process. Finally, this article highlights opportunities for interdisciplinary research across romance studies, trauma theory, gender studies, literary theory, and psychology.

About the Author: Dr. Alicia Leigh is an emerging trauma theorist and author of over twenty romance novels and two nonfiction writing books. Her PhD thesis—recognised as one of the "top 10% of outstanding theses in the field" by her thesis reviewer—identified the post-trauma romance subgenre and several innovative trauma theories. Her master's degree research resulted in the publication of the best-selling nonfiction title, *The Romance Novel Formula*. Dr. Leigh has completed a post-graduate degree in psychology and is currently completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling to further her trauma expertise.

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Introduction

Recent decades have shown a marked rise in the societal, public, and scholarly awareness of trauma, especially in Western culture (see Foulkes and Andrews; Gillis). Literary theorists have observed how, intentionally or not, writers adapt the dominant psychological and social issues of their time into their work. For instance, Ronald Granofsky traces the emergence of trauma themes in post–World War II fiction, linking them to global events and cultural shifts. More recently, Leanne Dodd remarks on how the modern world's increased exposure to traumatic events has led to a corresponding increase in trauma-focused literature. Anne Whitehead, a leading scholar in trauma fiction, affirms that fiction itself "has been … changed by its encounter with trauma" (3).

The inclusion of trauma themes has been widely noted in genres such as literary fiction and crime fiction, however, this inclusion does not automatically classify them as *trauma fiction*, since I argue that trauma fiction is a category reserved for works in which trauma is a central feature (see "The Trauma Genre" section below for more on this topic). Scholarship examining the presence of trauma themes within the popular romance genre has received comparatively less critical attention. Yet it is valid to argue that recent shifts into a more "trauma-informed" culture—one that has and applies an understanding of trauma—may have influenced the writers of some contemporary romance novels, such as Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*, which increasingly incorporate trauma narratives into the character development and relationship arcs. Thus, the increase in trauma narratives within the popular romance genre reflects broader cultural shifts in how trauma is understood and represented in fiction.

This article draws on my recent doctoral thesis (Kindleysides) to argue for a more nuanced understanding of trauma's role in the contemporary romance genre by proposing three distinct trauma-themed subgenres: trauma romance (TR), post-trauma romance (PTR), and transitional post-trauma romance (TPTR). The article also offers a typology to distinguish the subgenres, thereby providing a framework for future research analysing trauma representation across romance narratives.

With these aims in mind, this article first presents an overview of the primary method used in my research, followed by a literature review establishing the theoretical foundations for analysing trauma within the romance genre by drawing on key scholarship in both romance studies and trauma theory. Second, it discusses the importance of being trauma informed, then suggests ways for romance academics to become more trauma informed. Third, the article outlines the three trauma-themed romance subgenres, providing a comparative analysis of the unique features of each subgenre supported by exemplar novels and a corresponding typology table. Finally, the article considers why subgenre classifications matter, highlighting several important factors, such as the sociocultural and ethical stakes of trauma representation in romance and the implications for future interdisciplinary research.

Method

As part of my PhD investigation, I read and analysed over twenty-five romance novels containing trauma themes. By employing narrative analysis, a specific critical practice

(Baldick 238), and principles of narratology—which Peter Barry describes as the "study of narrative structures" (223), referring more broadly to the theory of narratives and their structures—I identified common story elements and categorised novels into the specific trauma-themed romance subgenres discussed throughout this article. This approach allowed me to define the common "narrative structures" that characterise the three different trauma-themed romance subgenres. This methodological framework not only facilitated the classification of the subgenres but also highlighted how trauma narratives function within romantic storytelling. The literature review expands on the theoretical foundations that support the existence of these three distinct subgenres, thus demonstrating how this typology contributes to broader conversations in both trauma theory and romance studies.

Literature Review

To ground the following discussion, this section reviews some of the available literature on three foundational and interconnecting concepts: the romance genre, the trauma genre, and what I refer to as the trauma-themed romance subgenres. This review includes an overview of each concept and introduces my working definitions and identified features of the subgenres, which are based on a synthesis of existing theories and findings from my PhD research.

The Popular Romance Genre

Although romance is widely acknowledged as a distinct literary genre—evidenced by the proliferation of scholarly studies on the topic and the establishment of dedicated journals such as this one—the genre's commonly accepted features remain broad in scope. Scholars generally agree that essential components include a central love story and a satisfying resolution (i.e., one that resolves the central romantic arc). Beyond that, the broad scope leaves room for debate and nuance, as this article aims to demonstrate.

Early pioneers in the field focused on the narrative and plot elements of the romance genre. Tania Modleski asserts that romance requires a happy ending with a strong focus on the romance (437), thus highlighting the relationship arc and the stereotypical "happily-ever-after" (HEA) ending. Pamela Regis also suggests that the relationship arc and happy ending are equally significant, saying romance is "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (21). However, Janice Radway describes romance as a narrative focused on "the developing relationship between heroine and hero" (122), which emphasises the relationship arc and its psychological function for readers more than the ending. Radway's work also pioneered critical discussions around romance's intersections with patriarchy, power, and escapism for women. Her work, therefore, highlights the popular romance genre's interpretive possibilities and cultural functions.

Recent scholarship has further expanded on Radway's work by incorporating a larger range of narratives, themes, and perspectives related to the romance genre. For instance, Laura Vivanco argues that romance does not merely reflect but also actively negotiates social anxieties, particularly those related to gender and power. This highlights the romance genre's capacity to evolve in response to sociocultural trends, such as growing awareness of the impacts of trauma. While Jayashree Kamblé acknowledges "the common narrative

impulse of describing a courtship and marriage" (xiii), she also argues that there is an identifiable "move from the fragmented self to a unified one" (xiii). Kamblé's work also focuses on the "episteme"—or worldview—of romance (xiii). Therefore, she acknowledges the identification of specific elements suggested by earlier theorists but also, like Radway, expands on the possibilities of the genre. On this point, Catherine Roach also asserts that romances "do deep and complicated work for the (mostly) women who read them" and further suggests there is a "reparative aspect" to romance, since it attempts to atone for the effects on women living in a patriarchal world (11). Hsu-Ming Teo concurs, noting the genre's adaptability and its reflection of societal changes. Teo's work additionally underscores the genre's global reach and its capacity to address diverse cultural contexts. Francesca Pierini observes that modern romances often engage with complex themes and challenge traditional genre boundaries, again reflecting broader societal shifts and, I contend, indicating subgeneric shifts. For instance, the three trauma-themed romance subgenres I propose challenge traditional genre boundaries through their unique engagement with the complex themes of trauma, recovery, and romantic relationship impact. Recognising the differences between these subgenres enables academics and scholars to analyse not just *whether* trauma is present in a romance, but also *how* trauma impacts narrative arcs, characterisation, and the developing romance—and, perhaps, the romance genre's wider cultural and interpretive work.

By considering the aforementioned points of agreement within the romance scholarship, namely a central love story and a satisfying resolution, I defined the popular romance genre in my PhD thesis as "a work of fiction that includes a love story as the central element, between two or more characters, with a happy and satisfying ending" (Kindleysides 17). While my definition of the romance genre builds on the emphasis on structures and features found in the early scholarship (see, for example, Modleski and Regis), my approach differs in that it prioritises a concrete narrative arc—one with a beginning, middle, and end that follows two or more characters navigating a romantic relationship to reach a satisfying conclusion—while also remaining compatible with the more modern scholarship and cultural sensitivities. For instance, my definition is deliberately inclusive, allowing for variations that depart from heteronormative and dyadic relationship assumptions (e.g., "two or more characters" with no emphasis on gender, sexual identity or, as mentioned in my thesis, species). In these main ways, my definition operates as a structural baseline from which subgeneric variation, such as trauma integration, can emerge. I more thoroughly investigate the precise features of trauma in romance in "The Three Trauma-Themed Romance Subgenres" section below.

Before turning to the following topic of the trauma genre, I offer a brief aside: while most scholarly definitions imply or outright state the presence of at least two characters involved in a romantic relationship in a romance novel (mine included), I further contend that stories of self-love—or what I refer to as *autoromance*—can equally constitute a valid form of romance narrative within the romance genre. (I predict these will become more popular in the decades to come.) Nonfiction sometimes centres the protagonist's journey towards self-love, healing, and wholeness, which culminates in a satisfying emotional ending. A well-known example is the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, whose narrative of self-discovery leads to an emotionally satisfying ending in which she enters a romantic relationship. The existence of these stories in other genres challenges the interpersonal norms of the romance genre and points to the possibility of, once again, expanding the

genre's scope. My position on autoromance also aligns with recent shifts in romance reader preferences. Harlequin's *The Love Lowdown Report* intriguingly indicates that 69% of romance readers prioritise self-love and friendships over finding a partner and 42% viewing a long-term, healthy relationship with themselves as their preferred happy ending. Such findings may suggest a cultural movement toward embracing self-focused narratives within the romance genre. However, a deeper analysis into this prospect is outside the scope of this article but warrants future examination.

The Trauma Genre

The classification of trauma as a genre is also a matter of ongoing debate. Early trauma theorists such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth investigated the ways trauma resists narrative representation. However, other works—particularly in literary and genre studies—have treated trauma as a recognisable narrative form with its own conventions. Laurie Vickroy was one of the first to argue that trauma fiction possesses distinct features. In her foundational work *Trauma Fiction,* Whitehead states her aim "to indicate the literary features that regularly occur in trauma fiction," though she notes it is also "not my intention to provide a generalisable set of rules" (84). Michelle Balaev offers this definition, detailing some specifics around possible trauma elements: "a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels" (150). Further elaboration by Tamás Bényei and Alexandra Stara stresses that trauma fiction integrates not just the event of trauma but also its effects. Regardless of the variations in definition, most of the theorists in this space agree that trauma fiction exists as a distinct genre.

Drawing on this body of scholarship, then, I suggest that the trauma genre refers to works of fiction that incorporate an element of trauma representation into the storyline. Though seemingly simple, the definition aligns with that posited by Bényei and Stara, since it acknowledges the need for weaving the trauma into the storytelling. However, my definition also pushes beyond Balaev's definition by broadening what can constitute trauma (i.e., not only loss and fear), which highlights key questions in the trauma genre space: what is trauma, and how can it be accurately represented in fiction?

Similar to the topic of autoromance, a deep engagement with how trauma theory addresses the question of what trauma is lies outside the scope, length, and purpose of this article. However, to offer a brief overview of the field, Caruth defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (11), Sarah Woodhouse says trauma is "a perceived threat that overwhelms us and our ability to respond" (18), and Gabor Maté notes that trauma causes a "disconnection from our sense of self, others and the world" (qtd. in Woodhouse 20). By drawing on these and other experts (including Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot, Paul Conti, MaryCatherine McDonald, Bessel van der Kolk, and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman), I devised the following definition in my doctoral thesis: trauma is "an experience/s which threatens personal ideas of the self" (Kindleysides 21). To clarify my definition further, I posit that in order to classify as trauma, there must be some type of event or experience that feels threatening enough that the individual involved questions how they feel, think, and see themselves in the world. That is, the experience must challenge the ideas they have about themselves—for instance, they might question whether they are safe in the world anymore or whether there is something wrong with them. My definition purposely avoids psychological jargon to make it accessible while also

underscoring the seriousness of an event before it can be classified as trauma. By underscoring the threatening nature of an event, it limits the possibility of a small inconvenience being termed trauma, which leads to the associated question of how to accurately represent trauma in fiction, romance or otherwise.

Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja's *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, an important recent resource in this field, consolidates the scholarship on literary trauma theory and demonstrates the progress of trauma studies within the field of literature since the early pioneers. This volume showcases trauma theory as an interdisciplinary field and affirms the importance of contextualising trauma narratives within broader cultural and narrative frameworks. While the romance genre is not the book's primary focus, its existence and interdisciplinary scope showcases the relevance of applying trauma theory to genre fiction more broadly. But how can trauma theory and literary theory combine to offer critical frameworks that can be applied to works of fiction representing trauma? Furthermore, does trauma fiction possess specific features, such as romance's happy ending, other than those proposed by Balaev?

Many theorists in this space have addressed these questions. For example, Whitehead states that the writing techniques used in crafting trauma fiction can be informed and influenced by trauma theory, highlighting the genre's "attempt to convey the experience of trauma through narrative forms that mirror or mimic the effects of trauma" (4). Even so, theorists disagree about the best way to achieve this. Vickroy suggests incorporating "dissociative symptoms" (xiv), "fragmented identity" (xiv), "interior monologues" (11), surrealist elements (13), and "symbolic imagery," "metaphor," and "flashbacks" to mimic trauma's aftereffects (30–32), whereas Ruth Leys critiques the purely mimetic approach, arguing that trauma theory sometimes incorporates mimetic and anti-mimetic views (2). Additionally, Dominick LaCapra advocates for what he calls the "middle voice" —"the 'in-between' voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions" (19)—in which writers switch between the active and passive voice in their fiction. Moreover, several theorists agree that trauma should be open to a variety of representations in fiction. Craps explores the "modernist trauma aesthetic" and advocates for a broader understanding of trauma representation within literature (38–43), Bényei and Stara argue that trauma can be represented in a variety of narrative (and visual art) forms (13), and Alan Gibbs critiques the "prescriptive aesthetic" of much trauma fiction (148). Despite their agreement in this regard, it should be noted that these theorists do not necessarily agree on what trauma is nor what types of trauma can be represented in fiction, thus demonstrating some of the areas of contention around trauma in fiction. Two other theorists who explore the variability of trauma representation in fiction are Nicole Sütterlin, who notes how trauma can be represented via the "absence, indirection, and splitting" of the narrative voice and identity and shows how doppelgängers have been used to portray dissociation (63–64, 322) and Joshua Pederson, who discusses "absence/silence, indirection, and repetition" as common methods for representing the psychological fragmentation sometimes experienced by trauma survivors (97).

Adding to the critical discussion around what constitutes trauma representation, my trauma definition outlines several other elements to consider. For example, does the story contain a representation of a traumatic event/experience (e.g., a mugging), which is shown to have been threatening (e.g., the character felt preyed upon) *and* alters the ideas the character holds about themselves (e.g., they no longer feel safe going about their daily life)?

Additionally, my broad trauma genre definition opens up the number of experiences that could be depicted as a trauma in fiction and also offers flexibility around classifying narratives that blend trauma with other genres, such as romance. This integrative potential—the blending of trauma and romance specifically—is the focus of the next section and forms the central contribution of this article to both trauma theory and romance studies.

The Intersection of Romance and Trauma: The Trauma-Themed Romance Subgenres

Although Lynne Pearce alludes to this connection in her book *Romance Writing*—writing that "romantic love is the most ecstatic *and* traumatic event we are likely to suffer" (1)—she does not present the connection between romance and trauma in the context of specific subgenres, or even the romance genre per se, but rather in the context of romantic love. Nevertheless, her framing underscores the potential for overlap between romance and trauma, making it a relevant touchpoint for this discussion. Likewise, Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega demonstrate in the introduction to their foundational work on the topic, *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*, the developing interest in the intersection of trauma and romance. However, their study focuses exclusively on British literary texts and, like Pearce, they do not offer subgeneric distinctions since they focus on "romance strategies" as opposed to romance as a unique genre (Ganteau and Onega 4).

Despite the existence of this foundational literature and the many articles published on the romance-trauma connection in a variety of contexts (see, for example, Schönfelder; Hortle; Long; Šmídová), the topic still remains under-theorised in terms of subgenre classification. Joseph Hillis Miller also notes the vast body of literature on trauma, romance, and their interconnection (90), yet this abundance has not translated into a relevant framework or typology for categorising trauma-themed romance narratives. This is despite both the romance and trauma genres being profoundly affective, since they are (arguably) often concerned with a form of emotional or psychological rupture and repair. Modern narratives within the romance genre regularly incorporate characters with traumatic pasts; however, it is only in recent decades that trauma has become central enough within the romance genre narrative—and acknowledged enough within the popular consciousness—to merit subgeneric classification.

This article, therefore, builds on existing scholarship by proposing a typology of trauma-themed romance subgenres grounded in literary theory and genre studies. Noted literary critic Paul R. House states that "subgenres arise when authors take aspects of existing genres and develop them in some unique way" (41). John Truby similarly argues that subgenres emerge through the mixing of core genres. According to these theorists, then, a subgenre can be determined by its intersection of two or more main genres. As such, literary theory warrants an investigation into the types of subgenres that can be generated through the hybridising of the trauma genre and the romance genre. More specifically, Dana Percec details the romance genre's "fluid character" and its capacity to generate hybrid subcategories (ix). Building on these concepts, I propose that the term *trauma-themed romance subgenres* can be used to describe romances that integrate trauma not merely as backstory but as an intentional structural and elemental core. Additionally, I submit that these subgenres must meet two essential criteria. First, they centre a romantic relationship involving two or more characters and conclude with a happy and satisfying ending. Second, they represent trauma in a way that affects character arcs and/or plot structure. These two

essential criteria reflect the core features of both the romance genre and trauma genre, as previously outlined. While it can be argued at this point that trauma-themed romance subgenres could be grouped or nested under the trauma romance umbrella, I adopt a distinct classification to emphasise the identifiable differences and nuances between these subgenres. This classification also avoids implications of fixed boundaries or internal rankings since the criteria function heuristically and highlight narrative tendencies without suggesting hierarchy (Frow 14–15; Kamblé 15). The classification also allows for a more precise analysis of how trauma functions narratively and structurally within each subgenre. Moreover, treating them as discrete, yet related, subgenres aligns with the core principle of subgenre theory: that variations emerge through the deliberate emphasis on specific genre elements (House; Truby). Recognising trauma as a genre element—one that can both shape the narrative and impact a character's emotional trajectory—allows a clearer lens for differentiating romance subgenres that engage with trauma to emerge. On that note, the specific configuration of romance and trauma elements varies across the three proposed trauma-themed romance subgenres. Before turning to those subgenres, however, it is important to consider the growing importance of trauma-informed storytelling in contemporary romance, along with the possible societal sources for this trend.

The Importance of Being Trauma-Informed

Current global research reveals a staggering rise in male-perpetrated violence against women, a trend echoed in Australia. Government data from the *Australian Institute of Criminology* reports a 28% increase in male-perpetrated intimate partner homicide against women between 2022 and 2023. Internationally, experts describe sexual and intimate partner violence (IPV) as a global public health crisis (Pemberton and Loeb). The World Health Organization concurs, stating unequivocally that "violence against women is endemic."

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these patterns. Numerous studies have documented statistically significant increases in all forms of IPV during 2020, especially among first-time victims (Boxall and Morgan; Gosangi et al.; McNeil et al.). Additionally, according to the UN report *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic* (UN Women), "violence against women and girls has intensified since the outbreak of COVID-19" (3), and "1 in 2 women reported that they or a woman they know experienced a form of violence since the COVID-19 pandemic" (6). Together, this body of research points to a growing population of women who are not only living with the aftereffects of trauma but are also being newly exposed to it—a reality that has implications for popular cultural production, including romance genre fiction.

These alarming statistics also intersect with the romance genre in a particularly compelling, and often underexplored, way. Up to 86% of romance readers and 99% of romance writers identify as female (see Hollows; Lois and Gregson; Nielsen; Rodale; Romance Writers of America; Teo). Given these demographics, it is reasonable to infer that many romance readers and writers are likely to have experienced or been affected by gender-based trauma. Although exact data on the gender and identity breakdown of romance scholars is limited, the field's strong representation of women (and other marginalised voices) suggests that many researchers may also bring lived experience of

trauma to their work. This lived experience could influence both the representation and interpretation of trauma narratives in romance fiction.

Furthermore, trauma does not affect all women—or all people—in uniform ways. Individuals with interconnecting marginalised identities, such as women of colour, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people with disabilities, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those in lower socioeconomic groups, are often at an even higher risk of trauma. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, these intersecting forms of oppression compound the vulnerabilities of already marginalised groups. Judith L. Herman and bell hooks similarly highlight how trauma is both shaped by and reveals underlying structures of power, especially as it relates to race, gender, and class. These forms of trauma are not always isolated events but can be cumulative and ongoing, shaped by social conditions and sustained inequalities. Therefore, trauma-informed approaches within romance studies must extend beyond a focus on gender-based violence to account for the diverse and compounding forms of trauma experienced by historically excluded groups.

These factors also demonstrate the importance of romance writers and academics in engaging in trauma-informed practices—that is, approaches that are attentive and sensitive to the complexities of trauma—when representing, analysing, or theorising trauma in romance. This includes understanding trauma's aftereffects and approaching its depiction with care, accuracy, and inclusion. Such practices not only prove ethically necessary but also enhance the interpretive depth and sociocultural relevance of romance scholarship.

A fundamental step towards achieving this is the ability to distinguish between different types of trauma-themed romance subgenres. Developing a shared vocabulary and clearer typology can foster more informed, ethical, and nuanced discussions within this area of study. This typology also provides a clear framework for evaluating how trauma is narratively and structurally integrated into romantic storytelling. Before turning to that typology, however, the next section outlines several strategies romance scholars can use to become more trauma-informed, which is essential for responsible research and criticism in this field.

How Romance Scholars Can Become More Trauma-Informed

While it is admirable to become trauma informed, its value lies in how that knowledge is applied in practice. For romance scholars (and writers), this means both gaining trauma awareness *and* adopting trauma-informed approaches in presenting research (or writing a novel) when it examines trauma elements in romance. This dual commitment to trauma-informed awareness and approaches is achievable in three simple ways:

1. Interdisciplinary engagement: Romance scholars are encouraged to draw on trauma theory from a variety of fields—for instance, psychology (Caruth), literary trauma theory (LaCapra), and the trauma genre (Whitehead)—to inform their critical readings and knowledge of trauma representation in romance. This cross-disciplinary approach allows for wider scholarly analysis and a more refined understanding of the possible narrative strategies open to scholars, academics, and writers; it also illuminates further ways to analyse and critique trauma within romance.

2. Contextual sensitivity and inclusion: This involves situating research and discussions around trauma-themed romances within broader cultural conversations about gendered violence, social power dynamics, marginalisation, and survivor agency. A trauma-informed scholar recognises the multiple sociopolitical dimensions of trauma narratives, rather than treating them as purely aesthetic or entertainment texts—a framing that risks trivialising trauma experiences. Applying an intersectional framework ensures that analyses remain attentive to the diverse realities of trauma survivors and avoids erasing marginalised perspectives.

3. Critiquing tropes and stereotypes: Romance scholars can critically examine how some common tropes (e.g., love cures all) and stereotypes (e.g., she was wearing a short skirt) may perpetuate problematic ideas about trauma and the post-trauma recovery journey. This includes advocating for accurate and responsible portrayals of trauma that challenge simplistic healing narratives and highlight the societal problems around these issues. Consider, for instance, the argument that Penny Jordan's early "novels expose rape and gender-based violence as damaging to both women and men in society" (Derbyshire)—an interpretation that highlights the genre's potential for social critique.

Trauma-informed knowledge and practice for academics requires ongoing education. The above three suggestions are a gateway to fostering a richer scholarly critique and knowledge of trauma within the romance genre. However, they are by no means the definitive answer. As trauma research continues to evolve and develop, so too must the critical engagement with the romance genre. When scholars are more trauma-informed, they can also engage more deeply with the three proposed trauma-themed romance subgenres, which are detailed in the next section.

The Three Trauma-Themed Romance Subgenres

As part of a trauma-informed approach to romance studies, it is helpful to identify subgenres that incorporate trauma as a key element. This section introduces three primary trauma-themed romance subgenres—trauma romance (TR), post-trauma romance (PTR), and transitional post-trauma romance (TPTR). While these three subgenres are not intended to provide an exhaustive or definitive list of the potential intersections between trauma and romance, I contend that they do offer a helpful introduction towards understanding the possibilities of how trauma can operate within romantic narratives. As mentioned above, I applied narrative analysis and narratology to over twenty-five romance novels that contained trauma elements. Through this process, I discerned recurring patterns and common narrative structures that enabled the classification of these texts into three distinct subgenres.

Before continuing, it is important to state that the provided definitions for each subgenre are intentionally gender-neutral, reflecting that trauma in romance narratives can be experienced by love interests of any gender or non-gendered identity. Hence, romance

writers and academics are encouraged to focus on the trauma experienced by any love interest, regardless of how they are gendered (or non-gendered).

The following typology distinguishes trauma-themed romance subgenres based on the degree of narrative engagement with trauma and its aftermath. At one end, TR depicts traumatic events without substantial focus on their aftereffects. At the other end, PTR fully explores trauma responses, psychological effects, relationship impacts, and recovery processes. TPTR occupies the middle ground where one or two aspects of trauma aftermath are present but not explored in full narrative depth. TPTR also allows scholars to trace narrative complexity or liminality in trauma depiction that binary categories might overlook. Table 1 visualises the differences detailed below, and the examples provided under each subheading demonstrate how this typology works in practice.

Trauma Romance

Many novels aligning with the proposed features and definition of the TR subgenre may not have been labelled as such. This is partly due to the relatively recent emergence of a connected study of trauma and romance. Arguably, Ganteau and Onega's was the first major work on this connection, and that was published a little over a decade ago. Additionally, trauma theory itself only gained recognition as a formal field of study in the 1990s after the publication of Caruth's foundational text. As a result, the theoretical tools needed to explicitly connect trauma and romance have only recently become available.

Even so, it is worth noting that the term *trauma romance* is already in popular use, particularly among readers on platforms such as Goodreads, where 250 titles have been shelved under this heading. However, this reader-generated categorisation tends to group together a wide range of romances that engage with trauma in disparate ways, often without distinguishing between the depth of trauma representation, its narrative function, or its impact on the development of the central romance. Moreover, the subgenre has potentially existed since at least the eighteenth century—although, again, it has largely not been labelled as such for the aforementioned reasons. For instance, *The Wrongs of Woman*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft in the late 1790s and published posthumously, depicts childhood trauma and marital abuse (the heroine is confined in an institution by order of her husband) alongside a developing extra-marital romantic relationship (Wollstonecraft; Schönfelder).

Therefore, while this article retains the popularised term trauma romance, it does so with a more specific scholarly intent: to delineate subgeneric boundaries based on how trauma is integrated into romance. With that intention in mind, I propose the term trauma romance to refer to "a work of fiction that depicts a traumatic experience/s within a romantic narrative" (Kindleysides 24). Accordingly, TRs feature the following three criteria:

1. A love story, between two or more love interests, with a HEA or HFN ("happy-for-now") ending as a central element of the narrative. As discussed in "The Romance Genre" section and the subsequent definition of the romance genre I provide above, this feature is fundamental to all modern romance novels, regardless of subgenre.

2. At least one love interest who has experienced trauma. While more than one love interest may have a trauma history, the presence of at least one such character is sufficient.

3. A description and/or exploration of trauma. The traumatic experience of at least one love interest is explicitly represented and integrated into the storyline. (Kindleysides 24)

To clarify further, a TR contains a central love story with a HEA/HFN, a traumatised love interest, and narrative engagement with that trauma. It is this emphasis on trauma representation—as opposed to trauma response, trauma effects, or post-trauma recovery representation—that sets TR apart from the broader romance genre and the other two trauma-themed romance subgenres.

To demonstrate the three major features of the TR subgenre in a more practical way, I offer an overview of a book aligning with this subgenre. Jayne Castle's *Guild Boss* exemplifies the TR subgenre. The novel contains a central romantic relationship between Lucy Bell and Gabriel Jones, culminating in a HEA (a wedding). Lucy, the heroine, is traumatised: she was kidnapped and drugged, and her experience is not believed by others—a scenario that is described in the narrative. While there are minor indications of trauma response (such as sarcasm as a defence mechanism and a reluctance to discuss her trauma, hinting at another possible defence mechanism), there is no substantial depiction of post-trauma effects, nor does the trauma significantly affect her relationship with Gabriel. Moreover, there is no conscious post-trauma recovery arc. The novel's limited engagement with trauma aftermath positions *Guild Boss* as a representative example of the TR subgenre because the trauma is depicted and acknowledged, but it is not explored in terms of long-term psychological impact, relationship disruption, or structured recovery.

In summation, TR marks a distinct subgenre within romantic fiction—one that centres on the representation of trauma while maintaining the romance genre's commitment to the love story and its happy resolution. It forms the baseline category in the typology of trauma-themed romance subgenres, from which PTR and TPTR diverge in their more complex treatment of trauma and its aftermath.

Post-Trauma Romance

PTR is a trauma-themed romance subgenre that builds upon the foundation of TR by delving more deeply into the aftermath and enduring impacts of trauma. While TR primarily depicts the traumatic event within a romantic narrative, PTR demands a fuller exploration of trauma responses, post-trauma effects, their influence on the romantic relationship, and a conscious and positive recovery process. This complexity makes PTR both a challenging and deeply nuanced subgenre for romance writers and scholars to engage with. PTR is defined as "a work of fiction that depicts a traumatic experience/s, its post-trauma effects, and the processes of recovery from the traumatic experience/s within a romantic narrative" (Kindleysides 34). As such, a PTR features the following six characteristics:

1. A love story, between two or more love interests, with a HEA or HFN as a central element of the narrative. This remains a defining element across all trauma-themed romance subgenres.

2. At least one love interest who has experienced trauma. While more than one character may have a trauma history, the presence of at least one traumatised love interest is sufficient.

3. A description and/or exploration of the trauma. The traumatic experience must be explicitly represented and integrated into the storyline.

4. A description and/or exploration of associated trauma responses and post-trauma effects. Unlike TR, where trauma responses—the reactions an individual experiences during a traumatic event—and post-trauma effects—the symptoms and behaviours experienced by an individual after a traumatic experience—may be incidental or minimal, PTR narratives describe and/or explore these elements in more depth. Trauma responses are the immediate and automatic reactions that occur in the body, brain, and nervous system during the traumatic event. My PhD research narrowed down nine main trauma responses: flood, freeze, flight, fawn, fight, fright, flag, faint, and fade. For more information, please refer to Kindleysides (53–55). Post-trauma effects are the ongoing symptoms and behaviours that follow a trauma, including, but not limited to, the commonly known condition post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

5. An exploration of how post-trauma effects impact the romantic relationship. Trauma influences interpersonal dynamics, often creating obstacles to intimacy, trust, and commitment. PTR narratives depict these relationship disruptions in either subtle or profound ways. An example of a subtle impact might involve a heroine feeling on edge around men. A more profound impact could include a character avoiding long-term commitment.

6. The representation of conscious and positive post-trauma recovery attempts. PTR narratives feature a character healing journey that is both conscious (i.e., intentional) and based on positive choices (such as a character undertaking therapy). Negative coping mechanisms—commonly "outward-directed" behaviours, such as excessive drinking—or defence mechanisms—typically "inward-directed" behaviours, such as "putting up walls"—may appear, but they are ultimately supplanted through conscious and positive recovery effort by the end of the story. (Kindleysides 34–35)

As such, when classifying PTR stories, scholars should look for those narratives that include a central love story between two or more love interests with a HEA/HFN, trauma representation, a depiction of trauma response/post-trauma effects, a noted impact of the trauma on the romantic relationship, and the inclusion of a positive and conscious trauma recovery journey.

To showcase the PTR subgenre in a more practical way, I offer an overview of my book aligning with this subgenre. *See Her Run* typifies PTR through its portrayal of Diana King and Jonathan Smith, whose romantic relationship culminates in a HEA (wedding). Both protagonists have experienced trauma—Diana through escaping an abusive marriage and Jonathan by enduring childhood abuse. The novel explicitly depicts Diana's trauma responses—including flight (she literally runs away, hence the title of the book), fawn (she aims to please her abuser), fade (she tries to make herself invisible and does not want to be

noticed), and faint (she collapses)—as well as her diagnosis of PTSD. Jonathan exhibits common defence mechanisms, such as emotional withdrawal when triggered. Significantly, the narrative explores how these post-trauma effects strain their relationship, with Diana's PTSD nearly ending their romance and Jonathan's barriers causing a temporary breakup. The novel also represents Diana's conscious and positive recovery choices through her engagement with traditional talk therapy. This clear representation of trauma, its aftermath, and an intentional recovery process within a clear romance genre framework firmly situates *See Her Run* in the PTR subgenre.

Transitional Post-Trauma Romance

During the analysis I conducted on the twenty-five novels I read during my PhD research—for a list of these novels, with further notes on each, including associated subgenre designation, please refer to Appendix B in my PhD (Kindleysides 123–136)—I discovered several novels that possessed all three features of TR but only some of the distinguishing characteristics of PTR. Thus, I designated these novels *transitional post-trauma romance* since they straddled the fence of the two subgenres. While TPTR is arguably not as narratively or psychologically complex as PTR, it still engages seriously with trauma aftermath and its impact on the love story. This makes it distinct from TR as well as popular modern romance (where trauma may simply form part of a character's backstory).

To highlight the differences more definitively, TPTR is a work of fiction that depicts trauma and some post-trauma effects within a romantic narrative. As such, a TPTR contains all three of the TR features, namely:

1. A love story, between two or more love interests, with a HEA or HFN as a central element of the narrative

2. At least one love interest who has experienced trauma

3. A description and/or exploration of the trauma. (Kindleysides 45)

A TPTR *also* features one or two of the following three features noted under the PTR subheading romance:

1. Minor descriptions and/or exploration of an associated trauma response/s and post-trauma effects. In this context, *minor* refers to brief, undeveloped, or incidental mentions of trauma response and/or post-trauma effects—such as a passing reference to nightmares or avoidance behaviour—rather than sustained or multi-scene depictions.

2. An exploration into how post-trauma effects have a minor impact on the romantic relationship (for example, brief tension or hesitation, rather than ongoing or sustained conflict).

3. The representation of minor post-trauma recovery attempts in the narrative that are ultimately both conscious and positive as well as negative coping or defence

mechanisms. For instance, a character could decide to journal in an attempt to deal with their trauma.

It is important to reiterate that the final three features of TPTR are in limited form, with only one or two out of the three features incorporated. A novel may briefly depict a trauma response (e.g., the heroine flinching at loud noises) but not explore ongoing psychological symptoms, or it may touch on relationship tensions without showing sustained impact on the romantic plot. The key distinction is that while these elements are present, they are not the central drivers of character development or narrative resolution, as they are in PTR. (If the novel contains all three features, it is a PTR novel.)

Therefore, TPTRs novels include a central love story between two or more love interests with a HEA/HFN, trauma representation, and one or two minor portrayals of trauma response/post-trauma effects, romantic relationship impact, and a trauma recovery journey. To further elucidate, TPTR is a distinct trauma-themed romance subgenre because it reflects a narrative space that is fully engaged with the character's trauma but is not fully immersed in the trauma's aftermath. TPTR allows romance writers to honour the complexity of trauma, embrace the hope that emotional connection can bring, and incorporate character growth while also avoiding the psychological intensity that PTR can evoke.

To demonstrate the unique mixture of features within the TPTR subgenre in a more practical way, I offer an overview of a book aligning with this subgenre—*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë. Choosing this book reflects the obvious motivation of providing an example of TPTR and suggests that the TPTR subgenre, like the TR subgenre, likely has a long history.

Despite its age, Brontë's novel is surprisingly modern. It contains a central love story, between a heroine (Helen Graham) and hero (Gilbert Markham), with a HEA marriage . . . eventually! Although not explicitly framed as such at the time of writing (due to psychological and trauma theory being in their infancy), the heroine is shown to have experienced trauma. For instance, she endured what most people in modern times would call an abusive marriage with an alcoholic, cheating, gambling husband. Helen is represented with minor "fade" and "fight" trauma responses (e.g., she pushes back against societal standards for women and children), which suggests remarkable insight by Brontë since these responses were undocumented in psychological literature at the time. The book also showcases minor post-trauma effects, such as defence mechanisms—including Helen not trusting Gilbert and being wary of alcohol drinkers. Additionally (and in another rather forward-thinking element), Helen refuses to marry Gilbert until some time has passed so she can trust herself not to naively rush into another marriage too soon. Significantly, considering the time it was written, Helen indulges in painting. The activity is shown to bring Helen both money (financial independence) and peace of mind. This could be viewed as a form of art therapy by modern standards (i.e., a conscious and positive recovery journey). Even so, since it was not depicted as a conscious recovery attempt (again, likely because Western conceptions of trauma recovery were unknown in this period), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* cannot be considered a PTR novel. However, due to the other features which demonstrate how the novel straddles the demarcations of TR and PTR, *Tenant* can be classified as an early example of the TPTR subgenre.

Overview of the Three Trauma-Themed Romance Subgenres

To make the differences between these three trauma-themed romance subgenres even more identifiable, they are visually captured in the accompanying typology table (see Table 1), which aims to clarify the distinct features of each subgenre and provides a quick reference point for romance scholars (and writers). As these subgenres continue to evolve—and I anticipate that they will—they offer romance scholars a rich resource for exploring the intersection of romance and trauma in new, exciting, and increasingly nuanced ways. This typology is, to my knowledge, the first to offer a structured, theory-informed classification of trauma-themed romance subgenres. As such, this typology provides both a critical vocabulary for scholars and a practical framework for writers seeking to engage with trauma in romance.

Why Subgenre Classification Matters

While trauma can be incorporated as a minor or major theme across romance fiction, classifying trauma-themed romance into subgenres offers more than just thematic insight; it also provides structural and narratological precision. Building on the typology outlined in the previous section, this discussion explores how subgenre distinctions enable romance scholars to better identify how narrative, character development, and relationship arcs interact with the representation of trauma, its effects, and the post-trauma recovery process. Doing so will address the importance of subgenre classification.

Unlike thematic analysis, which often isolates trauma purely as content, subgeneric classification allows for the systematic comparison of how different romance texts construct, represent, and resolve trauma narratives. It further invites the examination of how narrative timing, genre conventions, tropes, and the positioning of trauma relative to the romantic relationship arc affect the story's emotional work and reader response. As theorists like Tzvetan Todorov and John Frow have argued, genre classifications are tools that shape meaning through recognition, expectation, and the "fantastic" differences between them (Todorov 25). Classifying trauma-themed romances into subgenres thus foregrounds the ways in which the romance genre can depict trauma in its complexity, rather than treating trauma solely as an incidental or background theme.

Also, the romance genre offers a particularly effective medium through which to represent trauma. Monika Markéta Šmídová supports this view, stating that "the structure of a romance novel makes the genre a suitable medium for the exploration of trauma and recovery." This suitability underscores a significant reason for distinguishing between trauma-themed romance subgenres: each subgenre reflects a distinct narrative approach to trauma, its representation, and its resolution, thereby challenging the ways readers engage with and interpret the stories.

Moreover, subgenre distinctions are methodologically useful. They encourage scholars to map trauma representation across romance more systematically and to identify recurring patterns, innovations, and shifts in cultural discourse. As trauma becomes more visible in popular culture and fiction, trauma-informed genre analysis can help track how romance contributes to—or resists—dominant narratives of healing, personal agency, and post-trauma survival.

These distinctions also carry ethical weight. Subgenres like PTR are notable not only for their structural features but also for their ethical positioning. In PTR, trauma recovery is depicted as a conscious process that may precede or accompany the romantic arc—but is never reduced to it. This approach contrasts with older romance narratives that, sometimes, implied that love alone could "fix" psychological wounds. PTR narratives highlight the need for internal work and, often, professional support. Romantic relationships may support recovery, but they are not depicted as cures in themselves. This narrative framing matters. When love is presented as a panacea, it can perpetuate harmful myths—particularly for trauma-affected readers—about what healing should look like. While romance fiction need not be realist in form, trauma-informed criticism calls for attentiveness to how narrative tropes may oversimplify complex realities. Scholars have an ethical responsibility to assess such representations with care, especially in genres whose readership is predominantly women, many of whom may be survivors of trauma themselves.

Additionally, these subgenres are not merely united by the presence of trauma but are defined by how narrative structure, character arcs, and recovery timelines shape the romantic trajectory. The subgeneric model, then, makes visible the different structural, trajectory, and affective patterns that thematic readings alone might overlook.

Moreover, readers may experience trauma narratives differently depending on whether the fictional trauma is actively unfolding, has recently occurred, or is mentioned as part of a longer healing journey. It is also likely that the reader's personal trauma history (including where they are on their recovery journey) will impact their reading experience. Subgeneric distinctions, therefore, help scholars analyse the emotional and ethical weight of trauma narratives—and how these narratives may resonate with readers.

Further, subgenres offer practical benefits beyond the academic, helping authors, editors, and readers understand content expectations. While thematic analysis can describe *what* is in a story, subgeneric classification can articulate *how* that content is narratively and emotionally shaped.

PTR also stands out from a representational standpoint. As Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher and others have noted, representation in fiction is about the inclusion and visibility of marginalised experiences. PTR allows for the portrayal of trauma survivors—especially women, queer people, and other marginalised groups—as active agents in their own recovery. This is especially salient given the previously noted statistics regarding the high prevalence of trauma among women and marginalised groups and the fact that the romance genre readership, authorship, and scholarly attention continues to be dominated by women. The accurate, sensitive, and diverse representation of trauma and recovery across TR, TPTR, and PTR therefore holds both literary and sociocultural significance.

Recognising trauma-themed romance subgenres is also not simply an exercise in literary taxonomy. Indeed, as already stated, the proposed subgenres are not meant to be rigid or exhaustive categories (hence, the use of "typology" when referring to them throughout this article). Instead, the subgenres offer a new critical understanding that deepens the field's engagement with trauma representation within the romance genre, supports ethical and inclusive scholarship, and affirms the romance genre's capacity to narrate trauma and its recovery process in ways that matter—personally, politically, and culturally.

Finally, in this academic context, subgeneric distinctions offer a framework for more precise literary and interdisciplinary analysis. Trauma-themed romance subgenres invite

further research not only in literary studies, as already mentioned, but also in psychology, gender studies, and trauma theory, where the intersections between personal recovery and cultural storytelling are of growing interest. As trauma narratives continue to proliferate within romance fiction, having a shared critical vocabulary will be essential for ensuring meaningful engagement across disciplines.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the importance of being trauma-informed in the study of popular romance and highlighted the intersection of the trauma and romance genres. Against this backdrop, it proposes the existence of and defines three trauma-themed romance subgenres that offer a structured framework for understanding how trauma is represented and resolved within romantic narratives.

To build this argument, the article first overviews the main method used to reach these conclusions: a narrative analysis and narratological approach applied to twenty-five romance novels containing trauma themes. It then presents a literature review that establishes the theoretical foundations for analysing trauma within the romance genre by drawing on key scholarship in both romance studies and trauma theory. The article then discusses the importance of being trauma-informed and suggests ways for romance scholars to integrate trauma theory into their practice. Next, it outlines the three trauma-themed subgenres in more detail by identifying their unique features—including distinct representations of trauma, its effects, and post-trauma recovery—supported by exemplar novels and a corresponding typology table. Finally, it examines why subgenre classification matters, which incorporates sociocultural and ethical stakes of trauma representation in romance fiction. Through contrasting TR with TPTR and PTR, the article also demonstrates the literary and scholarly value of recognising subgeneric variation in trauma-themed romance. Understanding these distinctions provides scholars with a more precise framework for trauma-informed literary analysis. Furthermore, the typology offered in this article opens up interdisciplinary possibilities for future research across literary studies, trauma theory, psychology, and gender studies—fields in which the cultural work of trauma storytelling is increasingly recognised. The article also highlights PTR's unique emphasis on a positive and conscious post-trauma recovery journey. This unique feature merits further exploration in romance scholarship, particularly around how romance fiction can model trauma recovery journeys. Ultimately, this knowledge supports a more thoughtful, reflective, and trauma-informed engagement with romance fiction.

Table 1

Feature	Trauma Romance	Transitional Post-Trauma Romance	Post-Trauma Romance
Central love story with a HEA or HFN	Evident.	Evident.	Evident.
Traumatised character	Evident. Features at least one love interest who has experienced	Evident. Features at least one love interest who has experienced	Evident. Features at least one love interest who has experienced

	minor or major trauma.	minor or major trauma.	minor or major trauma.
Trauma	Evident. Trauma is represented in the narrative.	Evident. Trauma is represented in the narrative.	Evident. Trauma is represented in the narrative.
Trauma responses and post-trauma effects	May feature minor examples.	May feature minor examples.	Evident.
Post-trauma effects impact the relationship	Not evident.	May feature minor impact.	Evident. Trauma impacts the HEA or HFN in a minor or major way.
***Conscious* and *positive* trauma recovery attempts**	Not evident.	May feature minor positive or conscious recovery attempts.	Evident. At least one traumatised character attempts conscious and positive recovery.

Table 1: Differences in Trauma, Post-Trauma Effects, and Trauma Recovery Representation in Trauma-Themed Romance Novels
Source: Adapted from Kindleysides (45)

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