

Larson, Christine. *Love in the Time of Self-Publishing: How Romance Writers Changed the Rules of Writing & Success*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. 288. US \$19.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9780691217406.

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Christine Larson's study of the romance writing and publishing industry, based upon both hard data and the personal experiences of romance writers who aided her analysis, is an informative analytical work that newcomers to the burgeoning gig economy, including writers, social media influencers, and other freelance workers, would find wise to study and apply in their own endeavors in community-building. Larson's book, excellent for students new to the field of popular romance studies, quickly defines and explains terms not often used nor understood, to include Romancelandia and feminized labor. Through memories and records of authors, publishers, and many others involved in recent history of the romance genre, Larson defines history timelines of the organized romance writing community, Romance Writers of America (RWA), in order to reveal a baseline understanding of romance authors' perspectives of their successes, fears, and struggles, both in their careers and in community-building. Relying on Pamela Regis, with additional input from Catherine Roach, Tania Modleski, and Janice Radway, to build the critical framework of understanding the romance genre, its history, and its cultural significance, Larson takes pieces of their definitions and arguments in order to explain and provide context for the book's definition of what makes a romance book a romance book (Larson 25). Then, focusing on authors and books that fit this flexible definition of the romance genre, the remainder of the book seeks to understand why romance authors became leaders in digital publishing by digging through forty years of romance community, or Romancelandia, data and human experience, and incidentally exposes the successes and failures of the RWA, a non-profit trade organization and professional network for career-focused romance writers, as both guidance and caution to other gig economy fields as they build their own support networks. John Padgett and Walter Powell's work on network theory, particularly their quote "In the short run, actors make relations. In the long run, relations make actors," guides Larson's process of analyzing how romance writers' networks function and have evolved (Padgett and Powell 55). Romancelandia, and RWA within it, serve as models of self-organization because they, as

Larson points out, were built on a premise of the ethic of care, a concept developed by Carol Gilligan and moral philosophers Virginia Held and Joan Tronto (Larson 16), which “strove to meet the needs of all community members” for a genre that was historically discriminated against by the publishing industry (Larson 11). However, Larson argues that an ethic of care, attempting to meet everyone’s needs with the “allocation of finite resources,” requires “constant negotiating between competing demands” (69). Well-intentioned as this ethic of care may be, and effective as the ethic was in an open-elite network that made romance authors the leaders in digital publishing, the RWA network still fell short in supporting its marginalized members equally to its efforts for the white heterosexual women that are predominant in the romance writing industry. As Larson points out, RWA “assumed that marginalized authors had the same needs” as the dominant group and thus lacked the necessary “identity-aware care” to support marginalized groups in the publishing environment (12). Despite the RWA’s inability to support all its members to the level they required, it was incredibly successful in supporting romance authors, as a community, in the publishing world’s watershed moment, the rise of the e-book.

Larson found that American romance writers had set themselves up for success long before e-books had come along. In a male-dominated workplace environment, holding one’s cards close is expected; giving away one’s industry secrets would make it hard to maintain a competitive edge. But romance authors, specifically those who have published independently or traditionally and writers who may not yet have published at all, built unique professional “open advice” (130) networks, like RWA, within which they shared “critical business information” regarding “contracts, payments, publishers, and the craft” (3). “All published authors, aspiring or established, were equally likely to ask for advice” within the community (Larson 173). Two catalysts led to romance authors, as a genre, enjoying a median income rise of “73 percent” after the e-book became increasingly popular “between 2009 and 2014” (3). The first is that romance writers built a community based on sharing information rather than guarding it. And from this community comes the second catalyst: romance authors, especially marginalized authors who had never been widely published in paper, began experimenting with electronic publishing and self-promotion “nearly a decade before the Kindle launched” (3). With information regarding electronic publishing and self-promotion quickly spreading across the open-communication community that romance writers and authors had built, romance authors experienced an incredible median income rise. Meanwhile, “all other authors dropped 42 percent” in the same time frame (3).

Larson’s study is built upon personal connection and insight from “eighty in-depth interviews with writers, editors, agents, and industry observers” and “countless informal interviews” at “conferences and online”, as well as on data collected from a “survey of 4,270 romance authors” in order to build a “network analysis of their advice patterns” based on survey results (3). In 2015, Larson surveyed RWA members with forty-nine questions pertaining to “three years of data on income, number and type of books published, years writing, experiences with self-publishing, demographic information” and asked authors to “name three people they most frequently sought advice from” (20). Larson also investigated her study’s and analysis’ limitations finding, for example, that her survey sample “included only RWA members,” which excluded and limited insight from non-RWA members (221). Larson ensured the credibility and accuracy of her qualitative data not only through “respondent validation” and the assistance of sensitivity readers, but also through her quantitative data (215). The qualitative data from the survey results was peer-reviewed and

published “in top journals within the communication field,” resulting in the “best and most extensive income and networking data available to date on romance writers” (222). Even without such assurance regarding her qualitative data, even if no data was provided at all, the stories Larson writes of the lives of her interviewees reveal and teach much the same lessons.

Larson’s findings are decisive and hold emotional impact as she builds upon each data-driven theme with the in-depth personal stories of individual women, all of whom were involved in the formation of RWA, its rise, and its fall. Each chapter builds upon the sense of interconnectedness and influence amongst the women through memories of those Larson interviewed. Through memories of authors like Nora Roberts, the beginning chapters lay the groundwork of “Romancelandia as a site of feminized labor” for new students to the field of romance studies to better understand what Romancelandia is, why the community began to form, and how it began to be more officially recognized as a community to combat the uphill battle many romance authors have faced to receive proper recognition, respect, and compensation for their efforts (21). In the subsequent chapters, Larson then reflects upon the founding and history of RWA and its foundational ethic of care. Larson follows the stories and experiences of founders, authors, publishers, and editors alike in these chapters to give the historical overview a more personal perspective. Editor and RWA founder Vivian Stephens’ story, in particular, branches across the entire book, starting with her experience as a newcomer to the publishing industry as a woman of color in 1978, and follows through her years of influence within RWA as a founder. But arguably more important than her status as founder is her direct support of marginalized authors. Like a tree spreading its branches, the opening chapters uncover the roots of RWA’s timeline through Stephens’ personal history in the field, and each consecutive chapter branches out to different authors, RWA founders and, later, RWA board members, as reflection of Stephens’ influence to garner direct support of more marginalized authors and a greater variety of marginalized groups. Later chapters investigate Romancelandia’s early and effective entrance into the digital era, and how, as the title of Larson’s book suggests, romance writers changed the traditional publishing and self-publishing industries. Larson’s opening arguments are well supported throughout and at the conclusion, as she weaves discussion of RWA’s failure to support its marginalized subcommunities, and the consequences and future RWA now faces for failing to take decisive actions sooner. Christine Larson’s *Love in the Time of Self-Publishing* was not just written as an informative guide to other growing networks, but as an homage to the thousands of authors Larson represents in her results, giving space for clear representation of victories and battles across forty years of Romancelandia so that newcomers to the popular romance studies can gain their bearings on why Romancelandia, and its connection to so many other focuses within this field of study, is so essential to understand.

Forty years’ worth of romance writing history offers invaluable lessons and warnings “about the impact of open networks and an inclusive ethic of care,” (201) and raises insightful questions “for anyone trying to create more cohesive communities and greater solidarity in the face of fragmenting social forces” (203). Utilizing individual, personal histories of authors and the history of RWA, students of popular romance studies can build a better understanding of definitions like Romancelandia, feminized labor, and the ethic of care. Larson’s review of RWA’s history covers both the good and the ugly. RWA played a large part in establishing a symbiotic relationship between new romance writers and established authors and in leading the charge into the world of digital publishing. But the irony is not

lost when it comes to RWA's failure to fairly support its marginalized members. According to Larson, RWA's failure was made relentlessly public on the same social media on which romance writers have made such extraordinary progress in their careers and in raising the world's perspective of the romance genre. In this "stain" of RWA's public perception, there is a lesson for other unconventional gig economy workers. Romancelandia, much like the gig economy, is "shaped by historic patterns of feminized labor" like "unstable work, insecure pay, [and the] juggling of multiple jobs" (16). There is still "transformative power" in "relational labor, inclusion, and the ethic of care," a power that could change the futures of other gig economy fields much like it did for romance writers, so long as gig workers learn from the mistakes of RWA and involve identity-aware care, too (205).

Bibliography

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