



The Success behind the Candy-Colored Covers

AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE ON ROMANCE NOVELS

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The Halifax public library, like most community libraries, circulates a generous collection of romance novels, including those published by Harlequin Enterprises Limited. Since the covers tend to be similar, devout readers mark specific pages to record having read the book. For convenience, many women check out over a dozen at a time because some read a novel a day, while most readers finish a romance novel within a week.¹ Correspondingly, authors may display incredible productivity. For example, Barbara Cartland wrote more than seven hundred romance novels, and her work has been translated into thirty-six languages.² As the settings, plots, characters, titles, and covers are so similar, readers are often unsure whether they have read a novel previously.³ In part, this homogeneity occurs because romance novels always, of course, pivot thematically around a romantic relationship.⁴

Literature, including popular romance, is a product of human imagination. It records our reproductive behaviors and archives the expression of these behaviors in the context of the sociocultural environment in which it is composed, thus leaving longitudinal and cross-cultural artifacts for study by evolutionary scholars. According to Fletcher, Gaby, and Kloester, “Critics often speak up for the value of studying romance fiction because of the sheer, unparalleled popularity (in global terms) of the distilled or purer versions of the form—most commonly category romance novels. . . . [S]tudying popular romance fiction is important because of the sheer magnitude of texts and readers it looks to (and respects).”⁵

Romances are not a new invention; they date back to the days of the ancient Greeks.⁶ Indeed, the first English-language, mass-marketed paperback was the romance *Malaeska* by Ann Stephens, published in June 1860.⁷ Furthermore, researchers report that romance novels have started to include more sexual activity, more sensuality, and themes with more mature content.⁸ The characters are changing to include less dominant men, perhaps in response to a cultural shift toward gender/sexual equality, while heroines are becoming older, possibly reflecting the trend of later age at marriage for women. Heroines are often suc-

cessful career women who sometimes make the first move, but still desire some form of commitment from the hero.⁹

Why are romance novels so popular and enduring? We propose that romance novels “hit” evolved triggers pertaining to a critical part of women’s reproductive lives: selecting and acquiring high-quality mates. We speculate that reading these novels simulates the act of finding a high-quality mate. Thus, romance novels reflect and stimulate evolved female mating psychology in specific cultural contexts. Indeed, perhaps no other literary genre revolves around such an important human activity.

Our perspective rests on the tenets of Darwinian literary study, which has effectively shown that one can examine texts to meaningfully comprehend human nature, particularly with respect to motivations and emotions.¹⁰ Romance novels are always about choosing and acquiring a good mate (i.e., mate choice), which we know has a clear evolutionary foundation and can be seen across species.¹¹ We posit that these stories position women to be vicariously active within the evolutionary mating game. Readers potentially identify with the heroine and then savor her choice of a good mate, since the hero is almost always attractive, affluent, athletic, and healthy. It seems doubtful that readers are obtaining direct fitness benefits from the novels. Instead, authors and publishers are profiting from triggering women’s evolved mate selection mechanisms.

ROMANCE IS HOT STUFF

While other genres have seen recent decreases in sales, Harlequin has experienced an increase.¹² Romance publishers have remained protected from the weak economy.¹³ According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), romance fiction generated \$1.39 billion (USD) in sales for 2009, far outperforming other genres (e.g., the closest competitor was religion/inspirational at \$770 million).¹⁴ A total of 9,089 new romance titles were released in 2009, and according to RWA in-house surveys, 74.8 million people read at least one romance novel in 2008. Romance fiction has the largest share of the book market at 13.2 percent (2009). Harlequin is the world’s leading publisher of series romance with sales exceeding six billion books since the company’s origin in 1949.

Evidence that women’s interest in romance novels is rooted in cross-cultural, evolved mate preferences is found in the international sales of these books. Over half of Harlequin’s sales take place outside of the United States and Canada.¹⁵ Harlequin publishes in 115 international markets and sells over 110 titles a month in thirty-two languages.¹⁶ Although the demographics of international readers may differ, a survey of U.S. readers¹⁷ revealed that the majority are women (90.5%) aged thirty-one to forty-nine (44%) who are currently in a romantic relationship.¹⁸ Harlequin readers are more likely to be married (63% vs. 52% of the U.S. general population), college educated (70% vs. 64%), employed (57% vs. 42%), and earn over 60K (USD; 47% vs. 40%).¹⁹

Despite modern socioeconomic conditions in which women can financially support a family and have a reduced reliance on paternal investment, women’s evolved mate choice criteria continue to guide their mate preferences. Even financially independent women with high socioeconomic status tend to prefer that their mates make more money than they do themselves.²⁰ However, while most romance novels have similar heroes, there are variations that permit women to express individual

differences in their mate preferences. For example, in *Assignment Marriage*, the heroine owns and operates a successful business while the hero is a private detective who eventually becomes an assistant deputy sheriff.²¹ Nevertheless, although there is an unusual financial mismatch, the hero is socially responsible, fit, and holds stable employment that permits him to support a mate.

SOCIOCULTURAL VS. EVOLUTIONARY EXPLANATIONS

There have been volumes written with the goal of exploring the appeal of romance fiction.^{22–27} However, they almost exclusively rest on sociocultural explanations that are somewhat disappointing, at least for someone versed in Darwinian literary studies. For example, Ruggiero and Weston suggest that the popularity of this genre is due to the “broad social and economic changes which began to affect women significantly in the 1960s. The Women’s Movement called into question narrow sex-role definitions and increased women’s consciousness.”²⁸ These books allow women to explore their sexuality; since “the sexually explicit scenes fill a need . . . romance novels of the last few years do deal far more explicitly with sex and sexual experiences . . . they deal far more openly with issues and life changes relevant to women (such as divorce and re-marriage).”²⁹

The problem with this explanation is that romance novels are by no means new or solely intended as a response to cultural events such as the Women’s Movement. Books that address women’s mating preferences have been popular for centuries and include classics such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre*. We readily acknowledge that sexuality is sometimes more explicit in modern romance novels, but even so, the hero embodies women’s evolved mate preferences and in the end, declares his love and desires for a monogamous relationship. Likewise, although modern romance novels might deal with contemporary issues, such as divorce, children from prior relationships, or women’s movement into nontraditional professions, these themes remain secondary. Despite these shifts, the central theme of romance novels continues to be obtaining a good mate.

It has been further suggested that romance novels are a sexual outlet for women.³⁰ Wu predicted that because romance fiction is quite sexual, its readers would be more interested in sex than nonreaders. Based on a survey of 436 women, she found that female readers had higher self-reported sex drives, required a greater number of orgasms for sexual satisfaction, had fewer sex partners, and were older when they had their first experience with sexual intercourse. Wu believes the latter two findings fit with the Harlequin theme of a fulfilling sex life in the context of monogamous faithfulness. Thus, although romance novels may be linked with women’s sexuality, the issue of whether they are an outlet akin to pornography remains far from clear.

Alternative sociocultural interpretations exist. Camp claims that romance novels are popular because they are about love: “they teach lessons of nurturing, of aspiring, of following your heart, and of finding success or rewards.”³¹ Brownmiller suggests that women read these books because they have been conditioned by men to do so. Well-known romance scholar Modleski contends that the novels reflect an approved outlet for women to express their resentment, since the heroines often rebel against male authority. Radway proposes the popularity stems from the fact that these stories address psychological needs, reducing fears and anxieties resulting from women’s social and familial position.³² Shore considers romances not “mere fantasy or entertainment but . . . a road map for life.

This compelling romantic ideology channels girls narrowly toward heterosexuality and marriage.”³³ Thus, books such as those by “Harlequin . . . reaffirm traditional values and mores, and extend the hope of conflictless female happiness . . . [and] implicitly reaffirm sex-stereotyped definitions of femininity and masculinity and sets of rules governing female/male relationship styles.”³⁴

We believe that these are potentially valid but incomplete interpretations that remain at the proximate level. For example, Camp’s view that these books deal with social learning is accurate but limited. A stronger explanation is that these novels are potentially teaching a socially acceptable way to express an innate, evolved interest in acquiring and obtaining a desirable mate. The international appeal of romance fiction, as shown by the global sales of Harlequin’s novels, indicates that the popularity spans cultural boundaries. Best-selling author Heather Graham³⁵ argues that Harlequin is successful at marketing romances translated from English because “emotions translate easily.” Love and mate acquisition are cross-cultural phenomena that exist beyond the literary settings in which they are displayed. Thus, Camp’s social learning ideas are incomplete and should be extended to explain the novels’ international appeal. As Nordlund argues, “romantic love is not a social construction in any useful or meaningful sense of the word.”³⁶ Love is a universal emotion, and emotions are evolved motivational mechanisms that influence behavior. Sociocultural explanations of the appeal of romance fiction miss a key point: romance novels pivot on mate acquisition, not mate retention (i.e., “living happily ever after”). The stories are about selecting and obtaining a good mate. In evolutionary terms, this part of the mating process represents the *most* critical decision for women given their high levels of parental investment.

Women, like other mammalian females, have faced different reproductive circumstances than men over evolutionary history.³⁷ While men invest little energy in their gametes and can potentially father many children with very little energy expenditure, women have energetically costly gametes that are comparatively few in number. Once fertilization occurs, women incur substantial energy and time costs (e.g., pregnancy, lactation, weaning, child care).³⁸ Due to this differential in required reproductive effort, a man’s optimal reproductive strategy may be to seek as many sexual partners as possible and invest little in any resultant children, while a woman’s optimal strategy may be to carefully seek a mate and invest heavily in the children. We note that, while men do not have to contribute to the care of children, paternal protection and allocation of resources tends to improve children’s survival.³⁹

Buss and Schmitt propose the existence of sex-specific mating strategies caused by sex differences in parental investment. Consequently, women presumably focus on identifying men who will invest resources, time, and energy in them and their children, as their reproductive investment is higher than men’s and may prevent them from independently obtaining sufficient resources. Women also likely focus on obtaining a long-term mate who will be monogamous, given that they will benefit from men’s exclusive investment during child development. Moreover, women should be careful to select a mate of high genetic quality, thereby ensuring their children will be healthy. In contrast, men should primarily focus on identifying fertile women who possess good parenting skills.

These differences in investment map onto mate preferences. Women consider commitment, ambition,⁴⁰ attractiveness (as synergistically mixed with ambition),⁴¹ and the ability to accrue (or possession of) resources⁴² important when it comes to selecting a potential long-term partner, since

these traits indicate that a man is able and willing to invest in his mate and any resulting children.⁴³ Women prefer men who are well-educated, affluent, intelligent, and high on the social chain, especially when seeking long-term mates.⁴⁴ Significantly, some characteristics that women may consider attractive, such as height, are not just cues of genetic fitness but also appear to serve as resource indicators due to their correlation with social and professional status.⁴⁵

OUR INVESTIGATIONS INTO ROMANCE FICTION

In two previous studies on series romance published by Harlequin, we examined how women's mate preferences are reflected in romance novels. We hypothesized that the popularity of romance novels is largely derived from the fact that they reflect women's evolved mating interests and mate preferences.^{46, 47}

In our first study, we suggested that the strong sales of these books showed that they, and their titles, must have some intrinsic appeal to women.⁴⁸ We observed that their covers contain very little information that readers can use to base their purchasing decisions upon; the covers display the title, the author's name, an image, the month of publication, and identify which series (and sometimes sub-series) the book falls under. Since the titles represent one of the very few pieces of available information, we reasoned that the terms they contain must be part of the appeal. Thus, we analyzed the title of every Harlequin (and Silhouette) novel and found that they expressed themes with strong evolutionary roots. The titles frequently contained adjectives that reference the hero's resources and status (e.g., "billionaire," "prince"), as well as long-term monogamous relationships (e.g., "marriage," "bride") and reproduction (e.g., "babies," "pregnant"). Therefore, the titles appear to reflect women's evolved preference for men with resources who want a long-term, potentially monogamous relationship that includes commitment to investing in children.

In our second study, we performed a brief content analysis to document changes in the hero as perceived by the heroine over the course of the novels.⁴⁹ We found that the hero often shifts from displaying the characteristics of "cad" to those of a "dad." Cads, at one end of the male mating spectrum, are men who maximize their reproductive success by having many short-term relationships without parental investment, while dads, at the other end of the spectrum, are men who maximize their reproductive success by engaging in a monogamous, long-term relationship with heavy parental investment.⁵⁰

The categorization of literary heroes as cads and dads has been previously examined using British romantic literature from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵¹ Using hypothetical scenarios, it was found that women preferred proper heroes (the "dad" strategist) for long-term relationships, but preferred the dark hero (the "cad" strategist) for shorter relationships. This is sensible given that cads might be high in genetic quality but low in characteristics indicating long-term relationship stability, while dads may be good parents and stable providers who loyally invest their time, energy, and resources.

We suggest that in the fantasy world of romance literature, where men shift from cad to dad, women can vicariously mate with someone who is daring, attractive, and adventurous, and then settle down with a loyal man who will be a good father, without needing to change partners and

thereby benefiting from the advantages that each male strategist has to offer. Others have noted these characteristics as well; for example, Ruggiero and Weston in their study of modern gothic romance and historical romance document that the hero is intriguing, with a mysterious past; he is strong, ruggedly handsome, “worldly, sophisticated, sensual, dominant and often non-communicative.”⁵² In the words of Harlequin art director Alana Ruoso, “the hero has that coveted rugged, man-you-can-depend-on look,” encapsulating the dad-cad duality of the hero.⁵³ Romance novels allow women to explore mating alternatives vicariously, knowing that there will be a happy ending in which the hero will be emotionally and sexually faithful and want a long-term relationship.

Although our two previous studies on Harlequins were highly informative, we did not examine the larger, sociocultural context that an artifact of human nature is going to reflect. Therefore, we extended our prior work by performing an examination of the covers of the flagship and longest running Harlequin Romance imprint to see how romance fiction has changed—and not changed—over time. As McKnight-Trontz notes, “The success of the paperback romance phenomenon was propelled in no small measure by the exuberant covers that graced these books.”⁵⁴

The covers of Harlequin romance novels tend to be highly similar and match a design template for each series. According to one scholar, “In the mid-1950s, Harlequin began placing the titles of its books in bands of color with artwork below. This design helped distinguish the publisher from an increasing number of competitors.”⁵⁵ While the templates change over time, we note that within a specific era, books visually differ primarily in their cover image. These images were initially hand-drawn, probably because photographs would have required more expensive printing techniques. The characters look innocent and non-sexualized, yet the women are young, demure, and beautiful. While their attire is always tasteful, women are frequently shown in nurse’s uniforms, presumably a consequence of Harlequin republishing, by agreement, a significant number of Mills and Boon medical romances. A small number of covers showed a lone woman, but we did not find one that contained a lone man.

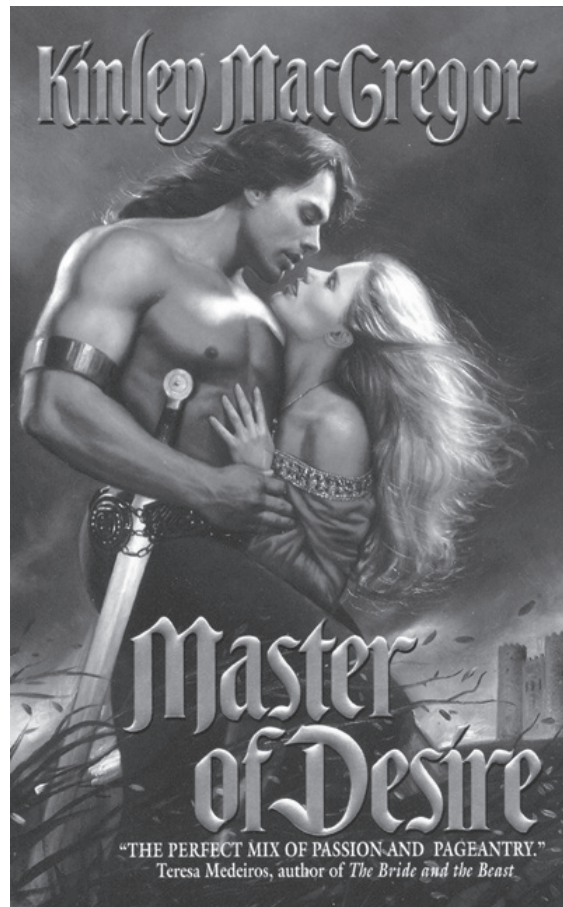
The 1960s ushered in a new, more homogeneous look. The fonts were clearer and less cursive, and the images tended to continue along previous lines with the characters not touching, certainly not kissing, and dressed in a manner that reflected professionalism (e.g., suits or uniforms). Some showed more than the couple, and displayed either a scene or some form of collage, and occasionally the characters are staring outward at the reader. Regardless, covers usually presented a couple that one can assume is romantically involved. Clothing was indicative of middle- to upper-class status, and all characters remained fit, attractive, and youthful. The men tended to appear older than the women, but not by a substantial amount.

In the mid-1970s, there was a subtle shift in that the characters began to look at each other more often. The collage or art imagery remained, and some covers still showed single women. In the late 1970s, covers began to show the characters about to kiss, but this was still a rarity, and most of the time the characters were not touching. Romance was clearly evident, but it was chaste, tasteful, and tended to be more implicit than explicit. Prior to the 1980s, for example, bare-chested men were rare.⁵⁶

By 1980, the characters had started to touch, and sometimes to kiss or embrace. The images, still hand-drawn, were less of a collage and more of a scene (e.g., showing a coherent landscape, rather

than composed of cut-and-pasted elements). Fewer covers showed lone women and more of them only showed the couple. Locations were increasingly more prominent, primarily cityscapes or night scenes. Eye contact between the couple was obvious, and even more so by the mid-1980s. By the end of the decade the couple was shown looking at each other, often smiling and in an embrace. Physical contact, which in the past had been minimal, was now the norm and clearly intimate in nature. The 1990s were similar to the 1980s. Although there were no major changes, some covers had a woman with a baby only, and no man.

In the new century, covers have become very realistic and of photographic quality, most likely due to technological advances in color printing. The couples are often kissing, embracing, and in some cases, engaging in more erotic behaviors. McKnight-Trontz noticed the same trend in that only gazing, embracing, and *almost* kissing were acceptable in early covers.⁵⁷



Eyes locked and signaling all the right traits. A cover from a 2001 romance novel. Used with permission from Harper Collins.

In more recent covers, the couples seem to be more involved with each other: hands are held, and they are leaning into each other with their eyes making solid contact. The setting is still staged but less often a collage—for example, one cover shows a couple leaning into each other on a beach with a lighthouse in the background.⁵⁸ Full bodies are more often shown than previously, a trend that seems to have started in the 1980s and increased to include the feet. McKnight-Trontz also notes that in the 1980s, the male model became more prominent on covers, which caused model Fabio to become a global celebrity, thanks to “his bulging pectorals, flowing blond hair, and bedroom eyes . . . finally the man was the sex object. And, given the subject matter, is it any surprise that women, too, preferred beauty over brains?”⁵⁹

In sum, romance covers have evolved from simplistic drawings that focused on the face of the heroine, to realistic depictions of a couple engaged in an intimate act. As time progressed, so did the realism and explicit relationship between the characters. Initially, the couple was hard to identify because there were other people on the cover, but over the decades, they typically became the only people displayed. In earlier covers, the woman and man often look in opposite directions, while in more recent years, they only have eyes for each other. Settings have changed from hospital scenes, with many of the women dressed as nurses and the men with stethoscopes, to office or boardroom scenes, with men in business suits. Also, “western” themes with cowboys and ranchers are now very commonplace.⁶⁰

EVOLUTION IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT

Harlequin cover images satisfy the cultural values of the era while displaying prominent evolutionary concerns. The women are all young and fairly attractive, but not overly so, which might allow readers to more readily identify with the heroine (which is also apparent in the lack of physical detail provided in the stories⁶¹). The men are often dark-haired with dark features, and although there are some with blond hair and lighter looks, we have yet to see a hero shown with red hair.⁶² The hero is displayed in a manner that indicates he has achieved financial or professional success, which is in keeping with the view that women prefer mates with resources, or the propensity to amass resources.⁶³ Generally, the women show more physical variance than the men, with a large proportion having light-colored hair, but are always smaller and shorter. Good physical health is displayed: no character is obese, wears glasses, or uses a cane. Exceptions exist, however, such as the use of elderly people as grandparents in the *Family Ties* subseries.

As McKnight-Trontz states, “Invariably, the covers relate something of the period in which they were drawn, particularly in regard to women’s roles in society. . . . For example, by the 1970s, the way women thought about themselves in their workplace had begun to fundamentally change, and this was reflected in the romance novel.”⁶⁴ However, the overall theme that emerges from cover analysis is that, despite social change over the past decades, including the Women’s Movement, the sexual revolution, the higher proportion of women graduating from college, and the increased availability of contraceptives, the mate preferences of today’s women are not fundamentally different from those of their mothers and grandmothers. The cover images clearly reflect changes in attitudes about displays of affection, female sexuality, and women’s place in society, but they also reflect an

unchanged mating psychology through their portrayal of attractive males as young, healthy, affluent professionals with good genes and the ability to invest in a potential mate and children.

Within the recently created Kimani Press imprint, written by African American women and marketed to African American readers, we found an example of a cover containing only a male. In a recent interview, Harlequin art director Ruoso stated that “just a man alone on the front covers . . . really seem(s) to be striking a chord with our readers.”⁶⁵ However, Ruoso continues, though Harlequin has experimented with, “landscape, still-life, and less traditional romantic poses,” they find that “series readers prefer the more obvious cues of couples and their families.” She further notes that “couples are kept close together to emphasize the romance.”

Prior to the 1980s, romance covers contained few depictions of children, let alone an image of a pregnant heroine. Increasingly, however, motherhood—once the implied purpose of a successful romance—is becoming more explicit, perhaps partly in response to the increased number of single mothers in American society. Today, a novel may focus on a pregnant woman’s search for a provider for her unborn child. This plot, too, reflects women’s evolved preferences for a mate with good genes and with the ability and willingness to invest. These traits do not necessarily come in the same package, and the currently more permissive social environment may make women more open to acquiring their respective benefits by exploiting the advantages of short-term and serial mating opportunities. As Pamela Jaffee, director of publicity for Avon and William Morrow Books observes, young readers (twenty to thirty years of age), “don’t need Mr. Right. They need Mr. Right-Now.”⁶⁶ “Mr. Right-Now” might be a short-term mate with good looks (i.e., good genes), while “Mr. Right” might be a subsequent mate with status, financial security, kindness, and interest in children (i.e., ability and willingness to invest).⁶⁷

Our cover analysis shows agreement with research on evolved female mate preferences. However, these preferences are displayed in a manner that satisfies the sociocultural norms of the period. When society was more sexually conservative and the occupational roles of women more limited, we saw women behaving in a chaste manner and in traditional roles such as nursing. Today we see the heroine depicted as a corporate executive and the boss of the hero she desires.⁶⁸ Changes in sexual permissiveness are also echoed in Harlequin covers. Where once the heroine glanced furtively out of the corner of her eye at the hero, she now is shown in his arms in a passionate kiss.⁶⁹

WHERE NEXT?

To understand evolved human psychology, one could alternatively examine fiction marketed to men. For example, reporter Lynn Crosbie discusses “fratire” as “a genre of non-fiction marketed to young men . . . [that] began in the early 2000s as a response to ‘chick lit’ and ‘chick flicks,’ and for a while, the new, jejune machismo was a nice alternative to stories about female morons and their purses and shoes.”⁷⁰ While sales are not yet at romance novel levels, this new genre, focused on men’s interests in drinking, acquiring women, and rebellion, may be worthy of further investigation to better understand men’s evolved psychology. Fratire diverges from previous attempts to write novels of interest to men. Harlequin uses the Gold Eagle imprint to market action and adventure books to a male audience, and authors such as Don Pendleton have successfully published male-oriented

series since 1969. Although these series have shown success and longevity, they have not achieved the popularity of the romance genre. Perhaps stories on acquiring women are more evolutionarily salient and will gain men's attention better than do stories of war or crime fighting.

We could also turn to those telling the stories. Dunbar argues that evolutionary approaches to literature can take two directions; they can examine the function of storytelling or examine the production of storytelling. He proposes that extraordinary authors have an intuitive understanding of the ultimate factors that underlie human behavior. Jane Austen is a prototypical example of an intuitive evolutionary scholar, which is possibly why her books are so successful and enduring.⁷¹

In this article, we have taken a very limited view of romance fiction and have not discussed the currently popular paranormal romances, historical romance, or other instances where romance occurs in noncontemporary settings or is marketed to specialized audiences such as Latin American women. While romance is easiest to study in its pure form, as the sole focus of a book, avid readers know that romance is a key part of many great works of fiction, as novels such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Madame Bovary* attest. Mating is an integral component of human existence and thus romance, which can be considered an idealized view of mate acquisition, has a deep hold upon women of all ages, cultures, and racial backgrounds. Although we have focused on only one facet of mate selection and only one component of the appeal of this genre, it is our hope that future scholars will continue where we have left off and further explore the reasons behind the popularity of romance fiction.

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70. Newspaper article by Crosbie, from the *Globe and Mail*, Arts and Sports section, p. R1, Tuesday, April 5, 2011.
71. Stasio and Duncan, “An Evolutionary Approach to Jane Austen.”

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