

Desperately Seeking Susan Among the Trash: Reinscription, Subversion and Visibility in the Lesbian Romance Novel

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins to examine the practice of reading the lesbian romance novel through surveys and interviews of selected readers, booksellers and publishers. Findings suggest that while the notion of escape similarly motivates both straight and lesbian romance readers, the psychological effects upon those readers differ significantly. Ultimately, this paper acknowledges that producers and consumers look to lesbian romances to counter the often invisible status of gay life in today's world.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet exposé aborde l'étude de la pratique de la lecture du roman à l'eau de rose lesbien par l'entremise de lectrices, de libraires et de publieurs choisis. Les résultats suggèrent que tandis que la notion de l'évasion motive de la même façon les lectrices hétérosexuelles et lesbiennes, les effets psychologiques qu'ils ont sur les lectrices diffèrent grandement. Finalement, cet exposé reconnaît que les producteurs et les consommateurs comptent sur le roman lesbien pour contrecarrer la réalité de la vie homosexuelle dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, c'est à dire le fait d'être souvent invisible.

Queer studies is currently one of the few academic forums where the personal, specifically the confessional, is an accepted mode of theorizing and inquiry. I'm therefore going to indulge myself by starting with a confession. *I read lesbian romance novels.* I read them before I started this project, and reading more for my research was far from a chore, especially when I wanted to avoid, well, just about anything else. However, I must say I've "come out" as a reader of lesbian romances only under that somewhat dubious rubric of "doing research." Why such guilt? If you ask, you probably haven't read them. Because with bad writing, undeveloped characters, and predictable plots, "light reading" is diplomatic. But you know, I found out, after plying a number of other intellectually highbrow lesbians with not-so highbrow bottles of beer, that many of us have a book from the Naiad Press nestled between our bedside copies of Butler and Zizek, though we say we have no time for the latest John Grisham. Which is interesting, I think - when we want light reading, why read lesbian romance novels instead of escaping into *New York Times* bestsellers, like the

rest of America? For relaxing and pleasurable books featuring lesbian characters, why don't we stick with the provocatively postmodern Jeanette Winterson, the academic yet readable Emma Donoghue, and the NPR-affiliated and Norton-published Doris Grumbach? For sexier slices of lesbian life, why do we read beyond the likes of Pat Califia, Ann Rice, and Anais Nin? If we're looking for sisters, and I think many of us who do queer studies are, why are we desperately seeking Susan among the trash,¹ with so many more literary lesbians waiting to be outed and reclaimed? Well, as any academic who believes the personal is political would do, I thought I could write about it.

This paper takes as its starting point the material histories and textual and ethnographic studies which provide useful paradigms that analyze the (heterosexual) romance novel as genre, and that genre's material and psychoanalytic effects upon its consumers. One focus of my discussion is to address the modifications necessary to similarly understand the lesbian romance genre and reading community, and to suggest that additional and more complex models may be needed to discuss this

increasingly popular literary form. Thus my argument begins to interrogate the potential conflict between lesbian representation and/or representation of lesbians vs. the romance form as a genre, which, in and of itself, presents at least two potential impasses for the study of lesbian popular culture. First, the contemporary romance genre is, at best, relegated to the margins of literary study, and proposing to examine romance novels written for lesbians renders it doubly marginalized. Second, the romance form as genre presumes a patriarchal ideology, where heterosexual coupling is the telos and defining logic of women's experience. It is not my intent to define what a lesbian romance should or should not be or do. Nor is it my intent to define what a "real" lesbian is, how she should be represented in a novel or how lesbians should read such representations. I am more interested in following those theorists who, in refusing to accept a label formulated within a sex/gender system which is always already heterosexist, find it useful to talk about lesbianism as a *practice* rather than an identity (Wittig 108). I would like to situate the writing and reading of lesbian romance novels as such a practice, one which can be analyzed in a useful and resistant way when interpreted through Judith Butler's theories of performativity as applied to bodies and texts (1993 2), and her exploration of Foucault's argument that the category of sex is a regulatory ideal: "the essence or identity that [performative acts] otherwise purport to express are...an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (1990, 136). In other words, this paper will focus more on the *act* of reading the (lesbian) romance than the novels themselves; and is particularly concerned with how this seemingly "alternative" practice may not merely resist, but in some senses, reinscribe heteronormativity. Therefore, my study is motivated not only by issues of canonicity and a curiosity about why some people choose to read lesbian romances, but is also motivated by a concern that when we write and read fiction by and for the gay community, it is possible that we may inadvertently reinforce some of the ideologies that ghettoize that very community and its art.

What I hope to achieve, through a pilot survey

of selected readers of lesbian romances, and a cursory gloss of a few texts, is to begin to tease out some of the slippages between three interrelated sites which perform lesbianism in sometimes contradictory ways. These sites are first, the publishers and stores which produce and market literature by and for the gay community; second, a particular performance of lesbianism that resides within the pages of the romance novel; and third, the act of reading as performed by what Stanley Fish would call a specific interpretive community (14), in this case, educated professional women. My choice of this small community needs some justification, however. This select group of readers does not reflect all consumers of lesbian romance novels, whose reasons for finding reading meaningful may intersect in complicated ways with race, level of education and class. I also don't think there's anything suspicious about the pleasurable consumption of popular culture by readers who, as intellectuals, possess reading abilities and tastes which place them among the "elite" (with all that term may connote), even if they are marginalized because of their gender or sexual orientation. But for the purpose of beginning a study which I hope deserves expansion at a later date, I felt I needed as narrow a population as possible, and I decided to begin "at home" if you will, with readers like me.

My survey examines the reading habits and opinions of a community of educated, professional women who read lesbian romance novels on a regular basis despite feelings that these books are not as well-written as the others they consume for business and/or pleasure. In order to obtain a survey population that fits my criteria for educational level and occupation, I posted to an email discussion list geared specifically toward lesbian and bisexual women who were academics or professionals in an academic-related field. The thirty women surveyed ranged from 22 to 55, but most were in their 30s. All but one identified as lesbian. They were mostly graduate students, professors, or were otherwise employed by a university or hospital. Except for the students, household incomes ranged from \$30,000 to over \$50,000 per year. Currently, they average between one and five lesbian romance novels plus an average of ten additional books per month, which they read both for work and pleasure. The

other books read were nonfiction, literature, mystery and science fiction; and many of these were also related to gay/lesbian issues.

Without exception, all the participants said that lesbian romances were not as well-written as other books they read. They wished there were better novels available and several conjectured that poor books got published because lesbian publishing houses had relatively few authors to contract² and that heterosexual romance readers had better choices because of a bigger, more competitive market. Yet none of the readers surveyed read heterosexual, Harlequin-style romances, which they had dismissed as "boring and uninteresting" after reading a few as teenagers. Since the respondents unanimously felt that the lesbian romances they read were of questionable literary quality, and all but two reported that they "were predictable and they didn't like that" it seems that what keeps a book like a lesbian romance novel from being as "boring and uninteresting" as the traditional romance genre, even for an academic, isn't how it's written but rather, something else. That "something else" is, as I will demonstrate from my survey findings, what continues to fuel the practice of reading the lesbian romance.

The books I asked about were those published by Naiad Press, a lesbian owned and operated company founded in 1973 by Barbara Grier. I had an hour long telephone interview with this energetic and fascinating woman, who proudly describes her press as a large small publisher - bigger than all the other women's publishers put together. Now the company is earning 1.9 million dollars, and publishing 31 lesbian romance, mystery and science fiction novels, annually. When I asked what has changed for Naiad over the years, Barbara replied that there were fewer bright readers, and that people were evolving away from reading toward TV and cinema. As an example, she pointed out that the 1986 film version of *Desert Hearts* and the subsequent release of *Claire of the Moon* encouraged mainstream booksellers to reprint these lesbian novels; and in order to compete in a widening market, Naiad now distributes lesbian videos in addition to books. This she stated with some chagrin, as she clearly seems to privilege reading over TV and movies.

Despite Barbara's dismay with declining trends in American literacy, she is obviously dedicated to producing novels for a spectrum of consumers. She explained that Naiad's aggressive demographic research identifies readers from age 18 to 80. Almost all are lesbian, at least three quarters are in relationships, and few have children. In the 1970s, most readers were white, and ranged from lower to upper middle class; but in the past decade Naiad has seen an influx of black, Hispanic, and working class readers. Barbara seemed passionate about providing books for lesbians with all levels of education; she firmly asserted, "Everyone lesbian should have something to read, even if she reads like a thirteen year old." Barbara groups her books into three categories: the most literary features authors Isabel Miller (*Patience and Sarah*) and Jane Rule (*Desert of the Heart*); the middle claims authors like Katherine Forrest (*Curious Wine*), and the all-time best-selling Karin Kallmaker. Of authors in the easiest-to-read category, Barbara wouldn't name names; but she did say the books "were so light that if you tore off the covers they'd float away." She claims all her books are less formulaic than straight romances³ but obviously even those in the Miller and Rule category are still too predictable for the taste of the readers I surveyed.

For a bookseller's "take" on the consumers of lesbian romance novels, I went to Lammas bookstore in Washington DC, which holds Naiad Press's sixth largest account. "American Jane," a long-time co-manager (the other is "British Jane"), was quick to say that just about all the bookstore's customers buy romances at one time or another. At eleven or twelve dollars apiece, the Naiad books are pricey - more expensive than Harlequins. Yet, despite the questionable strength of the lesbian dollar, Lammas has a standing order of twenty copies per shipment for each of the 31 books Naiad publishes per year in comparison to a standing order of five copies for most other titles except those by Jeanette Winterson and Rita Mae Brown, which sell in greater amounts. It is important to note that reader consumption is probably much higher than the sales figures indicate, as over half my respondents reported that they rarely bought books but borrowed from a friend or library. I

chose the DC Lammas to compliment my survey of educated professional readers because, according to Jane, most of the customers were middle and upper middle class, professional women who were likely to top off an armful of books on feminist theory or similarly "heavy" subjects with a romance or two. "Everyone loves romances don't they?" she asked in all seriousness, "especially lesbians." In fact, Jane, herself a mystery rather than romance buff, showed a curious reluctance to admit that any lesbian would find a lesbian romance novel unworthy of reading, regardless of its questionable quality. "Personally," she said, "when I want to read something romantic and sexy, I'll pick Karin Kallmaker over Jeanette Winterson any day."

I am struck by Jane and Barbara's self-contradictory responses about "good" vs. "bad" books, and Barbara's mixed feelings about reading vs. video. For example, Barbara freely admits that she doesn't read all the books she publishes and stated that her business is not to help her consumers be better readers, but to "enrich and change and help the life of all readers at all levels of comprehension." Then she followed up with a wistful "perhaps we can nudge them to read a little beyond their level." Similarly, she stressed the positive aspects of gay/lesbian representation on TV while expressing personal attraction and contempt for the medium in the same breath. This ambivalence, I think, mirrors much of our own in the field of cultural studies, caught as we often are between popular culture, the canon and high theory. It also reflects the concerns of the readers I surveyed. To begin to make sense of these conflicting responses to discussions about the quality of lesbian romances, I would now like to review theories about what reading the romance novel "does" for its consumers, and to compare some of the patterns in the way women, both straight and gay, choose the romances they read.

According to previous studies, such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance*, straight female readers identify with the trials and successes of romance novel heroines, and thereby enter a fantasy space comprised of beautiful, wealthy stock characters and repetitive "success-story" plots where they can vent displaced aggression against

the oppressive aspects of their lives. Thus, these studies seem to suggest, to my eye at least, that romance novels reinscribe dominant ideology while providing temporary escape. The straight female reader derives pleasure from the act of reading the romance: the genre renders undesirable aspects of patriarchy invisible yet the happy ending provides predictable reassurance that heterosexual privilege will be maintained when she steps out of the bubble bath.

Studies of both straight and lesbian romances reveal the readers' awareness that the literary worth of their reading material is potentially questionable; however, only the women in Radway's study developed complicated narratives to defend their choices. Radway's (straight) readers carefully discriminated between authors, and chose only books they felt were well-written. Historical and travel novels were especially perceived as well-researched, educational and valuable (107). Books were rejected if a too racy cover insinuated anything resembling pornography (104); books were also rejected for explicit descriptions of sex, especially if the relationship between hero and heroine was not characterized by monogamy and true love (105). In contrast, American Jane from Lammas stated that although some authors, such as Karin Kallmaker and Katherine Forrest, sold more than others, most lesbian readers don't have an author in mind when they come in to buy. This remark is somewhat complicated by Barbara Grier's assertion that readers tend to consistently choose books from one of 3 literary levels. It is also complicated by my survey, where 50% of the readers claimed they read only authors they were familiar with or had been recommended. The other half of my respondents marked "if it's about a gay character it's good enough for me." Overall, it seems the lesbian romance readers don't discriminate much between authors - or at least, less so than straight romance novel readers. In fact, when asked to list their favorite three authors and three favorite titles, many lesbians replied that they couldn't remember or that they all ran together, a statement I feel is particularly ironic coming from those readers who, as academics, generally can rattle off publication names and dates with ease.

Reasons for choosing a particular book,

according to Radway, play a very important part in establishing romance novel reading as an activity that the reader can justify (112). As mentioned previously, the notion of escape figures heavily in Radway's findings, as it does in my own. When asked to rank the top three of nine reasons why they read lesbian romance novels, my survey participants invariably included one or both of the following two choices: "to escape my daily problems," and "for simple relaxation." However, my survey answers, unlike Radway's, did not contribute to an elaborate narrative which indicated that their spare time activities were under intense literal or psychological censure: my lesbian respondents did not attempt to rationalize their pleasure reading by asserting that the romances were historical, educational, well-written or relatively chaste. Since Radway contends that her readers read to escape the pressures of a traditional lifestyle dominated by the patriarchal institutions of marriage and domesticity, and to gain a level of nurturance through identification with a heroine who is eventually tenderly appreciated by the hero in a way that compensates for the caregiving readers give their husbands and families, but may not be returned (113), I can only conclude that Radway's readers feel a level of guilt about their reading that the lesbian readers do not. In contrast to straight readers, who, according to Radway, often hide their reading from their husbands, my survey indicates that often readers share books or talk about them with their partners. In fact, another common response, in direct contrast to Radway's findings, was that many lesbians read romances for sexual fantasy. Furthermore, in contrast to Radway's respondents, who claimed that they preferred love scenes without explicit sexual detail, my respondents reported that they wanted more love scenes with explicit sexual detail, including more detail about sex toys and S/M.⁴

From my respondents' replies, there appears an easily recognizable narrative that the act of reading lesbian romances enacts a performance of affirmation. Indeed, the Naiad catalogue itself claims their books say to the reader: "Yes you are a lesbian and you are wonderful." Barbara states that because her readers need and deserve to see depictions of themselves as real people, Naiad

books must feature heroines who perceive their lesbianism as a central part of a well-crafted identity. Although the readers surveyed often complained that the characters were not, in fact, well developed or fleshed out, they readily indicated that reading romance novels strengthened a positive sense of gay identity. After the top choice of reading for relaxation, the most popular reason given for choosing lesbian romances was "because reading about lesbians makes me feel good about myself." Although only a few indicated that "books are one of the few contacts I have with gay/lesbian things" and the majority considered themselves to be "very out" - only half the respondents were able to report that their work/home environment was "pretty accepting" as opposed to "kind of" or "very" homophobic. It seems that reading for escape and reading as affirmation might often be related for lesbians who read in order to escape from an environment that makes them feel negatively about their sexual identity.

On a similar note, I noticed that a fair number of lesbian romance novels include emotionally rewarding interaction with parents, especially mothers. This rarely happens in Harlequin-style romances, where often, heroines are orphaned; although Radway has made note of some novels which are concerned with a heroine's search for mother and/or origins (151). It may be that in terms of fantasy fulfillment, the lesbian romance reader is just as eager to hear about successful relationships with parents as she is to read about hot lesbian sex or everlasting love. Many lesbian romances, especially those by Karin Kallmaker, feature extremely positive coming out discussions with mothers. When mothers are not mentioned, often novels contain mother figures as important secondary characters. Therefore, following Radway, I would like to make the preliminary suggestion that whereas straight readers of romance novels often seek nurturing not given by their husbands; with lesbian romances, the reader can identify with the heroine in order to escape from feeling rejected by or distanced from her parents.

Throughout my interview, Barbara asserted that her basic premise was that all female readers, straight and gay, need escape, and they do that in one of two ways: mystery novels or wild romances

of what she calls the "moon-June-spoon-swoon" variety. However, a lesbian publisher's elision of lesbians with all women concerns me because the benefits of comparing lesbianism with heterosexuality to assert its normalcy always must be weighed against the danger of a rhetorical move which erases significant differences between all women. Barbara's guiding philosophy only permits depictions of lesbians within the framework of a "normal" femininity which has been constructed and regulated in ways that are often detrimental to women. Lesbian romances may provide role models that affirm lesbian life, but how valuable is that affirmation if it hinges largely upon reproducing a genre steeped in heterosexist ideology? If Barbara's "moon-June-spoon-swoon" theory is accurate, and the success of her business suggests that it is, perhaps romance novels, straight and gay, work *too* well to anesthetize us to the insistent problems of patriarchy that clearly do not go away with what Tania Modleski calls the reader's "disappearing act" (36). A related concern is the novels' representations of romantic and erotic relationships which, in mirroring the successes of heterosexual pairings, also may replicate some of the limitations and negative power dynamics found in traditional arrangements for intimacy.

Against the existing theories about how romances provide a psychological space for displaced aggression and compensatory nurturance, I would like to briefly address two sets of questions which problematize the lesbian romance novel's position within heterosexism. First: when lesbian romances depict heroines with histories of addiction or sexual abuse, blue collar settings, dysfunctional relationships and unhappy endings, do these untraditional yet realistic characters and plots subversively provide the lesbian consumer, in contrast to "straight" romance reader, a more tenable representation of female happiness despite life's imperfections; or do they perpetuate the literary and historical convention of the pathologized lesbian⁵ and thereby reinscribe the patriarchal, heterosexist culture they presume to escape? Responses geared toward these issues were split. None indicated that less than positive representations recalled the pathological stereotypes from lesbian history, although a few readers

objected, "I don't like reading about bad things, I read to escape things like that." Jane from Lammas felt that her readers liked rich, professional heroines, and didn't want a lot of depressing events in their novels. Barbara Grier says romances can be role models when heroines combat real life problems like injury, addictions and unemployment; although she did comment that the quickest way to insure a novel's failure was to mention cancer. The majority of my respondents said of grit and realism, "I like to read about real life even when it's not perfect," and, "I like novels that show that even people with problems can have romantic happiness." Although the answers varied, overall, readers of lesbian romances expect and seem to want more representations of all walks of life, and more treatment of serious issues than is found in the traditional romance genre.

My second question: when lesbian novels blatantly appropriate standard romance plots, do they subversively posit a utopic lesbian space where same-sex desire and relationships unproblematically assert a legitimacy not currently enjoyed in our society, or do they blindly propose a liberal humanist rewriting of romantic love which replicates the oppressive institutions and dynamics associated with heterosexual partnerships? My respondents again were ambivalent about questions targeting these issues. Two-thirds gestured toward a utopic vision for people of all sexualities based on a politics of sameness modeled on existing norms. These indicated they had no problem with a fairy tale plot and ending, saying either "they could or hoped to identify with it" or "in romance novels, gay life shouldn't be any harder than straight life." However, the remaining third of the respondents reported that they didn't like traditional endings because "lesbian romances shouldn't have to mirror heterosexual relationships." Although most respondents wanted happy endings, many were interested in how that might play out in new ways, and would like to see more depictions of consensually nonmonogamous or otherwise nontraditional relationships. This group of readers, therefore, while they had traditional expectations in some ways, clearly saw the limitations of heterosexual dynamics as a sole model for romantic happiness.

Further studies need to address actual plots and characters in more detail, since here I have chosen to merely gloss trends in novels, and to spend more time outlining the survey and interview data that would allow me to address the practices of reading romance novels, rather than the content of the romance novels themselves. My results, in their sometimes frustrating ambivalence, indicate, I believe, that the practice of reading the lesbian romance does reflect the regulatory nature of the existing sex/gender system, but also allows for resistance to that system in ways that remain to be explored. In other words, the expectations and desires of lesbian consumers, as reflected by authors, publishers and sellers, and the consumers themselves, significantly resist, yet are simultaneously contained by, a genre which is always already steeped in heteronormative ideologies. The conflicting readings intersect in the realization that while heterosexual romance provides a social sanction for "normal" female sexuality, lesbian romance insistently celebrates a female sexuality which is doubly dangerous since its object of desire resides outside of patriarchal boundaries.

Ultimately, my textual and ethnographic evidence suggests that at present, the lesbian romance genre is created by and for readers who, first and foremost, seek reassurance that "we are

everywhere." There is consensus that the lesbian romance genre makes the invisible visible; it reinforces the existence of romantic and erotic possibilities between women even while it may reflect ambivalence about the success and acceptance of those relationships within the present cultural milieu. This conclusion, I'm afraid, is not terribly earth shattering. However, I do think it's unfortunate that we're so desperately seeking our sisters that, in a world where there never seems to be enough time, we read novels we otherwise wouldn't glance at, and which, to varying extents and for various reasons, leave us feeling vaguely dissatisfied. So where do we go from here? Ultimately, in the interest of moving theory and practice closer together, I think it might be interesting to engage lesbian authors, publishers, and booksellers in a discussion about the kinds of questions about reinscribing ideology that I have posed above. Perhaps such a project might make visible a version of romance which allows lesbians not only to escape, but to really resist the things which prevent them from affirming positive beliefs about themselves and their relationships.

ENDNOTES

1. My use of the word "trash" comes as much from my survey respondents' opinions that the books are sub-literary as my own. This is not to say that the books are not enjoyable, that it's "bad" to read them, or that the act of reading "trash" makes the reader "trashy." The term merely implies a general consensus that these books are akin to "B" movies or bad TV: they are widely consumed and artistically mediocre.
2. I think it is significant that so many of my respondents suggested this explanation. Conversations with Naiad's owner and various authors and would-be authors of lesbian romance novels indicated that there actually is considerable competition among writers, although I am presently unable to judge how that compares to competition among heterosexual romance novelists.
3. Whereas this paper reflects my preliminary opinion, and that of my survey respondents, that lesbian romance plots and characters generally are as formulaic as those in Harlequin-style romances; future text-based, rather than practice-oriented, studies need to provide closer readings of lesbian vs. straight romance novels. (Both Radway and Modleski provide excellent synopses of the Harlequin-style plotline). Nonetheless, I don't think it particularly problematic that my/my respondents' opinions about formula are contradicted by Barbara's claims: few businesspeople, especially those as shrewd as Barbara seemed, badmouth their own products.
4. I do not mean to imply that straight readers do not read romances for sexual fantasy. The point, rather, is a notable difference between the reasons for reading that the two groups of respondents were willing to give.
5. Often-discussed literary examples of the "pathologized lesbian" begin with the 19th-century association of lesbianism with

decadence and damnation, such as LeFanu's *Carmilla*, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mals*, Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*. Later representations of unhappy "inverts" and suffering, cursed and/or suicidal lesbians range from Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, to the continued elision of lesbianism with vampirism in cinema, to the character Martha in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*; all these and many subsequent lesbian "heroines," especially those in the popular 1950s lesbian pulp fiction, eventually lose their female lovers to men and/or meet untimely deaths. Cf. Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*, especially the chapter on "Lesbian Evil," Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Susan Gubar's "Sapphistries," and Andrea Weiss's *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, among others.

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