Reading Romances by Their Covers: The Legacy of the Bodice Ripper From Explicit Clinches to Modest Cartoons

LORE GOOSSENS

Lore Goossens is a PhD student at the University of Antwerp and the University of Ghent. Her PhD project *Bodyminds Made Strange in Young Adult Fairy-Tale Retellings* (2024-2028), BOF project 55546, explores how fairy-tale retellings for young adults represent bodies and minds, with a focus on disability and age. Besides young adult literature, she is fascinated by popular genres like romance or fantasy.

Abstract

A scantily clad couple, ripped shirts, flowing hair, and almost ecstatic expressions: especially in the 1980s, romance novels were infamous for their explicit front cover iconography, causing readers to hide away their books in public. These clinch covers strongly impacted the reputation of the romance, inspiring the pejorative nickname of the romance, *bodice ripper*. Today, romance is experiencing a renaissance, with a completely different look: cartoon covers, with their bright colours and graphic figurines in modest poses, adorn most of the popular romances. This paper investigates these two paratextual trends through three key examples: Christine Monson's *Stormfire* (1984) as a classic clinch, *Bringing Down the Duke* as a contemporary cartoon (2019), and finally Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I* (2000) as a romance that straddles both trends and shows how they intertwine. Both trends depart from different marketing strategies: clinches focus on explicit erotica especially in the illustrations, whereas cartoons are modest and romantic. Still, they aim to communicate the same information: to non-romance readers, they mark their genre, but experienced romance readers can distil information about subgenre, gender roles, and even level of sensuality from the cover. Strikingly, despite the contrast in explicitness on the outside, the inside explicitness is the same (especially in the case of *Stormfire* and *Bringing Down the Duke*). *The Duke and I*, then, shows that the legacy of the bodice ripper need not disappear on modern covers, but can be successfully combined with modern expectations of more modest covers.

Keywords: historical romance, paratext, book cover, clinch, bodice ripper, Bridgerton, gender studies, semiotic analysis

URL: https://platform.openjournals.nl/CLWap (openjournals.nl)
Uitgever/Publisher: Vlaamse Vereniging voor Algemene en Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap (VAL)
Copyright: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (CC BY 4.0).

Reading Romances by Their Covers: The Legacy of the Bodice Ripper From Explicit Clinches to Modest Cartoons

LORE GOOSSENS

Introduction

When you walk into a bookstore, romance novels immediately jump out with their bright, bubble-gum colours and striking cartoon covers.[1] In the 1980s, romances were also eye-catching, although the look of the covers was drastically different: the 1980s were dominated by the *clinch* cover, which depicts a couple ripping off each other's clothes, inspiring the term *bodice ripper* as a pejorative nickname for the romance (Kamblé 2016, 257-258). No matter the style, romance covers are often criticized and ridiculed for their alleged interchangeability. This critique extends to the content: romances are said to reproduce the same formula (Lois and Gregson 2015, 460). Both in terms of materiality – cheaply printed, available everywhere from supermarkets to train stations, with covers that all seem interchangeable –, and in terms of literary quality, romance novels are considered "trashy", the ultimate form of disposable literature.

This article investigates the legacy of the bodice ripper in romance novels written in English, through a sole focus on paratext. Paratext, in this paper, is interpreted along Gérard Genette's definition, as the "threshold" between book and reader, which includes the blurb, the cover, and the foreword, among other things (Genette 1997, 2). Paratext is then part of the broader material context of the romance, which also includes the means of production and circulation. The focus lies on paratext given its importance in the negative discourse surrounding the romance. Such a focus illustrates how much the paratext reveals about the genre and the politics of an individual novel without close reading the actual text. Hence, the analysis adopts a semiotic approach to look at the visual and verbal signs the cover transmits to potential readers (see Kamblé 2016; Goris 2022). After all, Genette also talks about the paratext as a "message that has taken on a material

[1] This article is based on my master's thesis titled "Breaking Down the Bodice Ripper: Paratext, Prototypicality, and the Genre of the Historical Romance", written at KU Leuven under the expert supervision of professor Pieter Vermeulen.

form" through elements like composition, typography, colour, and illustrations (1997, 4). I depart from the conventions of the romance genre and the bodice ripper, as described by romance scholars (e.g. Kamblé 2016; Goris 2022), and examine how these conventions are reworked or nuanced in covers both old and new. Particular attention is paid to how visual and linguistic signifiers–like the illustration of the couple, taglines, and the blurb–signal gender relations and sexual explicitness, as these two topics are inextricably linked to the pejorative reputation of the popular romance and its covers.

The popular romance receives little critical attention in comparison to other types of genre fiction, and, as An Goris notes, even within romance studies the cover is equally disregarded as it is deemed straightforward and simplistic (2022, 110). Previous research examines almost exclusively the covers of Harlequin Mills & Boon category romances rather than single-title romances (Kamblé 2016; McKnight-Trontz 2022; Goris 2022).[2] These works often provide a diachronic overview of the evolution of category romance covers in the twentieth century, but research on romance covers in the twenty-first century is severely lacking. To bridge these gaps, this article connects the boom of the bodice ripper in the 1980s to the "romance renaissance" we are currently experiencing. Both eras are characterized by their seemingly opposing cover styles: the clinch versus the cartoon cover. The article then zooms in on three examples, whose covers have not been examined before: Christine Monson's *Stormfire* (1984) as a classic clinch, Evie Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke* as a contemporary cartoon (2019), and finally Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I* (2000) as a romance that straddles both trends.

Each discussed novel is a historical romance. This subgenre is most strongly associated with the bodice ripping label, as illustrated by the old-fashioned garment in the name. This subgenre of the romance is set in the historical past, such as the Regency era or Victorian age (Wherry 2015, 59). Like all romances, a historical romance must contain the two key elements of the genre, as defined by the Romance Writers of America (2016): (1) "a central love story" and (2) "an emotionally satisfying and optimist ending".[3] As this definition is rather minimal, it would be useful to include material and specifically paratextual events as well, like marketing practices, bookstore shelving, and broader networks of distribution and reception (Kamblé et al. 2021, 15). These elements, especially the distinctive look of the romance, signal the genre to potential readers but could also scare non-romance readers away.

[2] Though Harlequin and Mills & Boon originally were two separate publishing houses, their merger was vital in the creation of the well-known look of the category romance (Kamblé 2016, 241).

[3] Many critics have attempted to define the romance: e.g. Janice Radway (1984, 150) identifies thirteen romance components, while Pamela Regis (2003, 14) defines eight. I use the RWA definition which has been formulated based on discussion with readers and writers and has been adapted when encountering limitations (Larson 2024, 93).

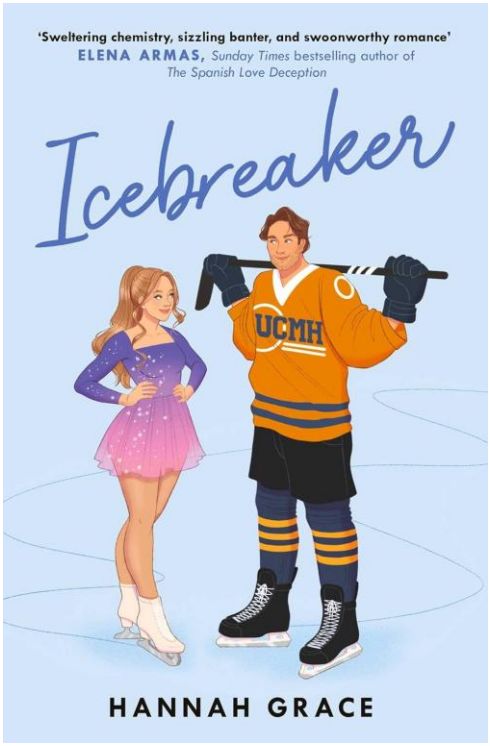


Fig. 1: The 2023 edition (Simon and Schuster) of Hannah Grace's *Icebreaker*. Source: Bol.com.

Though romance novels today look entirely different with their tame and colourful graphic covers, they still evoke complaints about interchangeability, lack of literary quality, and even moral corruption like the classic bodice rippers in the 1980s. Hannah Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022), for example, has evoked controversy because of its innocent look that does not correspond to its explicit content. Especially on TikTok, parents and adult readers have shared their fears that the cartoon cover with two ice skaters (fig. 1), which according to them signals a younger readership, will trick teens and even children into reading explicit sexual content (e.g. Edser 2024). Though social media can magnify such concerns, the *Icebreaker* case does reveal that the romance's reputation still strongly impacts how we read its covers, even with the romance's new look.

The central focus of this article is the cartoon cover trend, which so far has been underexplored in research, and its relationship with the history of the romance cover, with particular attention to the infamous clinch cover. I argue that the marketing of the romance has shifted from a focus on passion and sensuality to a more romantic and chaste interpretation in the twenty-first century. Still, a closer look at three covers reveals that though their marketing strategy is different, experienced romance readers distil similar information from the covers and that the legacy of the bodice ripper has not entirely disappeared from modern romance covers.

The Bodice-Ripping Boom

The most infamous look of the romance is undoubtedly the clinch cover, which depicts an embracing couple ripping off each other's clothes in the throes of passion. The clinch came to the fore during the sexual revolution in the late 1960s, though initially the embraces were sentimental, romantic, and chaste (McKnight-Trontz 2002, 18-20). The tone of the clinch changed with the success of more sexually explicit romances like Kathleen E. Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower* (1972). The covers followed suit by depicting sex and passion rather than romance, which became the norm for romances in the 1980s (Kamblé 2016, 258).

The pejorative nickname "bodice ripper", coined by *The New York Times* in the 1979, also arose in this context (Kamblé 2016, 259): it refers to the clothing item that was often ripped during

scenes of questionable consent or possibly references the "hyperventilation women suffered while reading about them" (Thurston 1987, 19). The term quickly became a shorthand to criticize and ridicule (historical) romances by associating them with pornography and rape. Critics like Germaine Greer claimed that these romances taught their female readers to "cherish the chains of their bondage", which was further fuelled by rape scenes in romances like *The Flame and the Flower* and the suggestion of force and submission on some covers (Greer 1970, 189; Kamblé 2016, 257).

However, the biggest characteristics of the bodice ripper as seen by outsiders – the lack of consent and the explicit clinch – were not enjoyed by readers. In the 1980s, readers already stated that rape and cruelty do not belong in the romance (Radway 1984, 73). The infamous rape scenes were short-lived in the romance, despite inspiring its bodice ripper reputation (Kamblé 2016, 259). The clinch cover was equally controversial: many readers found it "really embarrassing" to read a bodice ripper in public and some even covered up the clinch with a book cover (Brackett 2000, 351). Ironically, despite the disapproval of romance readers, the cover became a sign of the intellectual vapidity and sexual cravings of the genre's audience (Wendell and Tan 2009, 170).

In other words, the bodice ripper can be interpreted in two ways: (1) as an actual subtype of the romance in the 1980s with a limited life span, but also (2) as a persistent romance myth, which claims that romances are all the same: sexist and with a sole focus on sex (or rape). This negative discourse, which Jayashrée Kamblé calls the "Media Romance", is still prominent, even after the gradual loss of popularity of the bodice ripper in the twenty-first century (2021, 266). This paper focuses mostly on this second interpretation of the bodice ripper. One characteristic of this discourse is the reduction of the romance cover to a sign of sex only (Kamblé 2021, 269). Though it is undoubtedly an important aspect of the clinch cover, sex is not the only information such covers aim to communicate and they even sometimes subtly attempt to complicate the bodice-ripping expectations, as Christine Monson's *Stormfire* illustrates. The analysis of *Stormfire* specifically examines how the visual and linguistic signs of the cover evoke the bodice ripper reputation – through conventions of the bodice ripper cover like the pose of the couple or their gaze – but simultaneously nuance these signs to the experienced romance reader through small subversions of these conventions.

Breaking Down a Bodice Ripper: *Stormfire* by Christine Monson (1984)

Christine Monson's *Stormfire* (1984) is a very striking example of the clinch cover (fig. 2): the faces of the embracing couple bear orgasmic expressions, they are in various stages of undress, and their hair is blown away by the wind (Wendell and Tan 2009, 172-177). The publisher is Avon, one of

the big romance publishers who helped to spread the clinch cover (Kamblé 2021, 266). The most striking aspect of the cover is undoubtedly its explicitly sexual nature. The recurring references to fire on the illustration and in the language used contribute to this effect: the burning tower in the background and orange sky, the tagline on the front mentioning their "flaming passion", the blurb on the back using phrases like "fiery innocence", "smoldering hostility", "blazing inferno of desire", and "burning reminder". The references to fire tie in with the novel's title, *Stormfire*, which is all meant to signal that Monson's book is a novel about passion.

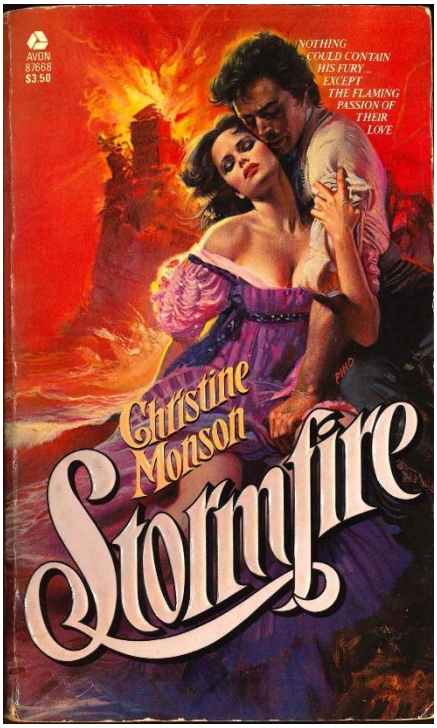


Fig. 2: The front cover of the 1984 edition (Avon) of Christine Monson's *Stormfire*.

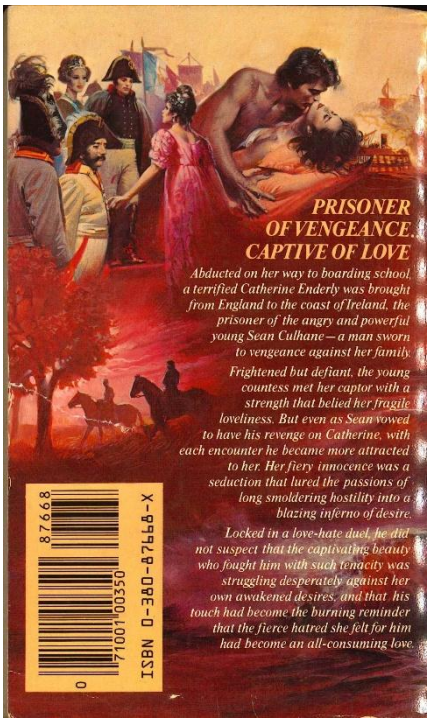


Fig. 3: The back cover of the 1984 edition of *Stormfire*.

To romance readers, these references to fire and sexuality do more than just mark the novel as a bodice ripper: they identify the level of sensuality or spice/steam level, as it would be called today. On romance.io, a popular site used to rate and discover romance novels, *Stormfire* is given 4 out of 5 flames, indicating that the explicit content in *Stormfire* is "explicit open door" with "at least two intimate scenes, explicit language with a variety of sexual acts". This "steam level" is congruent with the imagery on the front but especially on the back, which depicts the couple in the middle of sexual relations (fig. 3). The averted eyes and lack of eye contact, both between the couple and between the couple and prospective reader, create a sense of intimacy, as if the reader is intruding upon a private scene, and help signal the sexually explicit content.

However, the novel communicates more than sex alone. Firstly, the outfits of the couple clearly signal the subgenre of the historical romance. The historical attire in the top left scene on the back (fig. 3) specifically posits the story in the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815). This way, the

reader can recognize the subtype of historical romance, which is often based on the specific period of the setting (Ficke 2021, 126).

Secondly, the cover also gives insight into the gender roles of the story. Kamblé writes that the clinch typically "implie[s] a surrender on the heroine's part", which is visible in both illustrations (2016, 259). The front visual (fig. 2) shows her melting into him, surrendering control over her body, and the top right scene on the back (fig. 3) depicts her as a recipient of pleasure as well. The hero towers over her: one of the back cover images shows her caught in his arms, the impression of confinement reinforced by the tagline underneath that refers to a "prisoner" and "captive". The cover thus seems to create a conservative image of the heroine as a receiving figure, in contrast to the hero who is active and in control.[4] Another typical romance code is the light and dark dichotomy: the dark and dangerous hero must be saved by the love of the light and pure heroine (Barlow & Krentz 1992, 20; Young 2021, 500). Though romance scholars like Erin S. Young discuss the light and dark trope as part of the plot, *Stormfire*'s front cover illustration reproduces this sign: the heroine is illuminated while the hero's face is cast in the shade.[5] These traditional gender representations reinforce *Stormfire*'s association with the bodice ripper.

Still, a closer look complicates this impression. The passionate embrace of the couple, for instance, seems to be focused on the woman's pleasure: she has her eyes closed in ecstasy, whereas he seems to be strongly focused on providing her enjoyment by looking at her reactions. She is only holding his arm, not touching him as he seems to be doing the pleasuring. The back similarly shows her with her eyes closed and him watching her reaction, implying that her pleasure takes central stage. Moreover, the use of force on the cover illustration of *Stormfire* is different from classic bodice rippers, which often depict a man forcefully overpowering a woman (Kamblé 2016, 257). *Stormfire*'s front cover shows a double-sided gesture of force: he holds on tightly to her leg, but she pulls him closer, a marker of consent and active desire.

The scene on the first page of the romance, what Goris terms the "preview scene", similarly complicates established gender roles (2022, 118):

> ICE AND FIRE
>
> "Now. Catherine. Strike now, or yield."

[4] Maaike Meijer identifies a similar pattern of representation on a billboard advertisement. She calls the depiction of men as active and women as passive recipients a "cultural text" or a "fossilized code of representation" (1996, 8, own translations).

[5] As Piia K. Posti (2024) and Erin S. Young discuss (2021), the light-dark code in romances is racially charged and promotes white supremacy. The discussion of race on romance covers falls beyond the scope of this paper, but should be noted in the context of the light-dark code.

> She thrust the knife forward, but at the last moment looked into eyes that reflected the storm. This strange, brooding man had become part of her. Frighteningly, he needed her now, though she had denied him in rage and pride as he had her.
>
> As the knife clattered to the deck, a fleck of crimson over the Irishman's heart smeared against her breast as he swept her into his arms and crushed his mouth down upon her cold lips, kissing her as if the tempest raging about them were centered in his soul. Passion rose in fiery waves, pouring over the edge of the world, a descent into the inferno, bodies locked in a fusion of molten desire.
>
> (Monson 1984, I)

This scene again highlights the passion through metaphors of fire, but the beginning shows Catherine, the female protagonist, ready to kill or wound the love interest with a knife. Not only does she overpower him physically, but also emotionally: he needs her now, but she denied him before. This scene contrasts the tagline on the back which reads "prisoner of vengeance, captive of love" (fig. 3): it aims to show Catherine's agency and power rather than cast her as a passive victim. In other words, though the cover may seem to be a typical bodice ripper, it uses signs known to romance readers such as the preview scene or details in the illustration to add additional information about the steam level, the subtype, and even the more nuanced gender roles, which Goris calls the "double semiotic code" of the cover (2022, 113). Hence, not even a typical bodice ripper at the height of the bodice ripper boom completely aligns with the myth that surrounds it, which also shows the value in closely attending to a seemingly formulaic cover.

Clinch covers are not the only types of covers that appeal by explicitly referencing sex: another example are the covers with a photo of a half-naked man (fig. 4). Often, his head was cut off from the cover, which would allow readers to picture whoever they wanted as the protagonist but simultaneously highlights that the cover is all about physical attractiveness (Wendell and Tan 2009, 177). However, explicit covers, like the half-naked man or the clinch, were controversial: as stated before, readers reported being hesitant to open a clinch in public. Hence, the stepback cover was introduced in the 1990s, which uses a "cardstock overlay that lifts to reveal a full-color piece of clinchtastic illustration beneath", making the clinch easier to hide in public (Wendell and Tan 2009, 170). Currently, a new romance cover trend is emerging that prefers modesty over explicitness. These new cover expectations can be tied to a broader shift in the romance field:

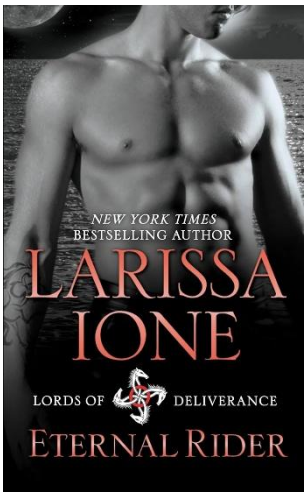


Fig. 4: The 2011 edition (Grand Central Publishing) of Larissa Ione's *Eternal Rider*. Source: Amazon.

the current "romance renaissance" is characterized by a new audience, changes in materiality and circulation, and a new look.

The Romance Renaissance

Today, the romance is booming again: even though the genre always took up a large part of the Anglophone book market, sales have skyrocketed since 2020, so much so that Book Riot talks about a "romance renaissance" (Rittenberg 2025). This romance renaissance shares many similarities with the bodice ripper era, such as significant material changes to the means of circulation and production, as well as a distinct new look. The bodice ripper, for instance, profited from the introduction of category romances by Mills & Boon (later Harlequin Mills & Boon). This publishing house standardized romances into romance lines like *Historical* (uniting romances with a historical setting) and used the rise of paperbacks to distribute its short and cheap romances to a broad audience (Kamblé et al. 2021, 16).

The e-book boom (2009-2014) has had a similar effect in the twenty-first century: romance authors were among the first to experiment with this new format, supporting each other in publishing outside the traditional publishing industry, and they saw their income expand dramatically compared to other authors (Larson 2024, 3). The COVID-19 pandemic led more readers to discover the genre, due to its online accessibility, optimistic tone, and through the hit series *Bridgerton* (Van Dusen 2020-). *Bridgerton*, a Netflix adaptation of the regency romance series by Julia Quinn, is one of the most watched TV shows of all time: its popularity but also its modern and positive interpretation of the romance reflected in more romance sales (Willingham 2021).

At the same time, #BookTok started to grow into the influential online giant it is today: the bookish section of TikTok focuses strongly on romance and young adult literature (YA) published in English, though the variety in genres is increasing (Dera 2024, 4). #BookTok popularized the genre of romantasy, which contains equal parts romance and equal parts fantasy, and skyrocketed sales of authors like Sarah J. Maas and Rebecca Yarros (Alter 2025). These shifts have introduced a new audience to the genre and have given the romance genre increasing prominence in bookstores, which once again increases its sales (Tivnan 2025). In short, the romance is hot and rejuvenated.

This rejuvenation of the romance is also accompanied by a new paratextual look: the "cartoon cover" depicts the leading couple or protagonist in a cartoon-like style, in bright colours, and modest poses that hint at the romantic dynamic between them. If we look at the Goodreads Choice Awards, which select the "Readers' Favorite Books" each year based on votes by

Goodreads users, the number of cartoon covers in the romance category has increased dramatically since 2011 (fig. 5).[6] Whereas initially, the top 20 of the romance category contained no or almost no cartoon covers until 2017, this number increased dramatically with a peak in 2021 when 85% or 17 books had a cartoon cover.

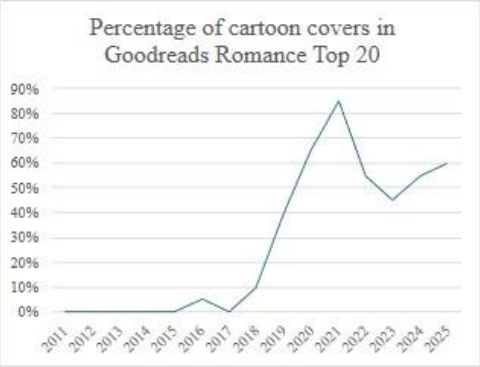


Fig. 5: Percentage of cartoon covers in the Goodreads Choice Nominees (romance category) from 2011-2025.

It is important to note that covers are only categorized covers as cartoons if they depict the couple: in later years, especially 2025, many other books had cartoon-style covers that depicted houses, landscapes, or accessories in a similar cartoonish style. The omnipresence of this style seems to suggest that broader interpretations of cartoon covers will continue to dominate the romance category for the coming years. After all, Goodreads nominates popular books, and the paratext often follows the principle of novelty and exploitation identified in popular fiction by Jan Baetens (2011, 338): a bestseller with a cartoon cover will inspire many other romances hoping to achieve similar success. In sum, though conclusive numbers cannot be draw from a limited corpus of 20 popular books per year, the covers of the Goodreads Choice nominees do seem to illustrate a larger trend.

It is no coincidence that this new style accompanies the material changes in circulation: bright cartoons are easy to recognize on a screen, making them suitable for e-books as well as for social media recommendations by bookfluencers. Cindy Hwang, vice president and editorial director of American imprint Berkely Books, also explains that graphic illustrations are cheaper than photoshoots with models (which used to be the base for the clinch), that cartoons allow for less defined depictions of the protagonists, and that they also attract non-traditional romance readers (qtd. in Waxman 2024). Moreover, the cartoon covers are not sexually explicit, in contrast to the clinch, so they do not need to be hidden when reading in public.

[6] The data collected starts in 2011, when the Goodreads awards started in its current format, with 20 nominees. Even though the first Goodreads Choice Award was technically in 2009, starting in 2011 allows for comparability across time with the same sample sizes.

In fact, cartoon covers can even serve as accessories that give insight into the owner's tastes and aspirations. This trend of treating romance books as accessories first came up in the 1990s, promoted by the TV show *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), as explained by Jennifer Richards, designer at Time Warner Books: "The show made women want to look cool and sophisticated, and we should make books appealing in the same way. Women should feel proud when they sit on the Tube reading a book because it has a great cover" (qtd. in Phillips 2007, 20-21). The 1990s and 2000s had their own version of a cartoon cover (fig. 6), but its typical long-legged silhouettes differ from the style today. These early cartoon covers were strongly associated with the genre of chick-lit and contemporary romances of the time.[7] Today, cartoon covers are still associated with contemporary romances, but they can adorn historical romances as well, as illustrated by Evie Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke* (2019).[8]

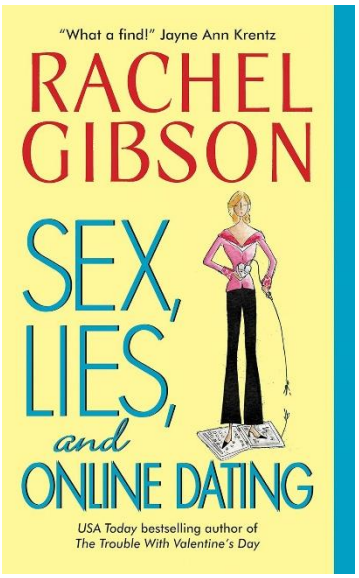


Fig. 6: The 2006 edition (Avon) of Rachel Gibson's *Sex, Lies, and Online Dating*. Source: Amazon.

(Un)covering a Modern Historical Romance: *Evie Dunmore's Bringing Down the Duke* (2019)

The brightly coloured cartoon cover of Evie Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke* (2019) depicts a couple riding a horse, in front of a historical skyline (fig. 7). Through the clothes of the couple, the horse, and the skyline, Dunmore's novel marks itself as a historical romance: experienced readers would be able to identify it as a Victorian romance. This cartoon cover depicts the two protagonists close to each other, implying their romantic relationship. However, the pose of the couple is not sexual at all, contrary to the clinch: the hero's right hand, for instance, is clearly distanced from the woman's waist. The back of the book has an even more tame cartoon (fig. 8), with the protagonists looking at each other from different sides of the back cover.

[7] Chick-lit is here seen as a subtype of romance novels. Major chick-lit books like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) focus strongly on the main character finding love and on the happy ending. Scholars like Christine Larson have argued as well that chick-lit is a "flavor of romance" and that it is rebranded as rom-com today (2024, 154).

[8] Although this paper limits itself to heterosexual romances, some bestselling queer romances also use a cartoon cover, such as Casey McQuiston's *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019). Further research could investigate queer romance cover trends and whether they create different cover expectations.

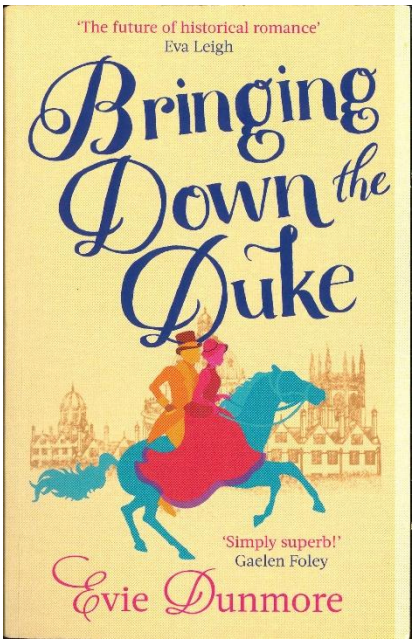


Fig. 7: The 2019 edition (Piatkus) of Evie Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke*.

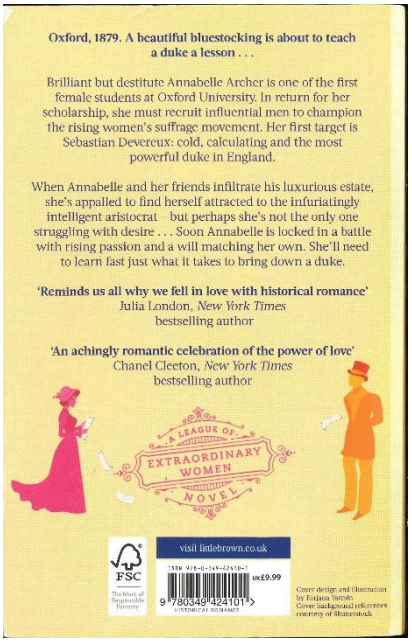


Fig. 8: The back cover of the 2019 edition (Piatkus) of Evie Dunmore's *Bringing Down the Duke*.

The rest of the paratext balances signs of romance and sex. The blurb, for instance, references "struggling with desire" and a "battle with rising passion" but is still less explicit than *Stormfire*. The endorsements adopt a similar tone: Chanel Cleeton's quote on the back talks about an "achingly romantic celebration of the power of love", the endorsements on the first page mention "[falling] in love with historical romance" but also "steamy romance", "chemistry", and "fire burn[ing]". The endorsements referencing passion are on the first page, not on the cover, which except for the blurb remains focused on the romantic. Hence, the mentions to passion are more clearly aimed at the romance reader adept at decoding the nuances of the cover: the cover visual – aimed at a wider public – signals love and romance, in contrast to the bodice ripper's explicit focus on sex. Remarkably, *Bringing Down the Duke* is not less explicit than *Stormfire* in its contents: romance.io gives both books the same rating of four out of five flames.

The paratext of *Bringing Down the Duke* presents the book as a modern variant of the historical romance. Not only does the cartoon cover align with the most recent cover trends, but the language used to describe the novel also emphasizes its modern interpretation: the endorsement on top of the front cover calls Dunmore "the future of historical romance" and the first page of author praises talks about "a marvelous, fresh new voice". The subject matter of the book is explicitly feminist, which is hinted at on the cover by an illustrated stamp of the series: *Bringing Down the Duke* is the first instalment of the series *A League of Extraordinary Women* (2019-2023), which focuses on female suffragists studying at Oxford. The illustration corroborates this

impression by showing the heroine taking the reins, implying that this is not only literally but also figuratively the case in the story. The illustration is a subversion of the gender roles encoded on a bodice ripper like *Stormfire*: the heroine is actively taking control instead of passively surrendering. Even on a structural level, the paratext of *Bringing Down the Duke* signals that it is a modern romance by not having a preview scene, which Goris identifies as a staple of category romances and bodice rippers (2022, 118).

Hence, the paratext represents the novel as modern in both its interpretation of the romance and in its politics, which implies that the novel targets the new romance readers of the romance renaissance. Readers used to clinch covers might have to learn to interpret the new signs of this cover style: the steam level, for instance, is indicated more subtly on this cover than on *Stormfire*. The more subtle style could complicate the book choosing process for those who dislike explicit erotic content: though the cartoon is still clearly a romance novel from which non-readers of the genre can steer clear, it has become harder to distinguish explicit romances from non-explicit ones, especially as a non-romance reader, as the *Icebreaker* controversy from the introduction illustrates.

In conclusion, the appeal of the cartoon cover differs significantly from the clinch cover, despite both serving as a sign for a romance novel. The clinch, as exemplified by *Stormfire*, signals passion and explicit sensuality, whereas the cartoon cover is more subtle and romantic. *Bringing Down the Duke*'s cartoon cover illustrates a broader shift in romance marketing: cartoon covers are modern and chaste, subtle in their references to sex but at the same time clearly recognizable on screens. Strikingly, the level of explicitness does not differ despite the contrasting covers.

The dichotomy between the tame cartoon and sexual content brings up questions about broader cultural shifts. As illustrated by the increase in book bans in the US but also online debates about the appropriateness of books like *Icebreaker*, the fear of corrupting minds young and old through books is a heavily debated issue today (Baêta et al. 2025). In such a context, tamer covers like *Bringing Down the Duke*'s are less likely to incite critique and moral panic, yet experienced romance readers can still decode the cover. At the same time, sexually explicit books are very popular, partially propelled by BookTok's open discussions of what they call smut or spice. *The Guardian* explains the popularity of "smut" through the younger audience, who supposedly are more open-minded and less ashamed, which is a striking contrast with the change in romance marketing strategy from sensuality to sweetness (Williams 2024). Thus, two interpretations of romance novels and covers seem to intersect: romance as sweet and romantic versus romance as spicy and sensual. Still, these interpretations need not be opposites, even on the cover: the different editions of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*'s show how they can intertwine.

Straddling the Clinch and the Cartoon: Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I* (2000)

The two examples analysed up until now, *Stormfire* and *Bringing Down the Duke*, are typical examples of two trends, the clinch and the cartoon cover, and each address a different generation of romance readers with different expectations. In this next section, I will examine an example that complicates this binary: Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I* (2000). The first book in the *Bridgerton* series (2000-2006), this historical romance got a new life as the source text for the first season of the immensely popular *Bridgerton* Netflix series (Van Dusen 2020-). The series led to new editions and new readers discovering *The Duke and I*, though Julia Quinn was already a successful author of historical romances before the Netflix show. I will look at two editions of Quinn's book, the original 2000 edition and the Netflix tie-in from 2019, to demonstrate how its paratext transforms the legacy of the bodice ripper and manages to combine elements from both trends into a modern cover that references the genre's history.

The 2000 first edition of *The Duke and I*, published by Avon, is a typical example of what I term the close-up cover (fig. 9).[9] The close-up cover zooms in on one object, in this case a calling card with the names of the protagonists, and is, like the cartoon, a more modest cover style. The calling card, which announced visits in fashionable, upper-class households, immediately speaks to the imagination and genre knowledge of the experienced romance reader, who would know to interpret this cue as signalling a historical romance. The colour scheme, overwhelmingly pastel pink, is very different from the saturated primary colours of *Stormfire* and closer to the bubble-gum colours of later cartoon covers and chick-lit covers, which would have been all the rage at the time of publication (Phillips 2007, 24). The pink cover seems to imply that the cover aims to address a younger audience rather than the traditional audience of the bodice rippers.

Remarkably, the back cover of this first edition is a proper clinch cover with a woman in a low-cut pink dress being embraced by a shirtless man (fig. 10). This is striking, because by 2000, publishers generally acknowledged the "embarrassing" reputation of the clinch. More modest covers were booming and the stepback cover, which hides the clinch under a more modest front cover, was already a common device to include the clinch without scaring off more discreet readers. The location of the clinch on the back cover does seem to imply some cautiousness, although it still does not allow for discrete reading in public. Interestingly, the next books in the series are

[9] Librarians John Charles and Cathie Linz refer to the "leg/shoe look" cover, but I believe this is a subset of a larger category that I term the "close-up cover", since it shows a close-up of an object relevant to the story (2005, 47). This trend came to the fore in the 1990s and highlights the importance of material objects in romances. An example is E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which zooms in on a tie.

proper stepbacks, with the clinch on the inside cover, mostly invisible from the outside (Quinn 2000-2006, Avon first editions).

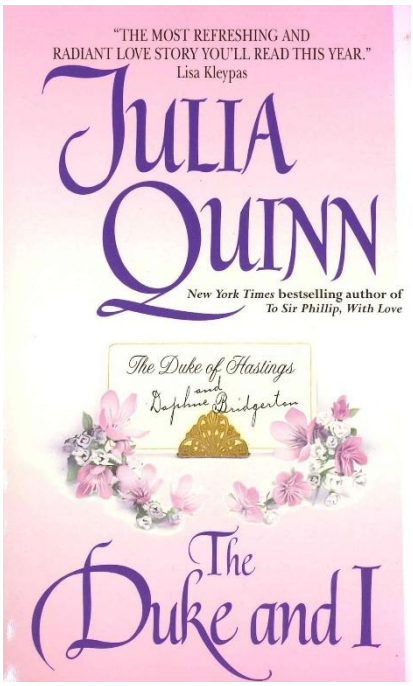


Fig. 9: The front cover of the 2000 first edition (Avon) of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*.

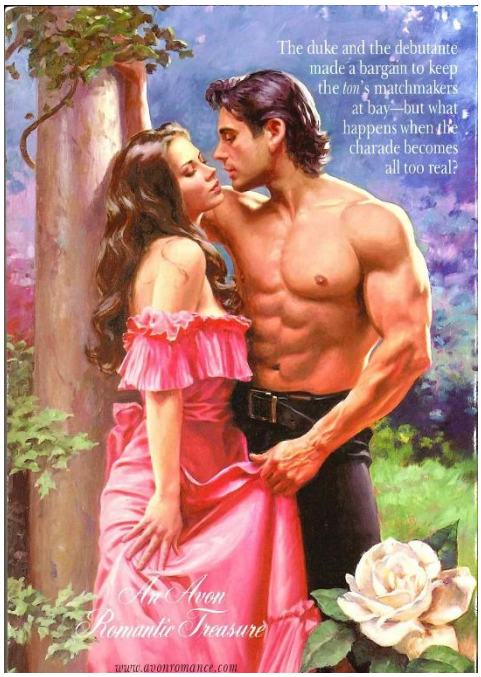


Fig. 10: Part of the back cover of the 2000 first edition (Avon) of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*.

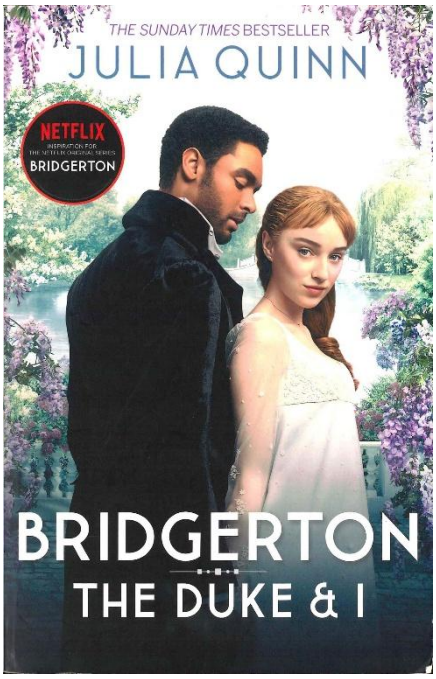


Fig. 11: The front cover of the 2019 Netflix tie-in of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*.

Like a typical bodice ripper, *The Duke and I's* back illustration signals passion and explicit sexuality through the dropped shoulders of the heroine's dress, the hero's bare chest, their sultry expressions, and lack of eye contact. Following the light-dark code, the heroine's face is illuminated, and she is whiter than the hero, although the symbolism is less strong than on *Stormfire*'s cover. Characteristic of the bodice ripper is the suggestion of force on the hero's part and the heroine's surrender: *The Duke and I*'s hero towers over her and pushes her against a beam, with his hand grabbing her dress, whereas her pose and heavy-lidded gaze depict the heroine surrendering to him and to her own desire. The characters seem to be on the cusp of a sexually intimate moment: he is about to kiss her, about to rip her dress, and she is about to surrender. In that sense, *The Duke and I* illustration is slightly less explicit than *Stormfire*'s visuals, which depicts the characters *in the middle of* instead of *about to*, but the distinction is minimal.

The language in the blurb and endorsements adopts a different tone by focusing on romance rather than passion. The front cover endorsement calls the novel "funny, sparkling, and bright" (fig. 9), the blurb does not mention passion but rather talks about the heroine "losing her heart and soul completely", and "An Avon Romantic Treasure" is written on the back (fig. 10). This more romantic tone aligns with the novel's lower level of sensuality: romance.io rates *The*

Duke and I 3 out of 5 flames or open door, "at least one intimate scene with the reader present, euphemistic language for act and body parts". In other words, though the clinch on the back would be seen as sexually explicit through the bodice ripper association, the front cover and blurbs market the book as romantic instead of erotic.

In conclusion, the paratext of the 2000 edition straddles two perspectives on cover design into what could be called a "Frankenstein" romance cover. On the one hand, the cover retains the association with the bodice ripper for those who expect a clinch for a romance, especially when the romance contains intimate scenes. Both Avon, Quinn's publisher, and the subgenre of the historical romance were strongly associated with the clinch and the bodice ripper, which could contribute to the readers' expectations (Kamblé 2021, 266). On the other hand, by placing the clinch on the back with a close-up of a calling card as front cover and by highlighting the romance rather than the erotica, Quinn's cover is aligned with more modest trends for romance covers. Hence, the paratext seems to imply a double audience: the classic audience of the bodice rippers and the newer audience that expects the early cartoon or pastel close-up covers that were trending in the 1990s (Phillips 2007, 24).

Though *The Duke and I* has been rereleased with several times with new accompanying covers since its first edition in 2000, I further focus on the Netflix tie-in covers as it bridges two audiences: earlier generations of readers who know Quinn as an author of more traditional historical romances and newer readers who base their expectations on the Netflix show. *Bridgerton* was widely discussed for its use of a multiracial cast in a genre traditionally associated with white characters, causing debate about diversity and historical accuracy (Posti 2023). Through its cast but also through other choices like the soundtrack consisting of classical covers of pop hits, *Bridgerton* presents itself as modern and trendy, which contrasts with the bodice-ripping reputation often attached to historical romances. Moreover, reviewers have linked *Bridgerton* to other middlebrow historical dramas like *Downton Abbey* (Mangan 2020) or *Dickinson* (Poniewozik 2020). These associations imply that the Netflix show has been perceived as a more middlebrow and modern historical drama/romance, instead of a bodice ripper, which impacts the expectations of the new readers drawn in by the show.

The Netflix tie-in (fig. 11) features the two main actors of the TV series – Phoebe Dynevor and Regé-Jean Page – in Regency outfits, surrounded by a lush landscape in blue and purple. A Netflix tie-in cover is an important tool of cross promotion: the paratext aims to attract viewers to the book because they would recognize the actors, but also pushes readers towards the series, as illustrated by the red and black Netflix sticker (Mitchell 2007, 108). This cover also provides an interesting point of comparison with the first edition. The pose of the actors is reminiscent of the

clinch, with Simon (Regé-Jean Page) towering over and staring at the back of Daphne's head (Phoebe Dynevor). Still, the pose is romantic rather than sexual, the passion implied instead of shown like on *Stormfire*'s clinch cover.

The most striking difference between the clinch (fig. 10) and the tie-in (fig. 11) is Daphne's bold eye contact with the prospective reader. Daphne refusing to avert her gaze is a proud statement of female sexuality that shows the reader that Daphne's perspective and enjoyment are centralized, not Simon's. Contrary to the other clinch covers in this paper, depictions of female surrender and male force are missing entirely. She seems to be in control, subverting the cultural text of female submission and passive sexuality. This depiction aligns with a more positive interpretation of the romance as a means of female empowerment, which is adopted by some critics and many authors in protest of the bodice ripper cliché (Kamblé et al. 2021, 19-21). This cover hints at the legacy of the bodice ripper but reworks the traditional gender norms encoded in earlier editions.

Through the modernization and partial subversion of the clinch, the cover can appeal to the double audience created by combining Quinn's older fans with viewers of the Netflix show and romance renaissance readers. The endorsement on the back also aims to communicate Quinn's legacy of historical romances to both audiences by calling her "a master of historical romance", showing the traditional readers that Quinn belongs to an earlier generation of writers and simultaneously informing new readers of Quinn's legacy. Even the background and colour use find a middle ground between the cartoon and the clinch: the TV tie-in uses pastel blues and purples like cartoon covers yet is more detailed and less bright than the cartoon. Still, the light-dark code of the romance, which TV series reiterates through the casting of a Black actor as the hero (see Posti 2024), is reinforced on the cover through the colours of the characters' clothing. As is the case for the clinch, the background relates to the story: we see a bridge surrounded by flowers, which evokes a romantic rather than erotic connotation.

In conclusion, the paratext of Quinn's *The Duke and I* clearly shows how the novel straddles changing traditions and trends. The 2000 edition already combines more modest and modern trends with a classic clinch on the back, and the 2019 tie-in manages not only to combine two trends but to fuse them into a cover that honours both the clinch and modern expectations of what a cover should look like.

Conclusion

The romance has had many different looks throughout the years. The most infamous and iconic look is undoubtedly the clinch cover, which stands out through its focus on sexuality in the illustration but also in other elements of the paratext, like the blurb or endorsements. The clinch became a sign for the bodice ripper, which started out as a way to describe a romance trend in the 1980s but quickly became a shorthand for all of romance's real or imagined negative qualities: ranging from too sexual, to sexist and repetitive. Yet, a closer look at the cover of *Stormfire* shows that this discourse is an exaggeration rather than reality: *Stormfire*'s clinch already nuances its bodice-ripping associations through subtle signs and insider knowledge of the paratext aimed at experienced romance readers, who knew how to decode the subtleties of the romance cover.

Today, the new generation of readers of the romance renaissance knows the romance by a different look, as *Bringing Down the Duke* illustrates. The cartoon cover, with its bright colours and graphic illustrations of the protagonist, does not want to sell sex, but presents the romance as cute and approachable, as modern and almost the opposite of the bodice ripper. The focus no longer lies on passion or erotica, but on romance and sweetness, visible in the colours, the language and the illustrations. Yet, the message of the romance remains the same, with details communicating to the experienced reader what to expect in terms of subgenre, gender roles and level of sensuality. Strikingly, the level of sensuality of the cover changes drastically from the clinch to the cartoon, yet the contents of the story are equally erotic, which demonstrates that it is purely a change in paratextual strategy. This shift could be tied to different conceptualizations of the romance: rather than presenting the genre as stories about passion, the cartoon cover interprets romances as romantic and seems to give sex a back seat on the cover illustrations.

The publication history of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*, with different covers for diverse intended audiences, shows that the clinch and the cartoon need not be opposites. The 2000 version already aimed to combine a modest front cover with the traditional clinch, but it is the 2019 Netflix tie-in that manages to combine the best of both worlds, so to speak, into a new cover that is still reminiscent of the romance's history. The tie-in also shows the longevity of the bodice ripper's clinch cover, though interpreted in a more modest and modern way. Moreover, the disappearance of the clinch traced in this paper is tied to a corpus of successful and traditionally published books, which are only heterosexual romances: its legacy may be more enduring in other parts of the romance market. A quick look at Kindle's "Best Sellers in Historical Romance" brings up many clinch covers, showing the resilience of the clinch among books that are less popular and more likely to be self-published.

As the romance renaissance is in full swing, we should keep a close eye on further paratextual changes. It is not improbable that the clinch could return to the central stage of romance publishing: with the rise of e-books, reading in public is no longer "embarrassing" if the cover is explicit. Moreover, *Onyx Storm*, the third book in the incredibly popular Fourth Wing series reintroduces a modern variant of the stepback by including a detailed illustration of the protagonists on the inside of the cover. If stepbacks are getting modernized, maybe the clinch could return in a new guise, following Quinn's 2019 example. With the advent of BookTok, beautiful and shareable editions of books are gaining popularity, as influencers can show off their special editions. Perhaps this could become the happily ever after of romance novels, even of bodice rippers: being treated as prized artefacts rather than trashy pulp, no matter how colourful or explicit the cover is.

Bibliography

Alter, Alexandra. 2025. "Rebecca Yarros's 'Onyx Storm' Is the Fastest-Selling Adult Novel in 20 Years." *New York Times*, January 30. www.nytimes.com/2025/01/30/books/rebecca-yarros-onyx-storm.html.

Baêta, Sabrina, et al. 2025. "The Normalization of Book Banning." *PEN America*, October 1. pen.org/report/the-normalization-of-book-banning/.

Baetens, Jan. 2011. "World Literature and Popular Literature: Toward a Wordless Literature?" In *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch & Djelal Kadir. Routledge.

Barlow, Linda and Jayne Ann Krentz. 1992. "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance." In *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, edited by Jayne Ann Krentz. Harper Paperbacks.

Brackett, Kim Pettigrew. 2000. "Facework Strategies Among Romance Fiction Readers." *The Social Science Journal* 37 (3): 347-360.

Charles, John & Cathie Linz. 2005. "Romancing Your Readers: How Public Libraries Can Become More Romance Reader Friendly." *Public Libraries* 44 (1): 43-48.

Dera, Jeroen. 2024. "BookTok: A Narrative Review of Current Literature and Directions for Future Research." *Literature Compass* 21 (10-12): 1-8.

Dunmore, Evie. 2019. *Bringing Down the Duke.* Piatkus.

Dunmore, Evie. *A League of Extraordinary Women*. 4 vols. Piatkus, 2019-2023.

Edser, Lisa. 2024. "Icebreaker Controversy: the Popular Book Parents Are Urgently Being Warned Not to Buy for Their Kids: Here's Why." *Daily Mail Online*, August 22. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13767225/Icebreaker-controversy-popular-book-parents-warning-tiktok.html.

Ficke, Sarah H. 2021. "The Historical Romance." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al. Routledge.

Genette, Gerard. 1997. *Paratexts*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge University Press.

Gibson, Rachel. 2006. *Sex, Lies, and Online Dating.* Avon.

Goris, An. 2022. "Hidden Codes of Love: The Materiality of the Category Romance Novel." In *Consumerism and Prestige: The Materiality of Literature in the Modern Age*, edited by Anthony Enns and Bernhard Metz. Anthem Press.

Grace, Hannah. 2022. *Icebreaker.* Atria.

Greer, Germaine. 1970. *The Female Eunuch*. Bantam Books.

Ione, Larissa. 2011. *Eternal Rider.* Grand Central Publishing.

Kamblé, Jayashree, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo. 2021. "Introduction." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2016. "Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art." In *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?*, edited by William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger. Routledge.

Kamblé, Jayashree. 2021. "Romance in the Media." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al. Routledge.

Larson, Christine. 2024. *Love in the Time of Self-Publishing: How Romance Writers Changed the Rules of Writing and Success.* Princeton University Press.

Lois, Jennifer, and Joanna Gregson. 2015. "Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and Gendered Sexual Stigma." *Gender and Society* 29 (4): 459-483.

Mangan, Lucy. 2020. "Bridgerton Review – Netflix's Answer to Downton Abbey is a Moreish Treat." *The Guardian*, December 25. www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/dec/25/bridgerton-review-netflix.

McKnight-Trontz, Jennifer. 2002. *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel.* Princeton Architectural Press.

Meijer, Maaike. 1996. *In Tekst Gevat: Inleiding Tot een Kritiek van Representatie.* Amsterdam University Press.

Mitchell, Rebecca N. 2007. "'Now a Major Motion Picture': The Delicate Business of Selling Literature Through Contemporary Cinema." In *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, edited by Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody. Routledge.

Monson, Christine. 1984. *Stormfire.* Avon.

Phillips, Angus. 2007. "How Books Are Positioned in the Market: Reading the Cover." In *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, edited by Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody. Routledge.

Poniewozik, James. 2020. "Review: 'Bridgerton' Is a Sparkly Period Piece with a Difference." *The New York Times,* December 23. www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/arts/television/bridgerton-review.html.

Posti, Piia K. 2023. "'I Get to Exist as a Black Person in the World': *Bridgerton* as Speculative Romance and Alternate History on Screen." In *History and Speculative Fiction*, edited by John L. Hennessey. Palgrave Macmillan.

Quinn, Julia. (2000) 2019. *The Duke and I*. Piatkus.

Quinn, Julia. 2000. *The Duke and I*. Avon.

Quinn, Julia. *Bridgerton*. 8 vols. Avon, 2000-06.

Radway, Janice A. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*. University of North Carolina Press.

Regis, Pamela. 2003. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rittenberg, Julia. 2025. "Are We Having a Romance Renaissance?" *Book Riot*, March 27. bookriot.com/are we-having-a-romance-renaissance/.

Romance Writers of America. 2016. "About the Romance Genre." Accessed 20 June 2025. www.rwa.org/the-romance-genre.

Thurston, Carol. 1987. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*. University of Illinois Press.

Tivnan, Tom. 2025. "Review of the Year – A Certain Romance: Fiction Soars, with Romantasy and Love Stories Leading the Way." *The Bookseller,* January 31. www.thebookseller.com/features/review-of-the-year-a-certain-romance-fiction-soars-with-romantasy-and-love-stories-leading-the-way

Van Dusen, Chris, creator and showrunner. 2020- . *Bridgerton*. Netflix.

Waxman, Olivia B. 2024. "How Romance Novel Covers Have Evolved Through Time." *Time.com*, August 1. time.com/7005391/romance-novel-cover-history/.

Wendell, Sarah, and Candy Tan. 2009. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*. Simon & Schuster.

Wherry, Maryan. 2015. "More Than a Love Story: The Complexities of the Popular Romance." In *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Popular Fiction*, edited by Christine Berberich. Bloomsbury.

Williams, Zoe. 2024. "My Weeks of Reading Hornily: Steamy Book Sales Have Doubled – And I Soon Found Out Why." *The Guardian*, August 6. www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/aug/06/my-weeks-of-reading-hornily-steamy-book-sales-have-doubled-and-i-soon-found-out-why

Willingham, AJ. 2021. "Netflix's 'Bridgerton' is Leading a Romance Novel Renaissance." *CNN Entertainment*, February 6. edition.cnn.com/2021/02/06/entertainment/ bridgerton-romance-novel-renaissance-trnd/index.html.

Woodiwiss, Kathleen. 1972. *The Flame and the Flower*. Avon.

Yarros, Rebecca. 2025. *Onyx Storm*. Piatkus.

Young, Erin S. 2021. "Race, Ethnicity, and Whiteness." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé et al. Routledge.