

In Defence Of Romance

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1. Romance is a biblical narrative. In fact, it's the gospel narrative.

The second point that I want to make is that romance is a Christian concept. The gospel is a romance. The narrative of the Bible is a romance. From the beginning God establishes the covenant in marital terms (jealousy, prostitution) and the prophets develop these ideas still further (betrothal, wooing, wedding, adultery, remarriage). When Christ comes, he comes as a bridegroom and when he returns he will consummate the marriage with his bride, the church. The story of salvation is the story of a bride won and wooed, made pure and beautiful, and united to her husband in perfect intimacy, happily ever after.

I think this is a story Christians should not be ashamed to tell. When we read other kinds of books and watch other kinds of films and see Christian themes in them, we praise those stories. We think it's a good thing to use narratives that revolve around ideas of sacrifice or substitution, of faith and hope, of transformation and redemption in order to deepen our understanding of the gospel. It seems to me that it's just as much of a good thing to hear the stories of the bridegroom winning his bride, because the happy ever after ending is real. There is a marriage to look forward to, when the bridegroom of our dreams will consummate our relationship, will draw us into perfect intimacy with him, and will satisfy us forever.

Of course it's not a good thing when the shadow and the type is mistaken for the reality. Husbands are not Jesus. They cannot restore us and redeem us. And so romance novels may not have quite the same emotional intensity as the Song of Songs, but in their own way, they do point us to the reality of the bridegroom to come.¹ Human husbands and boyfriends are never going to match up to the romantic ideals – but in Christ we have a bridegroom who outshines any hero of a romantic novel.

What I'm not saying

I'm not saying that there are no potential problems with reading romance novels. It's certainly possible for Christian women to become too focussed on a futile search for Mr Right or to become dissatisfied with the husband they've been married to for years. In both cases, the answer should be to refocus on the Lord and learn contentment in the situation he's called them to. And if romance literature is making it harder to do that, then of course it's wise to stop reading it. But I don't think those potential problems are universally true and I don't think the whole genre should be avoided because of them.

2. The power of narrative and the need to talk about sex and relationships

Stories are powerful things. There's a reason the Bible is a narrative and there's a reason that much of Jesus' teaching is in the form of parables. It's because stories change minds. Stories show us the world in a different way, from a new perspective and in doing so, they change us. Telling stories is an important thing for Christians to do.

¹ See below for one example of how this has worked for me.

Stories in the Bible are messy, complicated things featuring flawed, sinful men and women who engage in all kinds of appalling activities. Sometimes they get redeemed and sometimes they face judgment. Their stories aren't all tied up in nice, neat endings of conversion, forgiveness and sanctification. Telling complicated, messy stories about flawed, sinful men and women is an important thing to do. Stories like this can change minds. They can show us the world from a new perspective and in doing so, change us.

Romance novels, with their focus on relationships, have the power to influence the way we think about all kinds of important issues such as forgiveness, self-worth, intimacy, trust, loyalty, beauty, sexuality, marriage, children, disability and a hundred other things. Some romance novels are frivolous, surface-level comedies but mostly not. In fact, I would say that I've found greater emotional and social depth in romance novels than any other genre fiction.² Romance novels can give readers a way of thinking about relationships differently from the (inevitably flawed) models they've seen and experienced in real life.

Romance novels can give readers a way of thinking about sex differently too. I don't think we talk much about sex at all as Christians. I hope that married Christians talk about it with each other, but otherwise it's mostly left as a great unspoken blank. That's pretty scary for people with no sexual experience or, worse, with traumatic sexual experience, as they contemplate potentially getting married. (I think the same is true for non-Christians, actually, and reading lists of sex tips in women's magazines isn't going to help all that much.) But stories are powerful things in this context precisely because they don't focus on the mechanics. By setting sex scenes in the context of a narrative, with the focus on the relationship, they can give a model for thinking about sex as something other than the physical act.

Stories are complicated and messy. Characters get things wrong. Sometimes they manage to put them right again. No one is ever perfect, but they find ways to be perfect for each other. Romance novels rightly put a high value on relationships. And while it's true that, like most of the media we consume, they aren't usually written by Christians, in general, they do have a high view of marriage and family. Marriages are fought for; adultery is never condoned; abortion is still largely taboo. Characters may not be motivated by a love for Christ, but there is still a morality to the genre which owes a lot to Christian ethics. Pre-marital sex is the most common exception to this.³

What I'm not saying

In my experience, people often conflate chick lit, romcoms (romantic comedy films) and romance novels but actually the genres are quite different in their focus. Chick lit and romcoms are much more likely to be frivolous, comedic and surface-level than romance novels, and as a result of more one-dimensional characterisation I think they are much more likely to be problematic for women struggling with fantasies of the ideal man. Romance novels are sometimes lighthearted, but the characters are always flawed and complex, and the books often deal with very serious issues in real and difficult ways. They are much more likely to show the negative side of relationships as well as the positive.

² That is to say, non-literary fiction such as mystery, fantasy, SF etc.

³ There is a growing sub-genre of LGBT romances as well, but these are clearly and easily distinguished from the mainstream heterosexual romance genre.

But also, it's obviously true that not all romance novels are the same. Some are badly written, some perpetuate false and unhelpful models of relationships and sex, some trivialise things which are very serious, some explicitly condone sin, some may inadvertently lead readers into sin. I don't think romance novels are the only ones which have these problems, but they are certainly not exempt from them. I'm not arguing that all romance novels are worth reading.

3. Romance is not pornography, nor even 'pornography for women'

(a) Pornography is pornography for women

On several occasions, I've heard Christian women being warned of the dangers of too much chick lit in their reading habits and too many romantic comedies in their viewing habits. More than once I've heard the analogy that these things are to women what pornography is to men. There are some important things for women to read here about appropriate expectations for men and marriage. But as it has before, this kind of argument makes me uncomfortable for two very different reasons.

First, and I want to say this first because I really don't think very many people are saying it at all, romance novels, chicklit and chick flicks are not pornography for women, **pornography is pornography for women**. There is a myth which the church seems to have bought into completely that women are not interested in pornography. That this sin is exclusively a male sin. Women are instructed not to listen when a preacher addresses the men in the church about this issue. For a long time, I believed this lie too. And then I discovered the internet.

Women are writing, drawing, reading and looking at pornographic images ALL THE TIME on the internet. And if these women are there on the internet, they are somewhere in real life. Maybe one of them is in your church. And you are complicit in her sin if you are continually sending her the message that her sin cannot exist because of her gender.

There's a lot more information about women and the use of pornography along with some help for women struggling with this issue at [Covenant Eyes](#).

(b) Romance is not pornography

Romance is a huge genre encompassing a wide spectrum of literature. Plenty of romance novels have no sexual content at all. Many more have limited sexual content with closed-door bedroom scenes. And yes, some have more explicit sex scenes.

Here's what defines a romance novel: a focus on the central romantic relationship, with an optimistic and emotionally satisfying ending.⁴ The focus is on the relationship, not the sex. But of course, romantic relationships often involve sexual activity and sometimes the sexual activity is an important part of the way the characters grow and the relationship develops. Some stories can be told with closed bedroom doors and others can't. But the intent in a romance novel is to tell the story of the relationship, and not to sexually arouse the reader. This may mean focussing on the emotional and internal aspects of the sex scenes, rather than the physical and external mechanics,

⁴ <https://www.rwa.org/Romance>

for example. Sex scenes can be about tenderness, intimacy, anger, revenge, comfort, fear, joy and much more.

Also, it should be noted that plenty of books which are not romance novels include sex scenes for some or all of these reasons without crossing the boundary into erotica or pornography.

(c) What I'm not defending

There is a subgenre of erotic romance which has a high level of graphic sexual content. It is slightly different from the genre of erotica, but both erotic romance and erotica are books written with the intention of sexually arousing the reader. Books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* fall into this category. I am not interested in defending these books. In general they are as easy to distinguish from mainstream romance by the cover, title and blurb as erotic films are easy to distinguish from mainstream ones.

4. Why I read romance novels

This is a slightly modified version of a blog post I wrote a year ago after reading a particular romance novella:

A few weeks ago, I read Laura Florand's latest novella, Snowkissed. I read it in the bath and by the end (actually from about a third of the way through) I was weeping. That's not true. I was sobbing. There were moments during the book where I thought I might not be able to go on, because whenever I'd got myself back under control, I only had to look at the page again and the tears would start flowing. Reading it was a raw, painful, emotional experience. And at the end, my overwhelming feeling was, "I want to be loved like that."

I'm nothing like the heroine in the book, Kai. I haven't been through any of the experiences that inform her character in the book. I liked the hero well enough but he wasn't a man that I thought I would fall in love with. What I wanted, passionately and desperately, was the experience of being loved the way that he loved Kai. Their love for each other prompted a desire in me to experience that same love for myself.

Okay, so what does that have to do with religion, huh?

Well, for the last 5 years I've been writing my PhD thesis on the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is the romance novel of the Bible. Except it's not a novel, it's a cycle of poems. (And yes, there are other romances in the Bible, too. And yes, the whole Bible is a romance. That's another post for another time.) It's a cycle of poems about a pair of lovers, together, apart, yearning, content, passionate, anguished, tender, delighting, fierce, satisfied, longing. And it's in the Bible. Which is both interesting and challenging. It forces the intersection between religion and romance, for both Jews and Christians who have this book in their sacred text. It challenges readers to see what is sacred in romance – and not merely tender, sweet, clean romance. The Song of Songs is passionately erotic and unashamedly so. Sex and sexual desires are celebrated in the Song.

For me, the Song does what Florand's novella did. It leaves me with that same passionate, desperate desire to be loved like this. To have this other person to cling to, and to be the person clung to. To delight in another and be delighted in. To find satisfaction, safety, contentment and peace – the shalom that the shulammitte brings. To know the fierceness of this love that is stronger than death, that cannot be bought or sold or washed away. In reading about the passionate desire of these

lovers, the book makes me passionately desire that same experience of love. It's not a didactic book, teaching what love is in a theoretical, dispassionate way, though by showing and celebrating and reflecting on this particular experience of love, of course it does teach us what love is. But the point isn't to learn about love, the point is to feel that love.

Because the Song does something which no romance novel can do. It fulfils the longing it evokes.

One of the things I have tried to do in my thesis is show how the Song works differently in the context of the rest of the biblical canon(s). Taken as an isolated text, it seems as unsatisfying as any other romantic text. It shows the reader love, it creates the desire to be loved, but it can't fulfil that longing. But in the context of the canon, something else is going on. The woman, who is given no name, is described using the language of Eden, of Canaan, of the land flowing with milk and honey, of Israel who is God's own bride. Her loved-ness is the reversal of the fall, the redemption out of Egypt, the return from exile. Her lover is the messiah, the Christ, who adores and delights in the beauty of his bride. And though both are still longing for the final consummation of their relationship after which there will be no mourning or separation, there is already a joyful declaration of love and mutual possession as each claims the other for their own.

Which means as a reader, at least as a reader who identifies by faith with Yahweh's Israel or Christ's church or both, this isn't somebody else's love story. This isn't a fictional presentation, or a historical retelling. This is my experience. This is how I am loved. This is how God delights in me, as part of his bride. This passion, this desire, this fierce, unyielding love that provides shalom, this yearning to be together and never parted again – that is mine.

I read Florand's book again, sobbing again, tears of joy, this time. Not 'I want to be loved like that,' but 'I am already loved like that.' And it reminds me that for every romance novel I read, every happy ending I bear witness to, there's no place for envy, because it is already mine.

5. Why I write romance novels

Because I've always written stories. I can't imagine ever living life without writing.

Because I love to write stories about people and their relationships. It's endlessly fascinating to me.

Because I love to write stories which end well. Because hope is at the heart of who I am.

Because people like to read them. Romance is by far the biggest selling genre.

Because people will buy them. I started selling books when I was working on the PhD and I needed a way to make some extra money.

Because it's opened doors for gospel conversations with all kinds of people I might never otherwise have met.