Reading Women: Negotiating the Intoxicating Morass of “Happily Ever After” and “Happy For Now”

by

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Abstract

Happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) stories influence women's expectations of intimate relationships and inform their understandings of what it means to be in love and to love. With age and experience, women learn to adjust their media-fuelled expectations as they encounter the reality of what is required to sustain long-term intimate relationships. It is a negotiation that entails wrestling with questions such as choosing one's way of being in the world, understanding what romantic love means, and, often, preparing for life as a partnered or married woman. Women from diverse backgrounds, with a multiplicity of identities, are familiar with this dominant script that has the power to direct their lives and their dreams. Whether fictive, cultural, internalized, socialized, enforced, resisted, or rejected, this social script makes finding romance and love, if not marriage, a global institution that is central to a woman's happiness and material well-being, one experienced within specific local and personal contexts. To investigate women's relationships with and negotiations of HEA-HFN narratives, I convened three reading salons with a group of nine women to read and discuss three novels. Based on these conversations and my review of our discussions, I selected three thematic categories for an interdisciplinary exploration: Trauma, Diversity, and Violence; Sex, Shame, and Security; and Aspiration, Experience, and Harm. The ensuing analysis of this reading salon experience demonstrates that the coupling imperative, through the medium of romance fiction, is still valorized and continues to have an impact on women's lives. Furthermore, a lack of imagination, one that neglects and overlooks the potential of alternative social arrangements, is embedded in this media form despite authorial offerings with diverse representations. Even with seemingly unconventional plot outcomes, the genre reflects heteropatriarchal, heterosexist, monogamous, capitalist systems and structures that marginalize women because women may win on the page, but women's rights are continually under threat in the real lives they lead. Romance fiction, along with other media forms that enshrine a coupling imperative, reinforces the challenges and obstacles women face in their quests for autonomy, agency, and authority in the world beyond the alluring fairy-tale promises of HEA-HFN narratives.

Keywords: women readers; reading salons; romance fiction; happily-ever-after; happy-for-now; feminism

Dedication

To the students I have worked with over the years who have taught me to be better, kinder, and open to all the possibilities.

To the amazing group of badass feminists who joined me for three gatherings to talk about reading, life, and love, and whose humour, wit, and laughter in each other's company will stay with me always. I am deeply grateful.

And to Luc whose arrival in this world was the start of my fully becoming. I owe you more than I can say. I am in awe of the art that you make, and I am so proud of the person you are. Love. Respect. Gratitude.

Traditional Territories

I respectfully acknowledge that Simon Fraser University's three campuses reside on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), q̓íc̓əy̓ (Katzie), kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, and Tsawwassen Peoples.

I recognize my status as an uninvited guest and settler on the Land these Peoples have been stewards of for longer than can be remembered.

I invite you to consider your relationship to these spaces and places, and to the legacies of the histories that bring us to this moment in time.

I also want to express my shock, sadness, and despair at the ongoing erasure, displacement, and destruction that continues to be enacted in Palestine, in Gaza and the West Bank.

I struggle with the meaning of my work in the face of this human tragedy. I persevere because I believe education makes a difference, and that the impact of learning in one area uplifts learning in others.

The reality is there are no longer any universities in Gaza and more than 600,000 children, at this point, if they are still alive, have missed an entire year of schooling.

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There was so much involved in structuring the reading salons that you will read about here and so much behind the scenes work that is required to make such a project operational. My thanks to the Vancouver Writers Festival, author Wendy Roberts, and Pulpfiction Books, the incomparable independent bookstore in Vancouver, for providing their support in a multitude of ways. Thanks, too, to the staff at Simon Fraser University’s Vancouver campus for making sure the audio-visual systems worked, that the participants and I had refreshments to savour, and that the environment for our reading salons was comfortable, safe, and clean.

There is a significant leap from the immediacy and urgency of in-person field work to the drudgery and isolation of writing a dissertation. As someone who flounders

when tasks become less structured — whose response is to cram in so many other tasks and activities rather than to sit down and focus — I always run the risk of muddling my priorities. The Research Commons team at Simon Fraser University, both through the Thesis Writing Retreat and the online Thesis Writing Group they offer, provided the interventions I needed to get started in a meaningful way, to sustain my efforts, and to draw me back to this priority whenever I started to wander too far.

It can be a challenge during a multi-year venture to remember that one's success also depends on ensuring one's health, mental well-being, and enjoyment of life. Without the opportunity to dance my worries away with joy, in the exuberant company of the team at Zumba Vancouver, especially Denise Galay and Eric Robertson, I would not have been able to maintain my composure and manifest the fortitude I needed to negotiate the vagaries of everyday living.

Without my Whine & Wine friends, Alexandra Emlyn, who also reviewed my discussion protocol, and Meghan Sharir, I would have crumbled. Whether via Zoom at the height of the COVID pandemic, or socially distanced when the summer made outdoor meetings feasible, in our backyards, living rooms, and on our patios, we have talked, railed, ranted, gossiped, shared, listened, consoled, and laughed together in a way that makes it all better no matter how bad it gets. Thank you.

To Andrea Beale, Marc Ledwon, and Silvana Pimenta who work so hard to support my family in myriad ways, your friendship has come to mean so much to me. You have kept my world steady and my days possible.

There is an extended network of family relations and family friends whose belief in me has ensured that I have a solid sense of who I am and who I want to be in this world. That stability is a privilege, and I am profoundly appreciative.

To my father and my immediate family, you have made me a very lucky person. You may challenge me and drive me to distraction, you may tease me and make me cry, you make me laugh, and you make me feel special. You are the foundation of my world and the root of my success. To you, I owe everything. You rock!

To Mom, and the other loved ones I have lost through the years, I miss you.

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List of Terms

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CS	Cultural Studies
Email	Electronic Mail
FCDA/FCDS	Feminist Cultural Discourse Analysis/Studies
FCS	Feminist Cultural Studies
Chloe Brown	*Get A Life, Chloe Brown*
GSWS	Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
HEA	Happily-Ever-After
HFN	Happy-For-Now
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
Mister Bridgerton	*Romancing Mister Bridgerton*
REB	Research Ethics Board
RJ	Researcher's Journal
RS	Reading Salon (RS1 for Reading Salon One, etc.)
Seven Days	*Seven Days in June*
SFU	Simon Fraser University
VWF	Vancouver Writers Festival
Viscount	*The Viscount Who Loved Me*
WLM	Women's Liberation Movement

Inspirations

“Women catch courage from the women whose lives and writings they read, and women call the bearer of that courage friend.”

Carolyn G. Heilbrun

“Reading, I now know, rewards most when combined with reflective conversation.”

John Munro

“In films, novels, plays, stories, it is the laughter of women together that is the revealing sign, the spontaneous recognition of insight and love and freedom.”

Carolyn G. Heilbrun

“No one has imagined us.”

Adrienne Rich

It’s about damn time.

Lizzo

Chapter 1.

Resonance and Ubiquity: Introduction

> *"The reason for the predominance of sexual aspiration, I have decided, is that no other adventure has quite the symbolic force, not to mention the force of the entire culture, behind it."*
>
> *Carolyn G. Heilbrun, The Last Gift of Time. Life Beyond Sixty, p.103*

One word that characterizes the reaction women have when they first learn about my research into happily-ever-after (HEA) narratives is resonance. For example, at a February 2023 Simon Fraser University (SFU) thesis writing retreat, a young graduate student initiated a conversation with me during a private moment at the coffee station. She was intrigued, she said, by the overview I had provided about my research during the opening round of participant introductions, and she went on to share that she had recently become engaged to be married. Continuing with her story, she mentioned how her media consumption had influenced her expectations of intimate relationships, and that her expectations had complicated her understanding of what it meant to be in love and to love. Through her courtship and engagement, and over the course of her life with her soon to be husband, she had found it necessary to adjust her expectations as she learned what was required to sustain a relationship. The process this young woman described to me was a negotiation. A negotiation that involved wrestling with the question of who she wanted to be in the world, what love meant to her, and how to prepare herself for life as a married woman. In other words, she had to understand the terms she was accepting in making a decision that would shape the rest of her life according to what she had learned to be true for herself and in relation to the visions, representations, and specifications of society and popular culture.

Other women shared similar reactions whenever I started to talk about HEA narratives in media, whether those conversations were with people I knew or those I was meeting for the first time. The resonance these women expressed reflects the fact that individuals, from diverse backgrounds and who bear a multiplicity of identities, are familiar with this dominant script that has the power to direct their lives. This script, whether fictive, cultural, internalized, socialized, enforced, resisted, or rejected makes

marriage, a global institution that is experienced within specific local and personal contexts, central to a woman's future happiness and material well-being (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017). Because of their connection to the institution of marriage, HEA narratives are also rooted in patriarchal systems and power relationships that understand gender as binary and biology as destiny. They organize the stages of a woman's life into a mythology of roles. First, as a child born into social and cultural relations that attribute a value to her existence. Second, as an adolescent who becomes a young woman capable of reproduction and who launches a quest to find "the one" or whose kinship network of family and community directs her to "the one." Third, as the plot's climax, as a woman who assumes the roles of wife and mother, her crowning achievement. Popular culture's repetitions and reiterations of this script reinforce societal expectations and valorize one social arrangement above all others. Scholar Elizabeth Brake (2018) refers to this as amatonormativity or "the false belief that everyone is seeking the same kind of romantic, monogamous sexual love relationship, and the accompanying evaluative judgement that such a relationship is best for everyone" (p. 68).

In North American popular culture, HEA is intertwined with notions of romantic love and marrying for love. This theme is reproduced in creative outputs from many industries including music, film, theatre, television, advertising, social media, fan art, and in the world of publishing (Weisser, 2013). According to The NPD Group (2020), a global information company, the interest in print books relating to love and marriage, for example, was greater in 2019 than in the previous five years. A December 2017 NPD study conducted for the Romance Writers of America (RWA) found that romance accounted for 23% of US fiction market sales with a readership that was 82% female (RWA, 2021). The average age range of the 2,000 romance readers participating in the RWA study was 35 to 39 years old with the majority, 73%, identifying as white/Caucasian and 86% as heterosexual or straight (RWA, 2021). According to another news report, 40 million romance books sold in 2019 for revenues of $336 million USD (Grady, 2020). This total was for traditional print publications and electronic publishing only. It did not include self-published work, which is a significant market segment in the genre (Roach, 2016). The popularity of the genre continues to grow. For 2022, a 52.4% increase in sales of romance books powered an 8.5% increase in fiction sales in the United States (Milliot, 2023). The volume of romance sales for the year reached approximately 19 million units, a level that had not been reached since 2014,

and this growth was linked specifically to the print format (NPD, 2022). In Canada's English-language trade book market, there was a 42% increase in romance book sales in the period from 2017 to 2022 with much of the increase occurring during 2021 and 2022 (Alarcón, 2023). The popularity of the BookTok romance community and hashtags such as #RomanceRecs are driving this trend, pointing to the development of new — and younger — reader groups for the genre (Alarcón, 2023; NPD, 2022)

According to popular press reports from 2019, romance fiction has become more inclusive and diverse in response to societal changes (Leach, 2019). As of May 2023, for example, LGBTQ fiction in the United States reached a historic level of 6.1 million units sold (NPD, 2023). The category that experienced the most significant growth under this more inclusive umbrella was adult romance with a 40% increase in sales over a similar time frame in the previous year (NPD, 2023). In the romance fiction field now, bestsellers include stories of same-sex relationships and book covers feature diverse representations, while characters include those who are neurodivergent or those who contend with mental illness (Asmelash, 2023). Despite such changes the essential component of a romance novel today, as it has been from the start, is the notion of a singular successful intimate relationship — a HEA and more recently a "happy-for-now" (HFN) ending. HFN endings establish a couple's commitment to one another and to the new relationship they have formed. It also recognizes both the possibility of impermanence and that the outcome for the pair may not be marriage. Furthermore, most romance readers identify as white and that means selling stories that encompass diverse identities and experiences is a more challenging endeavour for publishers whose business model depends on navigating the benefit of issuing new stories against their marketability (Asmelash, 2023).

I have felt the pull of these stories in my own life, and I recognize that fiction about women's lives continues to privilege HEA-HFN plotlines over others. These stories have the potential to impact one's sense of identity, being, and material existence to varying degrees, from negligible to substantive or not at all. As a result, I was curious about responses to these life-shaping scripts, and I wanted to interrogate the experiences of today's readers, especially those who identify as women. Building on the work of Catherine M. Roach (2016) and her guiding research question of "what do you think about romance?" (p. xiii) and following the example of Janice Radway's

(1984/1991) foundational inquiry into romance readers, I developed the following research question to guide my work:

> **In what ways does the engagement of women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with HEA-HFN narratives?**

My interest in exploring the responses of women readers to HEA-HFN narratives as cultural scripts represented the launch of a dialogic research effort. I also realized that talking to women about their experiences, interactions, relationships, engagements, and refusals would illuminate the theoretical paradigms I have engaged with during my academic career and that I continue to delve into as an emerging scholar. This approach would also allow me to combine theory and conversation in a constructive and generative way, a practice that is central to my teaching and learning styles.

Although the HEA-HFN trajectory is the dominant depiction in popular culture, particularly in romance fiction, alternative representations of women's lives exist in various media forms whether fictional or non-fictional. For example, I have read a fictional depiction of polyamory (Peterson, 2017), a memoir of being forty, single, and childless (MacNicol, 2018), and a non-fiction book about negotiating a new form of Black womanhood (Kendrick, 2019). There are documentaries exploring the process women go through when deciding whether to have children (Trump, 2018) and resources to support communities that form around the decision not to have children (The Not Mom, 2021). In Korea, in a dramatic manifestation of refusal, young women have launched the 4B movement and renounced the heterosexual imperatives of love, romance, sex, marriage, and motherhood (Lee & Jeong, 2021). However, these alternatives do not occupy space in the public imaginary, what some deem as a "cultural moment of heteropessimism (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022, p. 1903), in the way that the traditional narratives of women's lives do. While there is a general lack of women's representation in many creative industries (Donahue, 2019), the paucity of positive popular culture representations of women who are not part of a duo, married, and/or have children, or who are not searching to occupy these roles, is notable. Furthermore, women's happiness, particularly in American popular culture, is frequently portrayed as dependent on a successful acquisition of love or a "quest to love" (hooks, 2000/2018, p. xxviii), a public pedagogy that corporate media producers, such as the Walt Disney Company, continually reinforce (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017, p. 958). For women who are happily single

or who are happily childless, it feels like arriving “in a land without stories” (MacNicol, 2018, p. 54). It is a form of narrative erasure and social invisibility.

Challenges to the standard HEA-HFN depictions of women’s lives also appear in print and broadcast media. Some question the centrality of marriage (Catron, 2019; Cohen, 2020; Cook, 2020) and others question the apotheosis of motherhood (Glaser, 2021; Hauser, 2021). There is also a perception in public discourse that women are in a state of crisis, one that predates the onset of the global pandemic (Jaffe, 2021), and that women are the targets of disaster patriarchy or a war on women (V, 2021). However, the HEA-HFN life script is resilient, persistent, and inescapable, in life as it is in the pages of a book or at the heart of other media portrayals (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017). The dominance of these HEA-HFN narratives has endured despite critiques from scholars such as Carolyn Heilbrun, activists, advocates, and women themselves, whether individually or collectively. Heilbrun, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University until she retired in 1992, often explored the role of women’s narratives in perpetuating patriarchal systems that limited a woman’s agentic participation in the world.

Heilbrun published a biography of Gloria Steinem in 1995 and co-founded the Gender and Culture series at Columbia University Press. She also wrote mysteries under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross. In *Writing a Woman’s Life*, she (1988/2008) urged women to write about their own lives and the lives of other women in ways that did not depend on the map of a man’s life or the map of sexist interpretations (Pollitt, 2008, xii). She demanded that women take charge of telling their own stories in their own voices and in an authentic manner because she believed such actions were essential to women’s claim to power, which she defined as “the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (Heilbrun, 1988/2008, p. 18). Heilbrun asserted that “we live our lives through texts” and that stories serve as models, not lives (p. 37). She felt that the narratives of female lives would be told, “when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and stories of men” (p. 47). She argued for the reinvention of women’s stories and urged women to develop their own quest narratives, whether fictional, biographical, or autobiographical, beyond those that ended in romantic fulfillment or romantic disillusionment (Heilbrun, 1988/2008). More acutely, she called for the reinvention of womanhood because in her view failing to do so would confine women to gender prison (Heilbrun, 1993, p. 210).

Society, according to Heilbrun (1988/2008), limited the scope of women's ability to dream of potentialities because "women daydream erotic scripts, men ambitious ones" (p. 103). This binary opposition of the erotic versus the ambitious, she argued, constrained women's participation in the public realm to a singular, inevitable outcome of love, marriage, and motherhood. In this, Heilbrun's argument echoes the more contemporary work of Sara Ahmed (2010) who theorizes the concept of a feminist horizon. In Ahmed's view, women and other groups have had to claim authority and power in systems and structures that say they have none. Reclaiming the capacity to reason, judge, and act, means setting the horizon beyond the imprisoning wall of ideologies of difference, including gender (Ahmed, 2010, Chapter 2). The insistence that women will find happiness when they find their one true love, for example, obviates critiques of institutions such as compulsory heterosexuality, romantic love, and the inevitability of becoming part of a couple or a coupling imperative. In Doris Lessing's (1962/1999) novel *The Golden Notebook*, her character Anna critiques this willingness to pursue happiness without questioning when she laments, "Sometimes I dislike women, I dislike us all, because of our capacity for not-thinking when it suits us; we choose not to think when we are reaching out for happiness" (pp. 464-465). When women's happiness is equated to a love that arrives as soon as cupid's arrow pierces the heart, then it has the potential to be an uncritical acceptance of a social norm rather than a carefully considered choice.

Academic investigations into HEA-HFN narratives, as well as their discursive functions, take many forms and there is a long tradition of scholarship in this area (Kamblé, Selinger, & Teo, 2021). It has intrigued an interdisciplinary range of scholars in fields that include women's studies, feminist theory, feminist cultural studies, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, literary studies, and popular romance studies. In this panoply of explorations, a key theme has been the impact of gender roles and societal expectations on women's lives, and the role of desire, fantasy, and pleasure in women's media consumption. Such inquiries include studies of readers (Kraxenberger et al., 2021; Radway, 1984/1991); romance novels and the many sub-genres of romance fiction (Clawson, 2005; Frantz & Selinger, 2012a; Ménard & Cabrera, 2011); romance discourses and romantic practices including the definitions of love, romantic love and how they operate within culture and popular culture (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000; Gleason & Selinger, 2016; Human & Quayle, 2020; Pismenny, 2018; Roach, 2016; Swidler, 2001;

Weisser, 2013); the construction of love and marriage in contemporary times (Brake, 2018; Koontz & Norman, 2019); challenges to social institutions such as marriage, motherhood, heterosexuality, monogamy, and the structure of intimate relationships in general (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Ferrer, 2018; Green et al., 2016; Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991); settler colonial heteropatriarchy, *Otherness*, whiteness, and global points of contact (Arvin et al., 2013; Ramos-García & Vivanco, 2020); and media representations (Rossi, 2011).

This array offers a glimpse into the range of research and scholarship in this multi-layered, much explored space although it is neither a comprehensive list nor an exhaustive one. As I began to explore the range of material on HEA-HFN narratives and how they manifest in the lives of women, what surprised me was not the resonance my research had for others. What surprised me was the intensely personal nature of the research inquiry upon which I had embarked. I have always been a reader and a writer. I read widely and in many different genres including romance fiction, which I no longer read regularly. However, there have been times in my life where I was a devotee of the genre and obsessed with the HEA-HFN outcome of such stories.

When I finally read Janice Radway's (1984/1991) *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, I knew many of the titles and authors she referenced, and I also recognized the era since I was an adult at the time of her study. I felt a strong sense of identification with Radway's participants even though I shared so little with them beyond our entanglement with romance novels. Today, scholars, researchers, and theorists continue to reference Radway's work (Gregson & Lois, 2021) although popular romance studies scholars also critique her feminist bias, psychoanalytic focus, and deficit depiction of romance novel readers (Frantz & Selinger, 2012b). There was yet another personal dimension that emerged for me as I began to study this topic more rigorously. As I read Radway's work and the work of others, I felt more and more connected to my maternal grandmother, Vida Lee Azan, who was born and raised in Jamaica. She was an avid reader of Mills & Boon, a long-standing imprint for romance novels, a precursor of Harlequin Romances, and now a subsidiary of that organization. I knew my grandmother and loved her dearly, but I did not know her as a person. She was visible and yet invisible, working in the shadows of an extroverted husband and on behalf of a large family. So, what did it mean to her to be a romance fiction reader? She died in 1984, and I will never fully know the answer to that

speculative question. I like to believe that my own experience and her legacy are part of what has made this area of research resonate with me to such a profound degree.

In thinking about my grandmother and her paperback romance novels, I realized that an exploration into HEA-HFN narratives as presented in romance fiction also entails understanding the function of reading in a person's life. Specifically, it warrants grasping with the nature of the activity and its meaning to readers, particularly for women. Reading is an engagement in the present that brings a text to life with purpose and intention. The agentic act is in the reanimation and reimagining of the words, the characters, the people, the worlds, the places, the plots, and the stories, whether fiction or non-fiction. The gendered nature of reading, and the way it reflects the gendered nature of society, is an impetus to studying women readers because when women use reading to understand their *now*, they reveal the reality of the material conditions that impact their lives. In learning more about their *now*, women gain insight into the social scripts that see them as less than whole, deficient, and dependent. With this knowledge informed women readers can shift the discourses that focus on self-improvement, fixing the self, and blaming the individual to those that investigate and interrogate the systems, structures, and historical legacies with which women grapple. The narrative of women readers as a historical phenomenon is a narrative of challenging boundaries, constraints, and limitations to claim the right to be in the public realm, to debate as a peer, and to engage in discourse (Flint, 1993; Jack, 2012; Long, 2003).

It is also about building community. Empathy and storytelling have helped women express solidarity although universalizing solidarity based on gender has the potential to risk ignoring the systemic and structural issues that continue to divide individuals, communities, and societies from one another (Chabot Davis, 2004, p. 407). At an individual level, the power of story helps women build a strong sense of self. Similarly, the romance readers in Janice Radway's (1984/1991) study insisted that "a romance is, first and foremost, a story about a woman" (p. 64). The foregrounding of women as protagonists shows a way readers use reading to resist the reality of being secondary characters in the larger social context (Heilbrun, 1988/2008; see also Jack, 2012; Long, 2003). If gender can form the basis of such a strong identification, then the potential remains, even in the digital era, of using reading to build bridges across other markers of identity such as race, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity. The same argument applies to writers who use identity markers in their writing to resist normative

standards and feature protagonists — themselves in memoir and autobiography, their characters in fiction — who are proud of their differences and empowered, not victimized, by them (Robson, 2021, p. 31).

In cultural studies and feminist cultural studies, the concept of conjuncture reflects the understanding that historical and cultural contexts shape media consumption. The transformation of Britain at the end of World War II led people such as Oxford Rhodes Scholar Stuart Hall to explore “contemporary conjunctures” to comprehend changes in society and to detail, more specifically, the relations between culture and society (Lehtonen, 2016, p. 209). As a result, there remains a need to continually explore the power of narratives in the moment (Ménard, 2013). With the recent proliferation of genres such as erotic novels, the emergence of digital technologies, the dynamics of online fan communities, and large-scale cultural events associated with popular published books and their adaptations to other media forms, scholars cannot simply extend the findings from earlier studies to today’s readers (Kraxenberger et al., 2021, p. 2). Thus, HEA-HFN narratives merit ongoing scholarly attention because despite the depth of existing academic inquiry, specifically feminist challenges to this storyline, societies and cultures continue to revere, value, and prioritize women in monogamous life-long relationships.

In working to understand the power of popular culture’s HEA-HFN mythology, this research project retains the promise of an emancipatory exercise mapping out avenues that exist “to think and live intimate relationships in more spacious ways” (Ferrer, 2018, p. 4). That is, through my efforts, in dialogue and in conjunction with those who chose to participate in this study, I wanted to expand the conversation beyond the page and “the fantasy conquest of patriarchy” (Roach, 2010). In designing this exploration of romance fiction, I adopted a feminist stance that change is possible and that “it is a feminist position that we live in patriarchy but that this condition is not inevitable” (Snitow, 2018, p. 93). In other words, I projected that the responses of women readers to HEA-HFN stories would offer insight into how this narrative operates in relation to twenty-first century norms, and why “the power of the story does not die” (Roach, 2010). The conversations of the group would help pinpoint spaces within the alternatives and ambivalences of contemporary feminisms to challenge the power and pervasiveness of HEA-HFN narratives (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020).

The research study I designed reflected my interest in the power of HEA-HFN narratives; their potential to sway women's imaginations and their ability to lower the horizon of how women choose to define success, happiness, and accomplishment in their lives. In embarking on this work, I questioned the valorization of the pair in romantic arrangements that are exclusive and lifelong. I was curious whether broadening the scope of the dialogue would help to foster resistance and refusal to this dominant script about intimate relationships and social arrangements. That is, would the experience of a group of women reading and discussing this form of fiction serve as a feminist space and a feminist act to cultivate opposition to patriarchal systems, structures, and institutions? This aspiration reflected my belief, one that echoes the approaches of many qualitative researchers, that working together in feminist spaces creates the knowledge that is necessary to move towards a future that is more just and more equitable (Berg et al., 2022, p. 663).

To engage with the subject of HEA-HFN narratives in the company of women readers, I knew that feminist theory offered me a standpoint from which to explore women's everyday lives. In this, I also assumed a connection between knowledge and action (Namaste, 2009, p. 12) as well as a political function to knowledge in making realities visible (p. 16). I also had concerns. If my knowledge production were to make the material impact of HEA-HFN more visible, would my efforts be cast as an attempt to destroy belief in the power of love and the victory at the heart of romance fiction that it portends? To proceed, I had to overcome my hesitation that others would perceive me as taking away comfort from women who believe that the world can be a better place because of love. Despite these and other potential drawbacks, I took pleasure, as I set out to conduct my research study, in anticipating what I would learn in the company of other women and the work we would do together to make sense of the enduring appeal of HEA-HFN narratives. Susan Ostrov Weisser (2013) identifies this as an effort "to understand and mediate the conflict between women's right to pleasure, romantic as well as sexual, and the feminist imperative to change the social forces that shape that pleasure at the expense of other rights and powers" (p. 16). It is about "the drama of the self in culture" (Kress, 1997, p. 130) and this is what I chose to explore, strove to comprehend, and endeavoured to summarize. This is what I share here as my contribution to the discourse about women in the conjuncture of our times and about their negotiations in relation to the ubiquity and resonance of HEA-HFN narratives today.

Chapter 2.

Surveying the Landscape: Literature Review

> *"People who know what they want are always unusual, particularly if what they want isn't to be found along one of the well-worn paths furnished by society for the use of the young."*
>
> *Amanda Cross, The Question of Max, p. 150*

The arc of happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives bends — inevitably and with certitude — to the union of two people, the formation of a couple, two people that have found each other and forged a commitment to one another through the travails of meeting, conflict, and courtship. Historically, this couple is comprised of a man and a woman, one person from each of the opposing categories of gender. With this emphasis on a heteronormative pairing, HEA-HFN narratives occupy space in the world of the heterosexual imaginary, which scholar Chrys Ingraham (2020) defines as "that way of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness" (p. 327). Heterosexuality becomes the overarching paradigm of HEA-HFN narratives, one that is structured and endowed with attributes such as being natural and normal (Ingraham, 2020, p. 326).

In effect, heterosexuality operates as an organizing principle within a patriarchal structure that maintains hierarchies based on gender, race, class, sex, disability, and other vectors of identity (Ingraham, 2020; see also Gieseler, 2018). Ingraham (2020) argues that heterosexuality as a social institution merits critical analysis, especially an analysis that explores how heterosexuality is learned, how it controls individuals, and how it contributes to social inequalities (p. 327). To me, Ingraham's notion of the heterosexual imaginary can be pushed even further to posit a love imaginary. As Susan Ostrov Weiser (2013) writes, "In our society, there is a Tinker bell approach to 'believing in love': it authorizes itself, much like religious faith" (p. 6). As a result, in the same way that imaginaries, such as the heterosexual and love imaginaries, merit critical examination, so do romance fiction and the HEA-HFN narratives that popular culture repeats, reiterates, and reinforces. These elements of popular culture play a role in sustaining the understanding, or the illusion of the heterosexual and love imaginaries that all will be well in the world, tranquil, safe, and whole, when humans fall in love, find

their one true soul mate, and bind to one another for life. The foundational institution of this heterosexual imaginary may be marriage, yet even more fundamentally it is the notion of pairing, a coupling imperative. As the coupling imperative within these imaginaries becomes more inclusive, to encompass diverse gender and sexual identities for example, the question is whether this social organizing principle valorizing two remains the same or is it also transformed into one that is less exclusive, less patriarchal, and less oppressive (Spade & Willse, 2016). To turn my critical gaze on these imaginaries, I have situated my work in a landscape of academic pursuits, investigations, and scholarship, specifically on these three pillars of inquiry: (2.1) feminist cultural studies (FCS), (2.2) epistemologies and ontologies, and (2.3) women readers' relationships to and with HEA-HFN narratives.

2.1. Feminist Cultural Studies Values Women's Interests and Pursuits

Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957), the British novelist, essayist, scholar, and devout Anglican (Haack, 2008, p. 27), lived an unconventional life and articulated a more expansive vision of what a woman's life could be in her fiction. In a 1938 address to an unspecified Women's Society, Sayers posed this question: are women human? One may scoff at Sayers' question, as members of her audience likely did, and reply, "Well, of course women are human!" However, the question merits consideration as a challenge to the biological determinism and essentialism that is the historical cornerstone of a woman's sense of self, particularly within the patriarchal tradition of western philosophy, culture, and society. It is a tradition that posits the subject-self as masculine, virtuous, and sagacious (Willett, Anderson, & Meyers, 2016) and the feminine as otherwise (see also Ahmed, 2004). It is a legacy that women have struggled against, in successive manifestations — individually and collectively — to assert themselves as independent beings of value beyond the roles of wife and mother. Sayers insisted that occupation and the ability to provide for oneself were human rights independent of gender. When men asked her what women wanted, as she explained to her audience in 1938, her answer was that women, as human beings, wanted what men did: "interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet" (Sayers, 1938/2005, p. 175). As Nancy K. Miller (2013), co-founder of the Gender and Culture Series at Columbia University Press, writes in her memoir about

life in Paris in the 1960s, it is the aspiration of women to be “self-possessed, independent, and unafraid” (p. 7).

Within her literary work, as with her 1938 address to a Women’s Society, Sayers shared more than stories and philosophical views. In her fiction, she provided snapshots of politics, culture, society, and social history, demonstrating a breadth and depth of scholarship in the intricacy of her plots (Martin, 2016, p. 26). This intricacy, however, was from an exclusionary perspective that was white, Anglo-centric, heteronormative, and upper class. At the time of Sayers’s public address, Europe was on the brink of World War II, it was decades before the development of cultural studies, a field of scholarship that emerged in the crucible of post-war Britain. Yet in her exploration of this question — are women human? — Sayers anticipated key preoccupations of cultural studies (CS) and feminist cultural studies (FCS), especially the issues of women’s agency, subject status, and material well-being.

Given Sayers’s use of fiction to understand the now, the contemporary conjuncture, of her historical period, she is a forerunner of FCS as are other voices that existed before the discipline was labelled as such (Thornham, 2000; see also Connell & Hilton, 2016a, p. xv). The essence of FCS — the soul one might say — is in the stories women tell of their lives. They are ordinary stories that may not exist except in family lore. Many of these stories have been lost because of history’s indifference to them and society’s devaluation of their worth because of their association with the feminine. The central issue, within FCS albeit not exclusively, is to understand which stories are told, who receives them, to what purpose, and how they are investigated, recorded, analyzed, interpreted, distributed, understood, represented, and acted upon. It is about the person’s own understanding of their material existence as rooted in their historical, cultural, and social contexts (Wachtel, 2019). Women’s stories exist in many forms and encompass fictional as well as non-fictional accounts because fiction and life writing approximate one another as genres in terms of the content and the way time and memory work. The past, present, and future are interwoven in conscious, subconcious, and unconscious ways.

As Ingraham (2020) emphasizes, it is culture that instills and installs meaning in the lives of everyone from the time that each person enters the social world (p. 326). Deborah Philips (2020) notes:

> The study of popular fictions has always been integral to the development of cultural studies, and the analysis of romance fiction and television soap opera established spaces in which feminist voices made gender politics intrinsic to the field. (p. 901)

Thus, research inquiries into women and happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives align well with FCS because scholars and researchers in the field investigate women's experiences in relation to patriarchal systems, structures, and discourses. Such inquiries into the conjuncture of women's lives focus on questions of agency, subject status, and material well-being through an analytical lens that encompasses gender and other vectors of identity (Connell & Hilton, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Thornham, 2000). The essence of FCS is to inquire into the stories women tell of their lives and to investigate their interactions with representations across media forms as audiences, consumers, content producers, meaning makers, message replicators, product distributors, compliant objects, and autonomous subjects.

FCS also creates discursive spaces to challenge the way knowledge is produced and reproduced, especially in relation to interrogating women's place in the world (Franklin, Lury, & Stacey, 1991). Since FCS consolidated as a field in the 1970s, Western notions of identity and subjectivity have shifted. Construction of the self has transitioned from efforts to manufacture a sense of wholeness into a never-ending project of self-improvement to build the self as a brand (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020; Genz, 2015; McRobbie, 2020). At the same time, the nature of media has evolved: what constitutes the literary is in flux and the participatory nature of the internet era creates new realms for audiences to formulate, manufacture, and distribute media texts (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011). One constant in these feminist-oriented inquiries has been the focus on media genres and products that societies perceive as being for a female audience. Within this cultural realm, another constant has been the perusal of women's relationship to reading as a manifestation and experience of desire, fantasy, sexuality, love, romance, pleasure, and imagination, which all figure significantly in the perpetuation of HEA-HFN constructs.

Feminist theorists also analyze the relationship of women to patriarchy, its discourses, manifestations, institutions, and power dynamics. In early scholarship, particularly among the radical feminists of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), scholars used gender as the primary lens for the analysis of oppression. They believed

that biological difference was the fundamental building block in the construction and creation of societies and cultures, which resulted in the inequality of a sex class system. Such environments and contexts compelled women to exploit their value as female objects to survive, secure economic sustenance, and safeguard or improve their social status, a process Shulamith Firestone (1970/2015) labelled hetaerism. In contrast to feminism, FCS expands the analysis of women's situation in society to encompass factors other than gender. The influence of feminism on feminist cultural studies is the focus on the theorization of women's subordination in a patriarchal society: what it is, its historical basis, and how it is reproduced (see also Franklin, Lury, & Stacey, 1991). The influence of cultural studies on feminism has been the insistence on the cultural construction of meaning, images, and identity as well as the relational aspects of power and inequality (see also Ambjörnsson & Ganetz, 2013). In the decades since the WLM, multiple theoretical paradigms have emerged to explain women's oppression. However, a lingering perception in the popular public imaginary is that men function as a class of oppressors in a patriarchal system that absolves their actions and only manifests concern for women "once the damage is done" (Ukuku, 2021).

In addition, FCS has played a role in shifting the understanding of what constitutes research in the field and the position of researchers in their investigations. It has also broadened the definition of what is valuable as study material and who is valued as a study subject. The basis for FCS work is rooted in observation, description, identification, empathy, and understanding. It is not meant to be prescriptive or proscriptive in terms of the subject and critique is reserved for the systems and structures with which the subject must contend. Change, in FCS, is not about designating individuals as flawed. It is about understanding the ways in which society and culture must be reshaped to allow imperfect human beings to strive and thrive without allowing the institutions and discourses of culture, society, economics, and politics to victimize, marginalize, oppress, and exploit them. Elspeth Probyn (2016) describes the strengths and innovations of cultural studies, and by extension FCS, as interdisciplinary, theoretical, critical, and practical.

This approach is exemplified in the work of Angela McRobbie, Emeritus Professor of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths University of London. McRobbie's (2013) interests as an undergraduate were gender, popular culture and sexuality and more specifically romance and feminine conformity, all of which came

under the rubric of deviancy in the early 1970s (p. 828). She chose the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham for her graduate work because in 1974, as she explains, it was the only “academic space which connected everyday phenomena with the serious study of cultural forms, such as girl’s magazines” (p. 828). Furthermore, McRobbie explains that as academic feminists in the 1970s, she and her colleagues were lured to the study of subjectivity and autobiography (p. 831) although this interest in narrative and gender, or the two pillars of feminist criticism, waned in the 1990s (Miller, 2019, p. 136). In my analysis of the history of FCS, I identified three categories to capture the thematic evolutions of the discipline. Borrowing the real estate industry maxim of location, location, location, I describe these sites as (2.1.1.) location: body, mind, and consciousness; (2.1.2.) location: space, place, and time; and (2.1.3.) location: narratives, representations, and truths.

2.1.1. Location: Body, Mind, and Consciousness

Academic work that centres women as the subject of analysis contends with issues of corporeality, corporeity, and the meanings attached to biological sex differences (Ponterotto, 2016). This biological orientation, and its various iterations, applies to any group or individual designated *other* to the hegemonic white, cis-gender male power holder of the Western construct. Despite evidence from science that sex is not a distinctly physical category (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and from neuroscience that the notion of a female brain is a myth (Rippon, 2019), the idea that biological sex equates to an essence of what it means to be a woman is embedded in Western society and culture. The interpolation of physical difference into cultural and social difference is the root of inequality, particularly in the way it has been connected to those who are entitled to hold and exercise power. It is a theme reflected in cultural representations of women (see Sutherland & Felty, 2016) including ancient sources that are foundational to Western thought and philosophy.

In *Women & Power: A Manifesto*, Mary Beard (2017) explains that Ancient Greek drama emphasized women’s unsuitability to power. If women claimed power or exercised power, social disorder was inevitable. Beard (2017), a professor of classics at Cambridge University, a television personality, blogger, and social media personality, cites the examples of Medea, Antigone, and Clytemnestra, and writes, “They are monstrous hybrids, who are not, in the Greek sense, women at all” (p. 59). In these

depictions and representations, the rule of man is the remedy for the chaos of woman. The development of Christianity and the biblical creation story has also had a profound effect on the understanding of gendered relationships, and the resultant religious attitudes to women's bodies have shaped, informed, and influenced the construction of society (Pagels, 1989). These public narratives and discourses about women's bodies, which are rooted in myth, religion, tradition, philosophy, and culture are frameworks for understanding issues such as morality, power, rationality, reproduction, sexuality, and consumption (see various chapters in Gill & Scharff, 2011).

In the 1970s, mirroring the concerns of feminism and feminist theory, researchers and academics in feminist cultural studies (FCS) relied on the essentialist category of women as a class to challenge the male-centred construction and interpretation of theoretical frameworks such as Marxism. Lucy Bland (2013) has characterized this approach as "a rather crude emphasis on reproduction as well as production" (p. 687). According to Sue Thornham (2000), engagement with the topic of the body and biological difference provided evidence of the greatest strain between feminism and cultural studies in this early phase of FCS (p. 14 & p.155). The WLM identified and named gender as the root problem of women's subordination and those engaged with the work of FCS were concerned with developing theory. In this time of theoretical introspection, FCS developed methods and methodologies to investigate the application of theory to women's experiences of life. However, the decades that followed, the 1980s and the 1990s, were eras of theory fragmentation. Rather than viewing this process as a liability, others consider postfeminism and the proliferation of positions and movements it has introduced as valid and interrelated (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p. 2).

Beyond theoretical examinations of the body and culture, a further challenge for FCS is to understand the relationship between mind and body, in particular the roles that fantasy and desire play in the individual construction of identity. This connection between the psychic and social realm has been a challenge for CS and FCS scholarship when the emphasis has been on texts rather than subjects (Jefferson, 2016, p. 120). Such a stern assessment of the value of texts contrasts with the wistful regret Angela McRobbie (2013) expresses about early FCS scholars who distanced themselves from scholarship that would have led them to rediscover "women writers, novelists, playwrights or artists who had been lost to history" because at the time theoretical Marxism and psychoanalysis seemed to offer more avenues of inquiry into

“understanding sexuality, desire and pleasure in our own lives” (p. 831; see also McRobbie, 2009, p. 6). Scholars have also raised concerns about the politicization of psychoanalysis that occurs when it is used to explain the sexual and domestic oppression of women (Thornham, 2000, p. 72). Psychoanalysis, especially as promulgated by Freud, is politicized because it embeds patriarchal understandings of women and medical-physical discourses are socio-cultural discourses. For example, work on the history of hysteria shows that decoded symptoms, psychotherapy engagements, and written records are not so much documentation of psychosomatic or physical maladies, but testaments to conflicts over the interpretation of femininity in particular historical contexts (Showalter, 1993, p. 288). Within a psychoanalytic framework, being a woman is to be a failed man or not a man. As a non-subject, or an object, society and culture can justify denying women selfhood, personhood, agency, rationality, and freedom. Nevertheless, the complexities of women’s lives defy a simplified subject-object binary, and the richness of FCS analyses resides within understanding the conjunctures of women’s subjectivities.

2.1.2. Location: Space, Place, and Time

The themes of space, place, and time intrigue scholars across academic disciplines with analyses focusing on the relationship of these components to borders, boundaries, and identity. Such work also examines how individuals and/or groups move, interact, disrupt, inhabit, and subvert such bounded areas of existence (Keough & Culhane, 2015, p. 40). For FCS, interest in women’s bodies and the concept of women as a subordinated class leads to questions about the spaces and places society and culture allows or permits these bodies and this class to occupy and inhabit. In grappling with this topic, the challenge is to recognize that *woman* is not an immutable, universal, or all-encompassing category and what may be true in academic discussions, and the material reality of space and place, often privileges the experiences of white, well-to-do, cisgender, heterosexual, non-disabled women and their feminisms (see Eric-Udorie, 2018a, p. xiv & xxii; see various chapters in Eric-Udorie, 2018; Taylor, 2017, p. 4-5).

Historically, society and culture have situated women within a private domestic sphere that is associated with characteristics such as passivity and functions such as motherhood (Elliot, 1989; see also Lazar 2017). Those who challenge and defy this boundary bear the consequences of such transgressions, consequences that often

involve discipline and punishment. Mobility across such boundaries is a distinguishing feature of privilege because the delineation of space locates power as a force and locates the counter-reaction to expressions of power (Moussa, 2014, p. 99). Early feminist cultural studies (FCS) scholars went to the spaces where women were and where women spent their time whether it was to examine housewives and their isolation, working class girls and femininity, or cultural representations in women's magazines (Women's Studies Group, 1978/2007). Although the researchers paid attention to class distinctions, their focus at the time neglected women who had always been required to work outside the home (hooks, 1984/2000). These academic explorations, as innovative as they were, also tended to reinforce the essentialized nature of women's spaces and women's cultures.

In contemporary times, public discourses challenge the idea that women are limited to certain spaces, particularly in the Western context. However, such utopian assertions tend to overlook the ways in which political, economic, and legal systems – rather than merely cultural differences – continue to operate in exclusionary ways for women, and even more for women who face burdens of oppressive systems in addition to those of gender and class, such as race, sexuality, and disability. Memoirist, former sex worker, and cofounder of TigerBee Press, Charlotte Shane (2018) labels the feminism that informs such a position "sabotage feminism" (p. 9). In Shane's (2018) view, it is the type of feminism that celebrates the success of women in high-profile corporate roles rather than one that offers a sustained critique of the corporation, the hierarchical corporate structure, or the societal benefit of the corporate rewards that accrue primarily to the prosperity of individuals (p. 6). In a global context, religious fundamentalism has also played a significant role in challenging feminism and feminist actions around the world (Mohanty, 2003, p. 508). The long-term result of these multiple factors has been a reactionary resurgence that threatens women's rights and legislation that targets social services, programs, and civil protections.

Of all the spaces humans occupy globally, in various iterations and with varying degrees of privileged access, the online realm is one of the most contentious. In the virtual world, more than with geography or physical placement, space and identity merge to such a degree that they often become conflated (Moussa, 2014, p. 97). While this convergence contains the promise of a liberating function and social equalization, an optimistic view overlooks the dangers and pitfalls of social media including the way

notions of gender and labour are embedded in the very structure of new media (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 567). For example, even with movements such as #MeToo that have emerged online, there are critical questions about the exclusions embedded in this initiative and its limitations (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2018). These movements build awareness of sexual violence, but despite their visibility and impact, the online abuse and harassment of women and minorities continues with ferocity. Large social media companies, including Facebook (now Meta), Twitter (now X), and YouTube, appear unwilling to address the misogynistic, racist, and hateful rhetoric that have turned the visionary virtual commons into a parade of predatory practices (McCullough, 2023). There is also the issue of private corporate control of what functions as a public arena. The challenge for feminist scholars is to understand the operations of narrative control and discourse manipulation online without reinforcing a binary of corporate malfeasance versus utopian good (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 578).

The mechanisms society has used to demarcate and devalue the space and place for women and girls include adherence to a strict gender binary and its associated feminine gender roles as well as the socialization into femininity (see Gill & Sharff, 2011a, p.2). Early feminist theorists located this socialization in the family unit (see for example hooks, 1984/2000, p. 38; Firestone, 2015) although this approach fails to recognize the function of family as refuge (Gill, 2007, p. 27). The broader perspective of FCS took family structure into account, incorporated economic analysis, and introduced the element of media analysis (Gill, 2007). This generative process of considering other theoretical perspectives and vectors of analysis has expanded to look at the relationships between femininity, beauty, and feminine roles and neoliberal capitalist consumerism (McRobbie, 2009; McRobbie, 2013a; see also Lazar, 2017) as well as the emergence of confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017). There has been a further move to critique the normative pressures of social media.

In all these derivations, the central tension has been to understand the culture of femininity as a contradictory site of imprisonment and resistance. Decrying femininity risks ignoring the way in which it can also serve as a legitimizing force for women who are unable to exercise other means of self-empowerment (Thornham, 2000, p. 143) and the way in which women choose to engage with new media as a form of cultural production (Attwood, 2011, p. 208). To essayist Alicia Elliott, winner of the 2018 RBC Taylor Emerging Writer Award, the valuation of beauty in contemporary society has

material consequences for women. Elliott (2019) writes, “In a world where beauty equals worth, not being the right kind of beautiful has material consequences on the quality of your life - and your death” (p. 181). She reaches this conclusion through her personal experiences as an Indigenous woman and her observation of the lives of Indigenous women and girls in Canada.

Another consequence of the limitations and constraints of space and place on women has been their effective erasure from time, public consciousness, and the historical record. Women’s invisibility is the consequence when men and men’s experiences are assumed to be the default for the entirety of the human population (Gill, 2007, p. 9). This erasure, whether material, symbolic, or representational, is delineated in many ways including literary, geographical, or historical. For example, in *A Room of One’s Own*, author, essayist, and literary critic Virginia Woolf’s (1929/2005) fiction of Shakespeare’s doomed sister highlights the ways disinterest, discrimination, and disdain serve as obstacles to women’s visibility and participation in the creative realm (pp. 46-51). Similarly, transnational, postcolonial, and decolonial feminist scholarship have challenged the Euro-centric hegemonic scholarship that obscures a clear view of the lives of women in the Two-Thirds World, Third World/South (see Mohanty, 2003).

In another illustration of this discourse disparity, Evette Dionne (2018), a Black feminist writer and scholar, was shocked to recognize how she had internalized the gendered basis of the public discourse around police violence in the United States. She was able to name Black male victims more readily than those of Black women (Dionne, 2018, p. 64), and she attributed this shortcoming to the erasure of women from time and history. Kimberlé J. Crenshaw who originated the term intersectionality in 1989 — itself an encapsulation of the concepts of “interlocking oppressions” and “identity politics” articulated by the radical Black feminist Combahee River Collective in the 1970s (Taylor, 2017, p. 4) — is part of the group that established the #SayHerName movement to redress the gender gap in this public discourse (Dionne, 2018, p. 73). This demonstrates that when women are centred in public discourses, their narratives, their stories help construct the foundation for change. This is accomplished through various mechanisms, whether that is to build a sense of commonality across borders and differences to create solidarity, to emphasize differences as a bond, or in other formations of resistance, to pursue alterations to the status quo in the pursuit of equity, freedom, and justice.

2.1.3. Location: Narratives, Representations, and Truths

Sue Thornham (2000), in summarizing the work of Stuart Hall, writes that identities are changeable, they are a subject's specific narration, at a particular time with arbitrary timelines and structures, but it is only in constructing these identities and the stories that accompany them, "that we are able to act in the world" (p. 3). That is, narrative is the manifestation of subjectivity. It represents the agent's choice, arbitrary though it may be, to manifest as a subject and to determine the way in which that subject-hood will be enacted. Central to this self-determined exercise of subjectivity are the encounters, engagements, and interactions with cultural forms and artefacts including the reception of texts and the relationship to them. The traditional location for women as subjects in terms of narrative has been as the outsider. Similarly, the field of cultural studies (CS) was situated originally as an outsider to the academy and "marginality is a recurring theme in the Centre's [University of Birmingham's CCCS] history" (Connell & Hilton, 2016b, p. 63). This is, perhaps, one factor why the early focus of CS and feminist cultural studies (FCS) was on subcultures. Those involved in these disciplines identified with life on the margins. Today, however, CS and FCS along with women's studies, gender studies, queer studies, transgender studies, and disability studies, have migrated into the institutionalized setting of the modern corporate university where they struggle against the devaluation of fields in the humanities and social sciences that threatens to forget and ignore them.

The early practitioners of CS and FCS were working in an emergent field and their focus was on exploring texts in a wider context. To do so, they drew on theoretical frameworks of culture and society beyond literary criticism because the theoretical base for CS and FCS was either absent or existed in a very limited form. This vacuum pushed them to initially focus on interrogating various traditions to build a separate theoretical paradigm for the discipline within the academy (Dworkin, 2016, p. 12). The resultant critical, interdisciplinary, and multi-layered theoretical approach that characterizes CS and FCS is a strength of the field although it can also result in a dissipation of focus and purpose. In the cautionary words of Charlotte Brunsdon (2015) it is "the inter-disciplinary promiscuity of cultural studies (which can be so disastrous when there is no understanding of the contours of an intellectual field), and a certain excess of cultural studies, a recalcitrant materiality" (p. 95). In a similar vein to the theoretical innovation of

CS and FCS, women have had to innovate and improvise the telling of their own stories and to find their subject-voices in doing so.

Narratives and self-managed narratives make the conceptual or abstract subject-identity concrete, the identities that individuals envision, desire, and fantasize about. Originating in print, such stories are now also spoken, broadcast, filmed, drawn, and presented in a multitude of media texts. They are also mediated and negotiated through media representations that complicate the search for and understanding of women's lives since representation is often not at the discretion of the individual. The intricacies of representation have an impact on the understanding of relationships between individual identity and the positioning of individuals as consumers, commodities, producers, and critics of story and media. If cast only as consumers, then individuals are precluded from roles as producers, which is an insupportable presumption in the personalized media-saturated landscape of current existence. Individuals and groups can also enact forms of resistance to media and corporate representations in forms and texts they use to self-direct and self-manage their expression of identities, which operate as mechanisms for making meaning and which are shared with empathetic communities and networks. These include such participatory realms as fan fiction, girl zines, and underground music scenes (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011; Piepmeier, 2009; Gillis & Munford, 2004).

To explore the theme of narratives, representations, and truths in today's technology-dominant mediascape, scholars also grapple with the complexities of audiences and consumers whose lives include social media participation and personal content creation. Such practices embody discourses of privilege, access, and participation, and the coded algorithms that drive online content distribution reify forms of looking. These algorithms mark content, including such components as filters for visual images, "…as racialized, gendered, and normative" (Lavrence and Cambre, p. 3). As a result, the social media revolution is a "raced, gendered, classed, aged, abled" (p. 3) phenomenon even as it appears to be participatory, inclusive, and transparent. The cost of being a social media citizen entails ongoing labour to maintain a constant visibility based on "the seriality and variability of self-representation" (p. 3). While the online world offers the opportunity to build community in novel ways, such as through BookTok for readers, the pressure of online life also gives rise to paradoxes and ambivalences. There is a compulsion to participate with life online while recognizing the judgement such participation entails including the feeling of being watched as one struggles

between the image of being perfect and the reality that humans are not perfect (Gill, 2023). It is an era of looking and being looked at that gives the illusion of control over what an individual chooses to post and share.

This divide between the perfect and imperfect is symptomatic of the increasing relentless gaze, glare, and spotlight of life online. It is “a digital ecosystem that demands an intensification of looking practices, which produce and enhance specific forms of objectification directed toward selves and others within digital environments” (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020, p. 1). While this digital sociality constitutes a form of exploration, play, and work on identity, it also emphasizes a way of looking that is conflictual. An example of this type of conflict is the competition between appearing at one’s best or natural in processes that are heavily edited and curated (p. 1). The task of “deciphering authenticity and artifice” (p. 2) thus becomes a key component of online relationality and creates an aura of mistrust, doubt, and skepticism. The rivalry that ensues, whether that is between differing versions of oneself or with others, is accompanied by a rise of “self-tracking and self-monitoring” of subjects, particularly of subjects who identify as women, to the micro-level of pores, veins, and blemishes, and results in the creation of a quantified self (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 60). The intensity of the gaze, the demand on one’s time, and the judgmental nature of the scrutiny all “… complicate the notion that this visibility is always freely chosen and instead, complex structures of constraint work alongside and with nuanced negotiations of the terms of visibility” (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020, p. 10; Elias and Gill, 2018; McRobbie, 2020). The need to negotiate the terms of visibility in an ongoing bid for a secure podium in the online world lends a sense of competition to social media participation and the curation of digital lives.

The competition to measure up with our better online selves generates a sense of anxiety that belies feelings of control, claims of empowerment, and beliefs of agentic online expression (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020 p. 10). This existence under a digital-forensic gaze (Lavrence and Cambre, 2020) dictates the nature of participation in a contradictory public sphere that seems open and yet is bounded, real and yet fake, visible yet concealed, characterized by both close perusal and speedy scrolling. This web of tensions and forces means that women’s engagement with the digital sphere “is likely to produce complex and contradictory affective responses (e.g. relief, pleasure vs. feelings of shame and failure” (Elias and Gill, 2018, p. 68). In the field of feminist surveillance studies, the indications are that this “surveillant sisterhood” (Elias and Gill,

2018, p. 67) reinscribes notions of femininity as heteronormative and reasserts sexual difference. It is also a realm where the question of power persists as fans are transformed into marketers, influencers, and self-surveillant subjects. The crux is whether the consumer is gaining autonomy, agency, and power or, in the context of neoliberal capitalism, whether the media industry is increasing its powers in new ways (Bird, 2011, p. 507; Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 2020).

This is an era where consumers are producers, or *produsers*, and it is a time that generates new ways for scholars to see, study, and understand audiences, media, and the impact of media on those who consume it (Bird, 2011, p. 502). These new avenues for research and this complexity echo the differing perspectives that surrounded the early study of the internet and its impact on feminism. Scholarship veered between pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints. *Technoenthusiasts* cast the internet as a new frontier and "a place where everyone could be informed, organize their own cultures, and thereby become the ultimate democratic citizens" (Schulte, 2011, p. 732). *Technoskeptics* espoused the discourses of moral panics and "characterized internet spaces as hotbeds for social destruction and moral degradation that could not be regulated" (p. 733). From this initial utopian-dystopian binary, scholarship on the relationship between the networked world and feminism, has evolved in more nuanced and dynamic ways (p. 736). For example, positioning the internet as a metaphor "… allowed cyberfeminists to reconceptualize feminism as transnational, diasporic, and as multiethnic/racial and to question traditional goals of achieving embodied power with bodies of bodiless liberation" (p. 737). That is, it expanded the understanding of the scope of feminism.

However, as a global phenomenon, considering the diversity of media environments, the internet continues to veer between poles of "gross inequalities and unexpected creative opportunities" (Bird, 2011, p. 503). To explore the ways individuals engage with media, scholars need to avoid a myopic focus on the virtual world. They must remember to sustain a critical interest in studying media interactions in offline environments, too (Bird, 2011, p. 506), because at the core of media studies is an issue of the relation between online power and offline power (Schulte, 2011, p. 737). Rather than embracing the ease of a value binary of good or bad, oppressive or liberatory, scholars in a wide range of disciplines must embrace the complexities of studying various forms of media, the diversity of audiences and consumers in the distinct contexts

of where and how they live, and the relationship between media representations, often idealized and normative, and the material realities of life.

Rapidly transforming media contexts and environments, the changing understanding of gender relations, and the evolution of theoretical approaches along with methods of analysis, combine to exacerbate the difficulties and challenges of media, gender, and representation as a field of study. There is also the transformation of feminism, in response to critiques from Black feminism, post-structuralist theory, the emerging interest in masculinities, and the development of queer theory, to consider (Gill, 2007, p. 2; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These critiques challenge the rigid and narrow definition of what it means to be a woman and the classic liberal feminism that emerged, based on such definitions, to pursue the interests of the dominant, hegemonic group. However, to some the attempt to broaden the definition of feminism has resulted in a loss of the movement's radical intention. In this argument, universalizing feminism to appeal to as many people as possible, through the prioritization of such discourses as individual choice, personal autonomy, and self-empowerment, has made the movement "as banal, as non-threatening and ineffective as possible" (Crispin, 2017, p. x). In this view, rather than responding to theoretical critiques with a renewed vision for feminism as a radical struggle for equality, equity, and justice, and to resist gender essentialism, heteronormative sexuality, racial inequalities, and socio-economic disparities, today's feminism has become pablum.

That is why representation continues to matter. because it is an avenue into understanding the stratification of the world's cultures and societies along vectors of "gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, disability, sexuality, and location" (Gill, 2007, p. 7). There is a continuing need for scholarship to explore how media consumers "negotiate and manage the complex interaction of structural media power and individual/community agency" (Bird 2011, p. 509). This is important, too, because of the changing nature of technology and the "increasing evidence that the surveillance and disciplinary functions of those controlling the online environment may be outweighing it's liberatory potential" (p. 508). In the 1990s the term postfeminism emerged as a theoretical framework to understand the "paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women" (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 2020, p. 4). Today, those paradoxes and contradictions have persisted and intensified inviting the continued scrutiny of feminist scholarship and the attention of feminist scholars. This is particularly urgent given the legacy of

discourses and a vocabulary where terms such as “happiness, balance and ‘lean in’” are characterized as feminist rather than traditional terms such as “autonomy, rights, liberation and social justice” (p. 7; Berg et al., 2022, p. 668). It is imperative to push back against the exclusionary nature of neoliberal feminism because it is predicated on “… white and class privilege and heteronormativity, lending itself to neoconservative and xenophobic agendas” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 2020, p. 17). Rather, representations and the study of representations need to reimagine and reassert feminism as a collective, diverse, and multi-faceted force that transcends the individual and moves beyond issues of personal aspiration.

Contradictory interpretations challenge the notion of media representations as calcified in binaries of women as either/or, as subject-object, active-passive, defiant-complicit, powerful-powerless, enlightened-victimised, emancipated-indoctrinated (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p. 27). Popular culture is where many of these contradictory and disputed representations reside, and debates, whether academic or not, eddy around poles of popular culture as friend and/or foe to women and girls. The flaw in arguments that popular culture, no matter how sexualised or liberalized, is a positive manifestation of girl power (see Genz & Brabon, 2009) is that many political environments around the world are conservative, regressive, and authoritarian to varying degrees and in different ways. Persistent inequalities, structural injustices, and sexist oppression exist globally, and they belie the power of media to transform society based simply on the diversification and pluralisation of representations (see McRobbie, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2011a). Embedded in the reality of reactionary forces though are the existence of multiple systems of expression that refuse and resist the status quo.

Rosalind Gill (2007), Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City, University of London, delineates the developments in media studies from textual and content analysis to audience research studies to the incorporation of the language of pleasure, to debates about the construction of meaning and the multiplicity of readings, to changing aesthetic values and the narrowing distinction between high culture and popular culture, and to the inclusion of issues of political economy. To her, the early 1980s was a time in which researchers worked to reclaim and assert the value of what was perceived as women’s culture and to understand women’s absorption of media texts in ways that transcended explications based solely on gender. For example, she discusses research from the 1980s and early 1990s on soap operas, romance novels,

gothic novels, dramas, quiz shows, and music videos including the work of John Fiske, Mary Ellen Brown, Christine Geraghty, Tania Modleski, and Janice Radway among many others. Gill (2007) asserts the necessity of pursuing investigations into issues of gender and media as well as the challenges in doing so given the evolution of the field of media studies, its intersection with transformations in academic theory, feminism, the understanding of gender and the role of media in "doing gender" (p.25), the impact of global economies, and the need to push research into diverse communities and variously constructed households (p. 24). The question remains: to what end? Part of the answer lies in the need to identify the meaning behind feminist intellectual work to ensure its relevance and efficacy (Gill, 2007, p. 22). Another part of the answer lies in the way media studies can inform scholarship and research into the diversities of women's lives. Such efforts will make meaningful knowledge contributions and ensure not only greater diversity in media representation but transform knowledge into action to ensure greater equity in culture and society.

Debates and discussions about narratives and representations, whether in the discursive realms of varying genres such as fiction or non-fiction, pinpoint the centrality of storytelling in the human experience. At its core, storytelling serves an epistemological function. It is about sharing knowledge of the way to be in the world and the ways of the world, its pitfalls, dangers, promises, and potentialities. All of these are mediated through cultural texts and artefacts that in the dominant Euro-Western culture have, as their default, a male protagonist, or a male perspective. These include folk tales and fairy tales, which represent the interests of dominant social groups, and are powerful cultural tools that emphasize women's passivity, innocence, and lack of power, or present the default male as a perpetrator of harm (see Carter, 2009; Stone, 2008; Zipes, 2006). While the shortcomings of fairy tales are liabilities from a feminist perspective, their appeal remains strong as representations of the search for one's true self — as in tween princess narratives (Kennedy, 2017) — as consumer products, and as reproducible cultural texts. Disney's success, for example, is a testament to the allure of fairy tales as well as their status as profit-making machines.

Commercial media production has not traditionally focused on women's stories or employed women as protagonists. As Nancy K. Miller (2019) remarks about the 1991 feature film *Thelma and Louise*, "many women loved the movie when it came out because we are starved for examples of women taking centre stage" (p. 28). While

“women taking centre stage” is a notable event, it is fascinating to consider that the denouement of this women-centred film involved the protagonists driving into the chasm of the Grand Canyon. Death as the ultimate freedom or ultimate depiction of free will for women is a message to be considered, parsed, and critiqued (see Sutherland & Feltey, 2016). However, the ways in which women share and transmit knowledge often remains in the realm of the oral and undocumented: as family lore, as conversations with members in communities of shared interests – such as “women’s reading, writing, and study groups” (Lury, 1991/2007, pp. 101-102), or with one friend or many friends. These connections are visceral and embodied in the memories of interactions with those who have the most influence on each person’s life. As Annie Ernaux (1988/1990) writes in the memoir of her mother’s life — a book she describes as neither a novel or a biography, but as a hybrid of literature, sociology, and history — when her mother died, “The last bond between me and the world I come from has been severed” (pp. 91-92). This identification with other women, whether family or not, is crucial as women build their sense of identity, subjectivity, and determination to act against the systems and structures of cultures and societies that have placed them on the margins.

During the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) this mode of connection was manifested in the slogan “the personal is political” and in the consciousness-raising sessions of the time. Although critics have objected to the way in which the WLM universalized the experiences of women and ignored the impact of racism, those involved felt that they were participating in a revolution. Nancy K. Miller (2019) explains the radicalism of this vision and says, “We imagined ourselves as part of a new kind of history, a history that would be created by telling our stories and documenting them…Each woman’s narrative would illuminate the larger pattern of women’s lives, our collective oppression under patriarchy” (p. 95). She also recognizes, with the benefit of hindsight, that she and her colleagues thought of themselves mostly as “nice, middle-class, mostly Jewish young women”, without considering their situation in relation to the women that lived beyond their circle (p. 95). Sharing the truth of one’s experience helped uncover the trends that enabled women to triage the hurdles they faced to stage political action efforts and engage in targeted activism. The challenge now, as then, is to find ways to represent, amplify, and share voices without creating a new hegemonic norm. As Carolyn Heilbrun (1988/2008) argues, “To put it simply, we must begin to tell the truth, in groups, to one another. Modern feminism began that way, and we have lost,

through shame or fear of ridicule, that important collective phenomenon" (p. 45). While the reliability of the authorial "I" is worth challenging and the assumed beneficial nature of large-scale collective action is worth questioning, autobiographies, oral histories, and documentaries are essential cultural texts that are constructed by subjects who have found the courage and the means to claim their voice and to do so with authority (Lury, 1991/2007, p. 98).

Understanding the truth of subjectivities in contemporary times is even more difficult because of the ubiquity of social media, which makes it appear as if people are revealing everything while disguising the fact that self-curation on social media is as much about what is not shared as what is. There is intentionality in each account that is masked by the apparent spontaneity involved when one posts content, whether visual, auditory, textual, or multi-media. While the social media subject is controlling their cultural production, the self-selection, self-editing, and self-surveillance is as likely to create new normative standards, as it is to challenge existing ones. Traditionally, the understanding of subjectivity has been to imagine a person as a whole being. The rise of social media has interceded in those efforts and heralds a new bifurcation of identities. It is a question of appearing versus being. As author and essayist Zadie Smith (2019) remarks, young women present ever more confident online social media personae while offline their lives are characterized by more self-harm, more insecurity, without the confidence or trust in feminism to help build community (see also Ponterotto, 2016).

A challenge for practitioners of CS and FCS is that the disciplines paradoxically exist nowhere and everywhere because they have been subsumed into other academic departments and exist in the many media forms of popular culture (Connell & Hilton, 2016a, p. xvi). This range of influence is a testament to the impact of the disciplines. However, scholars must redefine the mandate and intellectual contours of these disciplines to be able to connect to communities in meaningful ways although Charlotte Brundson (2015) cautions against an emphasis on measurability. In reference to cultural studies at Birmingham, Brundson (2015) writes, "It did not have a single content, it did not have a single aim, it could not be theorized tidily and it resisted recruitment into the contemporary bureaucratic definitions of 'impact'" (p. 96). The challenge for CS and FCS is to remain interdisciplinary, to avoid falling into the trap of measurable outcomes, and yet provide material evidence of an ability to contribute to societal and cultural change.

Furthermore, there is room to question whether the distinction between CS and FCS is still useful. In the contemporary academic environment, researchers working in the social and cultural realms must use what started as a feminist lens and engage in what originated as feminist critique. That is, it is impossible now, if not unconscionable, to study society and culture without examining, including, or being aware of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and location. Unfortunately, political interference threatens to compromise such work. The Hungarian government, for example, eliminated gender studies programs in 2018 and Brazil threatened to do the same (Redden, 2018; Wang, 2018). In the United States, the legislative and public onslaught continues against progressive views of gender and sexuality, and this has led to similar crises at some state universities and colleges. For example, trustees at the New College of Florida voted to close the gender studies department in August 2023 although similar resolutions in Wyoming failed (Trimel, 2023).

If the imperative in cultural-feminist studies is to study the conjuncture of women's lives, then this tenet must be renegotiated in face of the storm that has shattered the gender binary within academic studies. Theory has evolved in a postfeminist, postmodern, postcolonial era to accept subjectivity as an expression and experience of multiple sites of oppression. Furthermore, post-, and post-post theoretical constructions in the academic world have not only created discursive disputes around the relative value of theoretical terms and concepts relating to feminism (Gill, 2016), but have also nullified a unitary notion of a feminist self. Instead postfeminism "facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of feminism that rejects the ideas of a homogeneous feminist monolith and an essential female self" (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p. 28; see also Gillis & Munford, 2004). Furthermore, if the distinction between CS and FCS has become negligible, and women are not seen as a group or a class, how does academic scholarship in this area continue to highlight issues that marginalize, victimize, and devalue the feminine? How does cultural-feminist studies maintain its focus on the conjuncture of women's lives if *woman* no longer functions as a category?

Cultural-Feminist Studies challenges the location of women in society relative to power and unearths the material effects of capitalism on the lives of women. Capitalism will not fix the problems of inequality and injustice because it is predicated on exploitation, profit making, and the differential valuation of human beings (Elliott, 2019, 182; see also Taylor, 2017, p.8; Mohanty, 2003, p. 509). History has also shown, with

the example of Margaret Thatcher often used to demonstrate the point, that having women in positions of power is not the difference maker. The struggle goes on. As bell hooks (2010) laments, “We would all have fared better in our struggles to end racism, sexism, and class exploitation if we had learned that liberation is an ongoing process” (p. 26). Political theorist Iris Marion Young (2011) asserts that political institutions follow social connection and society consists of “influencing institutions and practices through which people enact their projects and seek their happiness, and in doing so they affect the conditions under which others act, often profoundly” (p. 139). That is, the success of efforts to make change is predicated on pursuing struggles on behalf of others.

Similarly, the need for complex feminist analysis remains because to understand inequalities, injustice, and oppression, researchers need to comprehend the “micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle” and “the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 501; see also Budgeon 2011). There is a role for cultural-feminist studies to play in going to where the voices and stories of women are, as scholars have done in the past from inside and outside the academy, but not simply with the intent of filling academic journals, conference sessions, workshop panels, grant applications, and course syllabi with material for debate among the few. Cultural-feminist studies needs to renew its focus on efforts “to end sexism and sexist domination and oppression” (hooks, 2015, p. 113) and to continue making contributions that transform knowledge and scholarship into radical political action.

2.2. Feminist Research and Researchers Challenge Western Constructions of Knowing and Being

The historical devaluation of the feminine means that feminist researchers must grapple with the legacies of science, and its ontological and epistemological foundations, as the basis of knowledge production. Feminist researchers strive to reconcile the reality of human life — a relational, temporal, material, quotidian existence of specificity — with knowledge systems that understand human beings as individual, solitary, decontextualized, abstract thinkers, knowers, and doers (Code, 1991). It has been an arduous challenge to combat the positioning of science as one reality, one truth, which specialists affirm via their cognitive authority, a configuration of science that requires evidence, evaluation, and proof, separating it from religion, metaphysics, and

superstition (Addelson, 1983, p. 165; see also Hill Collins, 1990). As such, feminist scholars have understood the historical development of science as “a cultural practice and practice of culture” (Lather, 2010, p. 58) that embodies a hegemonic patriarchal discourse embedded with power, privilege, and hierarchy.

In challenging the construction of science, critics have had to negotiate various “-ologies”, “-isms”, and “posts-“ including epistemology, ontology, psychology, physiology, biology, sexology, empiricism, scientism, positivism, functionalism, interactionism, relativism, determinism, capitalism, materialism, existentialism, feminism, androcentrism, post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial, post-feminism, post-word, and, in some cases, the post-post- (Lather, 2013, p. 634; see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mohanty, 2013). Researchers have questioned accepted knowledge paradigms through qualitative, quantitative, interdisciplinary, or mixed methods work to realize emancipatory outcomes in a world that still needs science (Haraway, 1988, p. 585; see also Code, 1991). Science, despite its weaknesses and flaws, has been a visionary and utopian project — at least in aspiration if not in practice. Western conceptions of epistemology and ontology have carved a path towards knowing through an understanding of science that carries an “Enlightenment pedigree” which is “patriarchal and racial” (Moreton-Robinson, 2020, p. 315). So, knowledge makers must continue to challenge the foundations of knowing to address power and privilege — the powerful and the privileged — and to reclaim the “insurgent knowledge” (Mohanty, 2013, p. 970) of a radical politics and build a less oppressive world more equal in its distribution of power.

A more expansive vision of science is to see it “as the refinement of theory” (Hanson, 2008, p. 107) or to see theory as artful and relational (Valencia Mazzanti & Freeman, 2023, p. 1361). However, even as theory refinement this form of inquiry has a lineage rooted in scientific principles such as reason, rationality, objectivity, abstraction, anonymity, and autonomy. These characteristics valorize science and the scientific method, and camouflages myths of value-neutrality and political innocence in the sciences and in academic disciplines (Code, 1991, 2014; Gross & Averill, 1983; Hubbard, 1983; Lather, 2010; Moulton, 1983; Spelman, 1983). In response to this concealment, feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression, and other critiques have emerged from the resistance of *others*, those whom society has excluded from systems and structures where the default cognitive authority is white, male, privileged, and capitalist (Hartsock, 1983a; Code, 2014). While there are weaknesses in the construction of

others, whether social or metaphorical, in that it overemphasizes *what is not* as opposed to *what is* and "with greater homogeneity that exists within the 'other'" (Hanson, 2008, p. 97), the sense of collectivity that arises from sharing an identity that is cast in opposition to the default has led to substantive and meaningful societal and cultural change.

The representation and understanding of women as *other* and as an oppressed class, for example, facilitated a change-making critique of science that solidified during the WLM. While gender is not the only vector of oppression and *woman* as an analytical category is more complex than this one identity marker, the WLM's focus on a binary distinction opened avenues of inquiry into difference and presaged feminist work that documented and valued women's activities (Wood, 2004, p. 151; see also Code, 2014; Harding 2004). This was a competing vision of science and research that stemmed from differing conceptions of epistemology and ontology. Divorcing epistemology and ontology as an approach of inquiry is challengeable because a distancing from ethics and politics has often accompanied such a split (Flax, 1983, p. 248). As an introduction to the concepts and the power dynamics they entail individually and when intertwined, I have chosen to provide a brief overview of each before expanding on the categorization of women and their historical status as *other*.

2.2.1. Epistemology and Ontology

To Lorraine Code (1991), Professor Emerita of Philosophy at Toronto's York University, "Epistemology is about discerning the nature and conditions of knowledge, about justifying knowledge claims and refuting skepticism" (p. 266). To evaluate an epistemology, it is imperative to excavate the unseen material of its construction (Keller & Grontkowski, 1983; Code, 1991) including its support structure of ontology, the theory of the nature of being. If epistemology is the "philosophy on the nature of knowledge building" (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 456) or "study of the philosophical problems in concepts of knowledge and truth" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 202), then human history is one of exploring relationships to determine what is real, known, and true. In the development of Western epistemology, ancient Greek mythology, and philosophy (Hartsock, 1983a) helped construct belief systems and knowledge claims about these relationships.

With Christianity, moral authority for knowledge shifted to the church until the scientific revolution emerged as the authoritative information source. Academic

disciplines emerged in the nineteenth century and organized Western knowledge into units, a process connected to the political world, the expansion of capitalism, and colonialism (Pryse, 1998, p. 5). It is a framework that ignores material reality (Keller & Grontkowski, 1983) and relies on dichotomies, such as the separation of mind and body (Flax, 1983, p. 255). The denial of relationality reached a zenith with Descartes. His model opposed “the body, sexuality, and the wiles of the unconscious” and “defined the problematics for much of modern Western philosophy” (Flax, 1983, p. 258; see also Code, 1991). Knowing also shifted to science, which to Aristotle was a collection of facts “as they are observed to be … determined by the rational order of the world” (Lange, 1983, p. 7). Knowledge was empirical and perceptual and yielded objective certainty that for many is still the elusive — if not illusory — goal of epistemology (p. 149; see also Code, 1991). In this approach to knowing, the male intellect became omniscient and transcendent while the body became a prison for any person whose physical attributes were not those of the default thinker.

The onus and responsibility for knowing depended on the thinker’s context, rationality, and perception (Code, 2014; Haraway, 1988; Hill Collins, 1990). The paucity of this model is that those who had the social sanction to know were men. Specifically, white men, middle class, most probably property owning, simultaneously anyone and everyone (Code, 2014, p. 150; Code 1991). Feminist analyses in the 1970s challenged such androcentricity and feminists in the early 1980s continued to develop a praxis that closed the gap between theories and “knowledge that matters to people in real situations” (Code, 2014, p. 149). They emphasized the political nature of knowledge and knowing — political in that knowledge and knowing upheld world views and supported social systems that thrived on demarcated boundaries, structured hierarchies, and confining social placements. In the early 1980s, feminist scholars identified that the essential task was to “root out sexist distortions and perversions in … the “hard core” of abstract reasoning thought most immune to infiltration by social values” (Harding & Hintikka, 1983b, p. ix; see also Code, 1991). This included the epistemological inadequacy of the subject-object division (Longino, 2010, p. 734; see also Hill Collins, 1990). However, even a more sophisticated epistemology is insufficient if the underlying ontology is not also dissected and reformulated.

Ontology represents the explorations, entanglements, and experiments of those trying to understand and explain “the nature of existence” (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 455). In

patriarchal systems, these lines of inquiry have resulted in hierarchical structures that consign individuals and groups to designated places, spaces, and positions (Hill Collins, 1990). When researchers share the knowledge of their scientific expertise, they also disseminate these wider social understandings (Addelson, 1983, p.167). Furthermore, if scientists, as authoritative and authority figures, remain immune from criticism, then ontological assumptions become fossilized. In Western ontology the default human being is *man*, a self-interested economic maximizer (Hartsock, 1983a & 1983b). This reflects the development of capitalism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe, a market model of social relations based on competing adversarial interactions in an ideal world where "individuals are free, equal, and able to shape their fates" (p. 49). Philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau, who espoused different approaches to political and moral philosophy, assumed men were solitary creatures and that the inevitable outcome of social interactions was to resolve power struggles through domination or submission (Flax, 1983, p. 261). This also encapsulates a paradox that logic and reason are free of emotional corruption while venerating aggression that "often invokes anger" (Moulton, 1983, p. 149). In general, society perceives this aggression as natural in men and unnatural in women (p. 150; see also Flax, 1983, p. 261).

Categorizing thinking and human beings into universal groupings simplifies subjectivity (Code, 1991, p. 166) and cedes power to those who define social boundaries and set the criteria for societal inclusion (p. 190). Such categories devolve into stereotypes, ideological images, and symbols that are difficult to break (p. 190). They make oppression, whether racism, sexism, and poverty, appear "natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 68). The more recent view is of a changing, transforming, multi-faceted self (Code, 1991, p. 183), one that is "more about foldings than layerings and splittings" (Lather, 2016, p. 125). This is "an incalculable subject" located in "a relational ontology" that redefines "objects as more in networks than in single sites, to trouble identity and experience, and what it means to know and to tell" (Lather, 2016, pp. 125-126). For women, selfhood has been tied to boundaries. As Lorraine Code (1991) notes, "A woman is constituted, in her subjectivity, by the position she occupies, the prescriptions, ideologies, myths, and other cultural constraints that structure the pressures she experiences, throughout her life, to be a good woman" (p. 178). If happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives contribute to the definitions of a woman's place in society and what it means to be a good woman, I am

intrigued in understanding their ontological and epistemological foundations. Research into how these narratives are constructed and how they shape women's understandings helps to challenge the boundaries they reinforce. In this way, the potential exists to shift discourses from those that embed the compulsion to conformity, *the good woman*, to the liberatory practice of women being fully human in all of humanity's material messiness.

To study HEA-HFN narratives through discussion and conversation, as I opted to do, also prioritizes the relationality of existence over the intellectual exercise of abstraction that has been the hallmark of Western epistemology and ontology. I determined that talking to women about their knowledge and experiences, through the prism of fiction as a mechanism to prompt reflection, would capture a multi-faceted look at relationality, whether that was their relation to narrative, self, and/or others. It became the basis for my critical examination and analysis of the underpinnings that allow HEA-HFN narratives to flourish and to exert power over the imaginaries of women's intimate aspirations or to inspire resistance and refusal. In adopting this approach, I am also refuting the separation of mind and body, the centrality of the male intellect, and the characterization of women as irrational beings (Olson, 2023; McIntosh & Wilder, 2023). My work also recognizes the value of emotions, emotional responses, and reactions as knowledge-building practices that can be revelatory. The emphasis on collaborative interactions further challenges traditional understandings of social relations as transactional exchanges and adversarial engagements. My choice to focus on women's perspectives acknowledges that one consequence of women's categorization as a collective *other* has been the formation of a sisterhood that has challenged the hegemony of Western epistemology and ontology.

2.2.2. Woman: One *Other* Among Many *Others*

In the Western context, gender is not only a sex difference. It is also an ontological and material difference because women, who are not agentic subjects in this paradigm, become commodities for trade and have had to rely on their relational networks and institutions, including marriage, as the mechanisms that sanction their participation in society and culture. In 1991, Lorraine Code acknowledged that using the word *sex* in lieu of *gender* was a flaw because it reflects a simple biological binary sex distinction (p. 8, fn. 6). Code explained her choice to continue using *sex* for *gender*, saying that it maintained continuity with her first thoughts on the issues and more

reasonably reflected the historical context of “the epistemological project” when writers and readers used the term in this manner (p. 8, fn. 6; see also Hill Collins, 1990). I face a similar difficulty in my reliance on the use of the word *woman* to delve into the historical conceptualizations and representations of the category and to understand the impact the portrayals of women have had on Western science, research, and academic inquiry. I use the word not with the intent to be exclusionary or to imply a unitary subjectivity, but to present *woman* as one of the original categorizations of the *other*.

The categorization of women as lesser has roots in Ancient Greece. Aristotle, for example, concluded that women were inferior in their ability to reason and to self-govern even within the confines of the domestic sphere. In his view, this lack of authority disqualified women from the public arena (Lange, 1983, p. 2; see also Code, 1991; Hartsock, 1983a & 1983b; Stiehm, 1983). Instead of Aristotle’s views being universally true for all time, they were only true for his time if one accepts that individuals in specific temporal, historical, geographical, cultural, and social spaces — that is, in their own conjunctures — make science (Hubbard, 1983, p. 45). The complicating factor is that Aristotle’s work and the works of others, from the Homeric ideal (Hartsock, 1983a, pp. 186-190) to dramas such as the Oresteia (Hartsock, 1983a, pp. 190-197), influenced future generations of philosophers including Descartes, Hobbes, and Kant, whose thinking left indelible marks on western culture and society (Code, 2014; Flax, 1983). These theorists and many others did not recognize that biological difference was embedded in their thinking or dismissed it as inessential (Lange, 1983, p.1; see also Spelman, 1983). While it is difficult to recreate conjunctures of the past, it is critical because deconstructing assumptions is a prerequisite for challenges (Lange, 1983, p. 14) and the implications of androcentric reasoning “are by no means dead yet” (p. 8). For example, challenging Charles Darwin’s work is important because it has an impact on biological theories (Hubbard, 1983, p. 52) and has had an impact on disciplines that looked at the evolution of social life in a manner analogous to biological life (Palmeri, 1983; Pascale, 2012). It also implicates science and research, including social science and qualitative research, in the historical racist project of colonialism and colonization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3).

Historically, science and society — albeit not all science, scientists, or members of society — depicted women as a disruptive force, in part because of their association with sexuality and reproduction (Flax, 1983; Gross & Averill, 1983; Hill Collins, 1990). As

a result, men's control of women was justified, which served to "symbolically disenfranchise women as cognitive agents" (Longino, 2010, p. 737). The dichotomy of autonomy as a masculine attribute and dependence as a female characteristic was further extended to a dichotomy of self-reliance and reliance (Code, 1991, p. 74; see also Flax, 1983). This infantilized women, made them dependent on those who could reason and know, and denied them opportunities to demonstrate authority (Code, 1991, p.124; see also Flax, 1983). An alternate view has been to champion feminine values as tools to build a better social order. The tension in feminist thought is that such an endorsement perpetuates the oppression of women (Code, 1991, p. 17). These feminine values belong to a patriarchal construction of femininity that values women as reproductive machines and solidifies motherhood as an institution within a heteronormative nuclear family unit. Family is yet another universal model that fails to capture experiences in varying socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-political situations (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 47).

One flaw with gender essentialism is that it substitutes a gynocentric model for an androcentric one (Code, 1991, p. 63). It may be a useful mechanism to build common purpose, but it depends on "a profound flattening of difference" (Mohanty, 2013, p. 972; see also Hill Collins, 1990). Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Professor Emerita at the University of Maryland, writes that knowledge reinforces "social relations of domination" and hierarchies of privilege (Hill Collins, 1990, p. xii; see also Smith, 1991). In a capitalist patriarchal society, she argues, the key function to differentiating *others* has to do with belonging. Society categorizes *others* as threatening outsiders to demarcate the margins of order (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 68). She stresses the need for change in these depictions to end subjugation. It is more difficult to discern where to start. One avenue has been for women to claim a place for themselves and others, as knowers and as valued subjects to know, and to change the epistemological characterization of lived experiences to understand reality.

In contemporary times, scientists share in past metaphysical assumptions of a singular, knowable reality when they apply universal laws and predictive notions of "the correct description of the world" (Addelson, 1983, p. 170). In contrast, feminists argue that material existence and the implications of social relations (Flax, 1983, p. 249) are reliable sources for what one believes about the self and the world (Longino, 2010, p. 736). The idea that material conditions are integral to the nature of individuals was also a

starting point for Marx's theory of knowledge (Hartsock, 1983b, p. 286). However, Marx's vision of knowledge was based on the material conditions of some while ignoring the material conditions of many, including women, although his legacy enshrined material conditions in social analysis, particularly the way reality forms consciousness in individuals and groups. Experiences at the conjunctures of peoples' lives give rise to consciousness, determine an individual's sense of identity, purpose, morality, and drive their actions, conduct, and understanding. These experiences also determine which group or collective a person aligns with, a process that is not the same for everyone (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 25). Understanding experience as specific and concrete also encourages the expression of distinctive consciousnesses such as Black feminist consciousness (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 24).

As part of human thinking, reasoning, and communication processes, language plays a role in inquiries about experience and reality (Moulton, 1983, p. 158; see also Pascale, 2012). Unfortunately, it can also be a tool to enforce compliance, conformity, and powerlessness as feminists argued in studies from the 1970s and early 1980s (Code, 1991, p. 59; see also Keller, 1983). That is because naming human activity is a social process (Hubbard, 1983, p. 46) and the issue is "who has social sanction to define the larger reality into which one's everyday experiences must fit in order that one be reckoned sane and responsible" (Hubbard, 1983, p. 46). Yet those whose reality lies beyond existing delineations are equipped to resist rather than reify social categories (Longino, 2010, p. 737). Reifying experience though forecloses inquiry because people do not "have uniquely privileged access to the truth about their own experiences" (Code, 1991, p. 169). Furthermore, if critique is to have meaning beyond a singular person, then there must be a certain objective social reality to verify the need for change and not to "obliterate the purpose of feminist political projects" (Code, 1991, p. 45). In the feminist tradition, resisting the notion of an absolute truth is important and it may be fairer to accept that there are general truths or indications of most likely truths.

The authority over what people know and think is real or true is the point at which epistemology, ontology, the categorization of *others*, experience, and reality converge. As a result, knowledge becomes an issue of power because the tradition has been to define human nature as one of self-interest and human activity as one of adversarial relations (Hartsock, 1983a & 1983b). Thus, Western knowledge justifies control rather than understanding. To be the one who knows, the one who knows more, or the one

who gets to say what knowing is, makes one's position in the world legitimate and powerful. This assumption also applies in cases when one makes false claims, but whose appearance of knowing, or identification as a default knower, bestows power. In this way, cognitive authority is politicized and remains immune from criticism if challengers do not examine the links between power, cognition, knowledge, authority, and politics (Addelson, 1983, p. 182). Furthermore, if cognitive authorities retain the power to define *objects* and *subjects*, then they deny others that same ability. This perpetuates subordination because the ability to self-define is integral to emancipation and empowerment (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 34; see also Code, 1991).

Overall, the issue is not about categorizing authorities as bad, ascribing them with evil intentions, lauding social scientists as exemplary, and treating physical scientists as an indistinguishable block of sameness. Rather it is about the limitations of the models scientists, researchers, and knowledge-holders use to talk about human nature and community (Hartsock, 1983a, p. 75) including their inability to see the power and privilege embedded in their exercise of cognitive authority (Addelson, 1983, p. 179). The surprise is in the durability and prevalence of these ideas throughout history despite the harm they have caused through their enablement of oppression (see Hartsock, 1983a; Hill Collins, 1990; Code, 1991). Knowledge legitimates domination when it depicts the subjects of inquiry, including human beings, as passive objects (Longino, 2010, p. 734). One goal in the praxis of feminist scholars has been to analyze the domination and resistance inherent in knowledge (Mohanty, 2013, p. 985). The focus on power does not mean overlooking "the contexts of struggle" (p. 969). Rather it recognizes the possibilities of building solidarities across borders, whether physical, national, cultural, literal, or metaphorical, to counter hegemonic control and dominant power (pp. 969-970).

For women and for feminist scholars, the connections between sexuality and power, or sexual politics (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 164), have formed another critical field of inquiry. In the context of power and domination, understanding differences in sexualities is not only a matter of accounting for variations, individual preferences, and the panoply of desires. It explains the ways in which systems of oppression annex "individual anxieties, fears, and doubts about sexuality" (p. 165). To Patricia Hill Collins, this reflects the "dynamics of power as domination" (p. 170), whether one is discussing pornography in general, the specific sexual exploitation of Black women, or the legacy of sexual

violence stemming from colonial practices and slavery. From the Black feminist standpoint that she elucidates, sexuality encompasses a summative view of the various components of human existence and expresses a both/and experience of sexuality as simultaneously oppressing and empowering (p. 166).

Another reason to interrogate the links between knowledge and power is to understand the real-world implications for public policy (Lather, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2012) as well as the transmission of knowledge to society via government, law, education, media, or popular culture (Hill Collins, 1990). Education, for example, is a mechanism for the perpetuation of power, but many also perceive it as “a powerful tool for liberation” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 148; see also McRobbie, 1982). Ultimately, what appears to be a struggle over science is a struggle over the power to set the parameters of debate and to limit the ability for counter-narratives to argue for different (Lather, 2010, p. 65; see also Lather, 2013, p. 637). There is a paucity to understandings that envision the current political community as the best possible alternative (Hartsock, 1983a, p. 51). In this paradigm, there is no need to improve the lives of citizens. This is why women and other groups have had to claim authority and power in systems and structures that say they have none. Reclaiming the capacity to reason, judge, and act, means setting the horizon beyond the imprisoning wall of ideologies of difference, including gender (Ahmed, 2010, Chapter 2). Gender, for example, enforces social conformity to feminine ideals. Many women are reluctant to have society perceive them as unfeminine intruders — pretenders to the throne, as powerful knowers, knowledge seekers, cognitive authorities, experts, specialists, and public figures. It is, however, an intricate web that makes the challenge of deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction fraught with difficulty.

2.2.3. Critiques: Elevating The Horizon

For women and others, occupying positions of knowledge has helped them oppose oppression. These emancipatory effects are embedded in alternate ways of understanding knowledge, ways of knowing, and ways of being (Code, 1991, p. xii). However, interrogating hegemonic concepts can bound scholarship if one topic becomes an obsession, such as autonomy in feminist theory (p. 73). Overall, feminist critique has avoided such myopia in defying the territoriality of disciplines, methodologies, and ideologies (p. 149). In the process, feminist scholars, scientists, and researchers have

experienced a shift, through institutionalization and formalization, from revolutionary and radical outsider positionalities to ones as academic insiders. When feminist critique is confined to departments or subsumed as subfields in traditional disciplines, rather than being integrated into all science, research, and academic study, it risks reductionism, cooptation, and tokenism as efforts at diversity rather than as forces for change.

Critiques have identified alternative epistemologies, but there is a question as to whether knowledge, rather than wisdom or understanding for example, should be the guiding principle for these epistemological quests (Longino, 2010, p. 739; see also Hill Collins, 1990). Perhaps a model based on self-reliance would be more empowering than one that teaches adherence (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 157). Another theoretical approach might be to view love as the force animating knowledge (Longino, 2010, p. 735; see also Hill Collins, 1990) or empathy. An ethic of care, which would focus on the specific humanity of each person rather than to see any one individual as a dominant ideal (Hill Collins, 1990), is another. There are many alternate routes to knowing, including those based on principles as varied as silence, injustice, and ignorance (Code, 2014; see also Pascale, 2012) or structured as ecologies (Code, 1991).

In general, feminist critiques challenge the naturalness of normalized and invisible assumptions (Code, 2014; Flax, 1983; Lather, 2013) including claims to objectivity that obscure the viewpoints of the anonymized holders of “paradigmatic privilege” (Code, 1991, p. 128; see also Moulton, 1983). Shifting knowledge paradigms is a contested process. “Paradigm wars” (Hesse-Biber, 2015; Lather, 2010), such as the methodological ones of the 1970s and 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 1), emerge when alternative approaches gain momentum. One such shift was a result of the deconstruction of gender and sex during the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), from both inside and outside the academy. This direction also reflected disillusionment with theoretical perspectives, such as psychoanalysis and Marxism, that posited freedoms and yet had failed to deliver equality for women (Harding, 1983, p. 311).

For feminist theorists, an emancipatory epistemology requires “an autonomous feminist viewpoint(s)” (Flax, 1983, p. 270) or standpoints, which are a form of epistemic privilege (Pryse, 1998, p. 3; see also Mohanty, 2013). They are epistemological devices that unveil the discrepancy between a surface reality and a deeper essence that explains the ways in which the level of appearance “inverts and distorts the deeper

reality" (Hartsock, 1983a, p. 117). Such self-defined standpoints also have the difficult task of countering societal suppression, which arises because counter-narratives encourage resistance (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 28). That is, the fear of paradigm shifts emerges because the request to change ways of knowing is also a demand for the redistribution of political power (Harding, 1983, p. 314). Patti Lather (2010), Professor Emerita at Ohio State University, believes that the confidence qualitative researchers expressed in the less defensive space of the 1990s was premature because reactionary impulses in the early twenty-first century saw an emergence of "gold standard" discourses (p. 3). This was "a resurgent neo-positivism, a (re)marginalization of qualitative research" and, in education research, a "reduction … to the needs of policy-makers" and the demands of academic fora (Lather, 2010, p. 3).

When the knowledge community accepts the need for an alternate standpoint, then the validity and necessity for multiple standpoints becomes clear. Concerns then arise about relativism and fragmentation (Harding, 2004). Two such paradigms, situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and mitigated relativism (Code, 1991) accept truths but not absolute truth, objectivity but not ideal objectivity, accountable subjectivity and not camouflaged bias, embodiment, and not complete abstraction. Subject positions in these models, including those of the researcher, are rooted in self-definitions of gender, race, and other identifications, not a mythic neutrality. There is also a concern that alternate standpoints can develop into prescriptive formulations transforming from epistemological and ontological challenges into boundary reinforcements making people serve disciplines rather than having disciplines serve people (Smith, 1991, p. 166).

To Patricia Hill Collins (1990), the history of social science is one of neglect. It failed to study Black women's experiences in the United States, the role they played in race uplift for group survival, and their impact on the transformation of oppressive institutions (p. 140). She attributes this to shortcomings in scholarship, particularly the "conceptualizations of power, political resistance, and political activism" (p. 140). To remedy the gap, Hill Collins (1990) espoused a personal and collective standpoint from the position of her own experience with the Black women's "outsider-within" perspective (p. 11). She was cognizant of the difficulty entailed in her use of a deterministic basis of race as an assumption of identity (Black) and theoretical orientation (feminist) (pp. 19-21). While critiques are effective tools to deconstruct and disassemble dominant understandings, there is also a danger of critique fatigue (Allen & Kitch, 1998, Pryse,

1998). That is, an endless cycle of criticism reaches a point of stasis, or what Patti Lather (2016) refers to as “stuck places” which then necessitates a change in direction from criticism to invention (Lather, 2016, p. 126). While there will always be a need for diligence, awareness, and constructive critique, the challenge is to offer alternatives that will be more effective in accomplishing the goals and objectives of social change. The question is whether there can be an epistemology that centers a feminist objectivity that is embodied, accommodates paradox and criticality, and is situated in real life rather than anchored in divine-like theoretical abstractions (Haraway, 1988, p. 581; also, Code, 1991; Longino, 2010; Pryse, 2000; Smith, 1991).

Nevertheless, there is another potential weakness in espousing standpoints, particularly subjugated standpoints. Donna Haraway (1988), Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz, cautions against excavating alternate viewpoints from “the peripheries and the depths” (p. 583) if proponents romanticize and/or appropriate them (p. 584). There is a risk in this process of presuming an innocence that is naïve (p. 584). Such standpoints may still be preferred because they embody the potentiality of difference and offer “more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (p. 584). The challenge becomes one of method, of “how to see from below” which requires “at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the ‘highest’ technoscientific visualizations” (pp. 583-584; see also Hill Collins, 1990). Standpoints are mediated understandings, which may not be understood in a system where a ruling class controls the mental production of ideas and the physical production of goods (Hartsock, 1983b, p. 288; Hartsock, 1983a; see also Hill Collins, 1990).

Standpoints of the oppressed, if they can avoid the pitfall of an uncritical embrace, represent an analytical and scientific achievement of political struggle (Hartsock, 1983b, p. 288; see also Harding, 2004). Ultimately, the question is whether any standpoint that functions as a mechanism to move beyond relations as they are is enough to transform systems, structures, and levers of power (p. 288; see also Hartsock 1983a). Furthermore, if different standpoints reveal what’s been hidden, what do feminist standpoints obscure since “no standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 33)? The emergence, resurgence, and the burgeoning impact of qualitative research, in addition to feminist, and other identity-based critiques, have led to transformative changes in scholarly research and the

material experiences of society's *others*. Such feminist critiques, new epistemologies, and alternate theories of power, among others, embed assumptions of a liberatory potential. It is a potential that is yet to be realized because significant theoretical questions remain, political struggles continue, and populist authoritarianism is on the rise. Nevertheless, the struggle to realize the potential is ongoing and feminist scholarship has a role to play in ensuring movement towards the liberatory visions of equity, equality, diversity, inclusion, and justice.

2.2.4. Qualitative Research: The Challenger

The history of Western science and research is a history of empiricism, which emphasizes experimentation, observation, and quantification. In response, qualitative research in the social sciences, is a refusal of this approach, an alternative with emancipatory intentions. Feminist approaches have helped to "call attention to processes and phenomena important to women's reality but undervalued or overlooked in patriarchal thought" (Gross & Averill, 1983, p. 83). One consequence of these many challenges has been the revelation of "methodological chasms" (Friedman, 1998, p. 315) between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Even with a long tradition of questioning the foundations of science and research, qualitative researchers continue to use methods and methodologies that are rooted in colonial knowledge and Enlightenment-era European philosophical traditions within institutions that also emerged from these traditions (McIntosh & Wilder, 2023, p. 235; Valencia Mazzanti & Freeman, 2023). As a result, qualitative researchers need to be diligent to ensure they do not perpetuate epistemic injustice. At the very least, they must be conscientious about the impact and consequences of efforts that remain largely human and Euro-centred (p. 235) and pursue the transformation of their work into the work of an activist scholar and researcher, "a disruptive enquirer" (p. 243), the immanent scholar (p. 242).

While methods are techniques researchers use to gather data (Falzetti, 2018, p. 364), methodologies encompass a much broader range of intentionality although there is a lack of agreement on what constitutes such categories or if there is a need for such categorization (Valencia Mazzanti & Freeman, 2023, p. 1361). Leaving aside the ontological messiness of theory, its relationship to research components, and its own nature as a social construction (p. 1362), for those operating from a feminist standpoint, methodologies reflect their theoretical stances including "ethical, political, and

epistemological concerns" (p. 364). Methodologies are more than issues of identification along vectors of analysis such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. They are ways to work and ways in which researchers have learned to think (Pryse, 2000, p. 110); they are "political and intellectual commitments" (p. 106). Qualitative research in general articulates transformation, social justice, and social change as integral goals (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 456). In the competing visions of quantitative and qualitative research, what is fundamentally at issue is a question about the function of research and whether its use and purpose is capturing objective truth or illumination, critique, evaluation (Lather, 2013, p. 636), action and activism (McRobbie, 1982), public awareness, education, personal development, or all the above. That is, whether the role of social science research is it to satisfy instrumental notions of state-directed policy or to spur activism, contestation, and socially/citizen directed change (Lather, 2013). Lather (2010) re-envisions qualitative research so that policy-oriented qualitative research will contribute to "a social science that 'matters' in struggles for a 'deeper' democratic social order" (p. 2) although having research subsumed into policy and discursive regimes comes at the cost of critical theoretical and philosophical investigations, which are then dismissed as abstract and elitist (p. 3; see also Pascale, 2012).

Traditionally, society has perceived quantitative research as more legitimate because of its apparent straightforward verifiability (Code, 2014, p. 152). This overlooks knowledge seekers who do not see that non-conforming and even conventional numbers operate on assumptions rather than evidence (Stiehm, 1983, p. 33). In other words, data conventions are not sensitive to the phenomena of social relations and power dynamics (p. 35). The emphasis on objectivity, prediction, and verification as better than description, interpretation, and discovery is what Lather (2010) calls "an epistemological sovereignty" (p. 24). Given the androcentricity of this sovereignty, the result has been to align qualitative research with the feminine and to accord it, as a result, lesser epistemic value (Code, 2014, p. 152). However, there is an alternative argument that positioning quantitative research as diametrically opposed to qualitative, is a political construction (Hanson, 2008, p. 97). From this perspective, there is a greater convergence in qualitative and quantitative approaches than many theorists acknowledge (Hanson, 2008; see also Hesse-Biber, 2010). Similarly, despite the diversity of practices in qualitative research it too has its limitations such as the privilege if affords some modes of representation over others (Valencia Mazzanti & Freeman, 2023, p. 1366).

In general, researchers, particularly those involved with social justice issues, have advocated for qualitative research because it situates the observer, the observed, and their activities in a world that engagement makes visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3; see also Mathijssen et al., 2023). Whereas quantitative projects "emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables", qualitative projects stress process, social experience, and the making of meaning (p. 8; see also Hesse-Biber, 2010). Proponents of quantitative research claim a value-free framework whereas qualitative researchers stress "the value-laden nature of inquiry" (p. 8). Approaches in qualitative research range from the constructive-interpretative (there is no objective social reality), to critical paradigms (power, control, and ideology establish dominant understandings of social reality), to feminist perspectives that "seek to understand the lived experiences of women and other oppressed groups" (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 455; see also Smith, 1991). While visibility is a step towards equality, social scientists need to consider the ways in which this emphasis has an intellectual history of voyeurism and colonialism (Pascale, 2012, Introduction), a legacy common to many branches of Western knowledge.

Women's studies and cultural studies, boundary busting disciplines of the late 1960s, combatted epistemological notions that ranked theory above practice and valued the "pure" knower more (Code, 1991, p. 243). In the late 1990s, feminist scholars reviewed and assessed more than twenty years of women's studies and prognosticated about its future (Allen & Kitch, 1998; Friedman, 1998; Pryse, 1998). There was concern that the radical intent of the field had been subsumed within a corporatized, neoliberal university structure (Allen & Kitch, 1998; Mohanty, 2013), which reflects technological and economic developments heralding a "cyberspatialized information age" and "increased competition of a transnational, globalized market system" (Friedman, 1998, p. 306). Another concern was that those working in women's studies relied on the assumption of inherent interdisciplinarity rather than implementing practices that made work truly interdisciplinary (Allen & Kitch, 1998, p. 275).

The boundaries of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are dynamic phenomena (Friedman, 1998, p. 301). There are debates, too, about the distinctions between interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary (Allen & Kitch, 1998; Friedman, 1998), pluridisciplinary (Trussell et al., 2017, p. 1), critical interdisciplinarity, cross cultural interdisciplinarity, and critical cross cultural interdisciplinarity (Pryse, 1998). There is also

transversalism, a transdisciplinary methodology that builds on the meaning of trans as “a bridge, a span across a chasm or otherwise untraversable terrain” (Pryse, 2000, p. 105), rather than jumping from one discrete location to another or building a position on anyone’s back (p. 112). What distinguishes an interdisciplinary approach is the aspirational goal of not providing privilege to one method of knowing, one theoretical perspective, one methodology, or one set of methods (Hill Collins, 1990, p. xiii).

The weakness with an interdisciplinary approach is that a lack of commitment may portend less meaningfulness (Friedman, 1998). While the risk in disciplinarity is overspecialization, the risk of interdisciplinarity is its superficiality because “disciplinarity offers depth but also insularity; interdisciplinarity offers scope but also rootlessness” (Friedman, 1998, p. 312). At its best, interdisciplinarity examines a range of interconnections between current events, media coverage, discourse in institutional spaces, the production, distribution, and commercialization of cultural materials, and the impact on local communities. It integrates approaches in epistemological paradigms to elucidate “the relations of power at work around culture as a process” (Wood, 2004, p. 150). It is also about the search for methods and methodologies that will enable researchers to be effective agents for social change, to produce knowledge that is transformative, and to make knowledge contributions to the struggle against multiple forms of oppression (Pryse, 1998, p. 2 & p. 4; see also Trussell et al., 2017).

Whether knowledge seekers opt to use a quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, or interdisciplinary approach, or a yet-to-be developed innovation, social science researchers need to work with the tectonic plates of culture, society, subjectivity, knowledge, and power. The focus of qualitative inquiry is to illuminate the nature of research as well as the nature of politics inside and outside the academy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 2). To open space for innovative methodologies, researchers need to be free from defensive posturing so that they can “imagine and accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather, 2013, p. 635). Knowledge must be expansive, dynamic, flexible, responsive, and transformative rather than diffuse, static, inflexible, rigid, and immutable. It is also about navigating the intertextuality of social relations, social life, and culture (Pascale, 2012, Chapter 6). Most importantly, it is about retaining political purpose (Pryse, 1998, p. 8) while not legitimating a new global social order of “exploitative and imperialist behaviors” (p. 9) or building “a methodological monolith” (p. 10). The refusal of a silo effect that

limits disciplines is crucial to maintain the focus of qualitative research on “critical reflection and revolutionary responses and possibilities” and to push “conversations and interactions” to encompass an interdisciplinary ethos as well as one that is intersectional and transnational (Berg et al., 2022, p. 658).

The purpose of qualitative research in the social sciences is to weave narratives and larger contexts together with “critical empathy and compassion to cultivate a deeper self-reflexive awareness of intersubjectivity in scholarship” (Pascale, 2012, Chapter 6). Along with this commitment, qualitative research has also increased the appreciation for the role of emotions in research, including the emotions of the researcher as well as the emotions of those who opt to participate in research studies (Olson, 2023, p 527). Qualitative research seeks out the stories of individuals but not one universal story, to understand group consciousness, but not to understand collectivity as only identity politics. It is also important for researchers to avoid tokenism and condescension when working with those who identify differently. Choosing to amplify a voice or set of voices, also means that researchers must be aware of the voices they neglect or silence, or the way their requests may make subjects ashamed of their identities or inclined to disavow their experiences. Reasserting the complexity of methodology as “a practice of belonging and becoming” also ensures that qualitative research remains focused on fashioning new landscapes that are “wrought in fluid traditions instead of preestablished paths” (Valencia Mazzanti & Freeman, 2023, p. 1374). The challenge for any researcher, no matter which methodologies and methods they espouse, select, or reimagine, is to investigate across differences in an increasingly fragmented, less understanding, more polarized political environment.

2.3. Women Readers Negotiate HEA-HFN Narratives

In her memoir *The Soul of a Woman*, feminist author Isabel Allende (2021) outlines the roots of her anger against a patriarchal system that victimized her mother for defying convention and the women that worked in her family’s home for being poor. From an early age, as young as six, she was cognizant that society ceded power and control in all facets of life to men such as her grandfather and her brothers (pp. 11-12). Growing up in Chile and in the decades before the state legalized divorce in 2004, Allende saw fear drive women to marry quickly, especially before the age of twenty-five, to avoid the fate of spinsterhood (p. 19). In her own life, Allende, a self-described

romantic (p. 29), clung to her first boyfriend, who became her first husband. She now calls romantic love a “collective illusion” and “another product of consumerism” (p. 151) although she is currently enjoying, in her senior years, a relationship with a new lover. It is this consumerist, collective illusion that happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives sustain and in relation to which women must negotiate their understanding of who they are in the world, struggle to be the way they want to be, and determine the role that love, romance, and intimate commitments will play in their lives.

In popular culture portrayals, the outcomes for women who do not follow or who disrupt the HEA-HFN script tend to be ruinous because their departure from the expected threatens the social order and portends chaos (Beard, 2017). The cumulative effect is to create the impression that the dream of love, romance, and marriage is every woman’s dream and that this is the natural, good, and proper course of one’s life rending all others unnatural, bad, and improper. The real-life consequences of this are that women who do not conform to these normative scripts are often marginalized and stigmatized, if not harmed, as are those women who may initially conform and then diverge from the path as in the case of divorce. One aspect that has drawn the attention of scholars is the influence of popular culture on women’s conception of themselves and their lives in the discursive extremes of choice, agency, and freedom versus compulsion, subjugation, and oppression and the blurred boundaries between independence and dependence for subjects immersed in culture (Koontz & Norman, 2019; McRobbie, 2009; Swidler, 2001).

One way to approach the question of such influences is to analyze institutions, discourses, practices, ideologies, and beliefs, which function as orientation devices that help individuals set horizons for their life’s ambitions and define their desired states of being (Ahmed, 2010). As a form of media consumption, reading is an orientation device, and one particularly associated with HEA-HFN narratives because romance is both a literary genre and a life experience. The substantial and substantive history of research into reading’s impact on women (Flint, 1993; Jack, 2012; Radway, 1984/1991) shows how it has been interwoven with struggles for equality and justice. Reading is also an activity that continues to be shaped by issues of privilege such as the access to education, reading material, and self-directed time. Women have fought for the right to be literate as an expression of their subjectivities, their participation as citizens, and their ability to exercise power in a world that has sought to contain and define their roles,

responsibilities, and identities. The engagement between text and reader (Murray 2018), the democratization of reading (Sandwith et al., 2020), and women reading together (Long, 2003; Rehberg Sedo, 2004) are forms of consciousness raising that when connected to action can lead to activism, advocacy, and change that is personal, collective, and/or structural.

Reading can be conceptualized as a technology of the self. To Michel Foucault (1988), individuals deploy technologies of the self to gain knowledge and collect experience to understand self, others, culture, society, and the way these inform, influence, and construct one another. Through such exertions, one strives to determine the way to be in the world and to attain one's desired state of being through individual meaning-making. This process of individual meaning-making is negotiated in relation to and/or in opposition to external compunctions, exhortations, and definitions of what constitutes good conduct, behaviour, and morality. Reading is one activity that individuals may choose to participate in, depending on their access to resources and their ability to develop the necessary skills, to learn about life and living and to learn about the experiences of others. Such learning in turn may function as a contributing factor in deciding how to live because books unveil the permutations of the human condition and "the relationship of life to literature" (Olding, 2021, p. 263). For women, depending on their environment, context, and material circumstances, reading is one mechanism they can employ to help them negotiate their relationships to various aspects of life and to help them form their ideas and understandings about love, romance, sex, marriage, and motherhood. As a result of the learning they do through reading, in conjunction with the other sources of knowledge they rely upon, women readers may choose to comply, resist, accept, refuse, rationalize, and/or refute these hegemonic social scripts; forge or discard alternative social arrangements; or engage in myriad complex responses in manifesting intimacy in their lives. The power of reading retains its potential as a knowledge-building force and a change agent whether an individual reads offline, online as a netizen in the digital literary sphere (Murray 2015; 2018), or in an array of other hybridized forms of consumption.

Despite the emancipatory potential of reading, the repetition, reiteration, and reproduction of love and romance narratives that focus on the centrality of a monogamous, life-long relationship with *the one* perpetuates a socially acceptable paradigm for a woman's life (Koontz & Norman, 2019). This dominant messaging in

popular culture strengthens the romantic imperative's duo-determinism although it does not necessarily reflect either the way people live or the variability of academic discourse. In the same way that scholars, researchers, activists, reformers, and people in society have exploded the binaries of gender and sexuality, there are challenges to the mutually constituting discourses of monogamy-nonmonogamy and monoamorous-polyamorous (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Ferrer, 2018). This emerging horizon posits a non-binary or transbinary understanding of relational identities and orientations, which is fluid, hybrid, and transcendent. The trend problematizes "the Western mononormative ethos" and "monomyth" that valorizes intimate relationships predicated on "sexual and/or emotional exclusivity" (Ferrer, 2018, p.7; see also Green et al., 2016; Ménard & Cabrera, 2011).

A risk in the relationship paradigm shift is that what is radical, revolutionary, and reformative — such as consensual non-monogamy — will become a dominant discourse. The emphasis on how to do difference, through self-help literature for example, may "set up new regimes of normativity, endorsing individualism at the expense of critiquing structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality" (Barker & Langdridge, 2010, p. 755). This vision of variable intimacy must confront the intractable essentialism of love as innate, inevitable, and beneficial; an ideology with democratizing power (Weisser, 2013, p. 1); a new form of faith (Roach, 2016, p. 168); and the assumption that romance is always a point of positive contact (Human & Quayle, 2020, p. 1416; see also Rossi, 2011). It is about the link between emotions and the subject's investment in structures (Ahmed, 2004, p. 12).

Scholars have also expanded the field of popular romance studies (Frantz & Selinger, 2012a, p. vi), demonstrated its value as an area of legitimate academic inquiry, and illustrated the value of this "the most despised and rejected of genres" (2012b, p. 1) through analytical, disciplinary rigorous, critical lenses (Regis, 2003). Research into the ways women readers negotiate HEA-HFN narratives, including in popular romance studies, often focus on content analysis, literary analysis, and the reader's engagement with text based on age, relationship status, or self-identification. Furthermore, I believe that the burgeoning focus on romance fiction, a genre that enjoys a predominantly female readership, arises because it most clearly embodies the HEA-HFN plot. To a certain extent, this focus tends to underestimate the extent to which HEA-HFN narratives permeate popular culture (Morrissey, 2014; Weisser, 2013) and other forms of writing by and for women including such genres as general women's fiction, travel writing, and

memoirs. It also tends to overlook the accompanying deficit in such a model, one that puts the emphasis on a woman's need to fix herself, to remedy her flaws, before she can find love and happiness.

Another issue is that all such writing takes love as a foundational assumption. Thus, the academic focus on romance novels precludes challenges to the ahistorical Western conception of love, the love imaginary, and may overlook alternative readings and transgressive interpretations. The material implications of HEA-HFN also merit further study because academic theories need to connect to living, and romantic love in contemporary times has become work (Human & Quayle, 2020). As such, it is another aspect of a subject's labour in the neoliberal capitalist consumer society with women assuming a disproportionate share of the burden and responsibility for the work that love, romance, intimacy, sex, and relationships require (Cacchioni, 2007; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013). It is an example of the belaboured self, or the subject working to find a place in the economic, political, and social reality of a capitalistic system in which searching for the self is a constant endeavour, working on the self is ceaseless effort, and self-surveillance has become an insidious control mechanism (Elias & Gill, 2018; Gill, 2023; McGee, 2005).

Thus, the recognition of the role of labour and capital in the way HEA-HFN functions is crucial because to ignore them in social analysis entails a type of accommodation to and acceptance of global capitalism (Namaste, 2009). From a historical perspective, the cultural scripts of a woman's life are linked to society's control of human reproduction. The establishment of human networks and social structures for intimate relations is related to managing women's bodies and their sexuality because patriarchal orders perceive danger in women's free expression of desire. Some scholars position the HEA-HFN narrative in written texts, particularly in romance novels, as women winning on the page and overcoming the strictures of the man's world in which they live (Clawson, 2005; Krentz, 1992; Roach, 2016). They argue that in these stories the man — the default power holder — learns to love and concedes to the primacy of the romantic attachment. It is a utopian vision of empowerment because *woman* is the most valued and powerful subject in these interpretations. It is another iteration of the glass slipper fitting Cinderella's foot perfectly and her being the one that's perfect for The Prince (Weisser, 2013, p. 1). It is a modern twist on an old fairy tale and traditional fairy tales are inherently patriarchal and conservative (Zipes, 2006, p. 2).

Interpretations that position the central power dynamic in popular romance fiction as one in which woman “tames and controls the monster, Man” (Roach, 2016, p. 182) overlook the opportunity to critique societal conditions that fashion men into beasts. Instead, it is imbued with the notion that monsters can be reclaimed, rescued, and re-humanized. It is a message that is dissonant with a reality that continues to disadvantage women. Women remain subject to negative transactional features of patriarchal power including misogyny, violence, and discrimination (Human & Quayle, 2020, p. 1424; see also hooks, 1984/2000). There are real life ramifications to the idealized forms of love and romance that popular culture disseminates and arguments that romance fiction is escapist fantasy or a space to “imagine and play” (Roach, 2016, p. 109) may render these innocuous. There is a material impact to falling in love with love and the sweep of HEA/HFN narratives. To bell hooks (2002/2018), “Keeping people in a constant state of lack, in perpetual desire, strengthens the marketplace economy. Lovelessness is a boon to consumerism” (p. 47). Between these poles of academic discourse, between empowerment and duplicity, are women’s experiences and the way that women live their lives.

In fact, the weaving together of love, romance, and exclusivity in intimate relationships — the HEA-HFN narrative — in combination with notions of the nuclear family has created a Western romantic imperative, one that has become a globalized commodity (Human & Quayle, 2020). Disconcertingly, this trend is a continuation of an imperialist colonialist model in the Anglo-American-European Christian patriarchal and capitalist tradition (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Ramos-García & Vivanco, 2020). As a feature of settler colonialism, this naturalization of heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism functions as an erasure of alternative forms of government and kinship (Arvin et al., 2013). The forced disappearance of Indigenous relationality, for example, has been key in refashioning Indigenous peoples into “settler state citizens” through “the management of Indigenous peoples’ gender roles and sexuality” (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 15). As a result of this removal, the decision to remain childless or to forego reproduction in the context of settler-colonialism becomes a privilege of whiteness or aspirations to established status within a white dominant hierarchy (p. 24).

If the HEA-HFN narrative is part of a problematic colonial and imperialist legacy and if the real-life deployment of these stories perpetuates a patriarchal power that disadvantages women, then how are these scripts disseminated, distributed, absorbed,

consumed, and learned? One way to approach this question is to analyze institutions, discourses, practices, ideologies, and beliefs in orienting fora such as education, family, politics, government, policy, law, medicine, science, religion, technology, popular culture, and media (Gill, 2007; Koontz & Norman, 2019; Rossi, 2011). Through engagement and interaction with these arenas of human activity, or through exclusion from them, humans learn various strategies of action that allow them to negotiate their existence within various cultural and social milieus (Swidler, 2001). That is, individuals draw on a pool of cultural resources, put culture to use in different ways through appropriation and mobilization to link their understanding of culture to action and experience (Swidler, 2001, p. 5). In the context of the HEA-HFN narrative, this cultural repertoire rewards compliance and conformity to the patriarchal script. It also fosters resistance and refusal in figures such as happily single women, women who choose not to have children, women who forego intimate relationships, women who express variable sexuality, and women who centre friendship over romantic entanglements.

As I have outlined in this chapter, cultural studies and feminist cultural studies have inspired me. The foundations and critiques of Western epistemology and ontology have intrigued me, and the history of women readers along with the lure of HEA-HFN narratives have enthralled me. To me, the complex interweaving of these thought-threads reflects what I have learned as a scholar, researcher, and educator during my time with the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. That is, the obligation to question society's organizing principles. In particular, the need to examine, closely and carefully, those principles, concepts, and ideologies that are foundational to the hierarchical systems of an oppressive patriarchy, one that valourizes and values the masculine over the feminine and situates power as a male entitlement. These principles include, among others, amatonormativity (Brake, 2018), heterosexuality and the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham, 2020), and popular culture and media as orientation devices (Ahmed, 2010), including the HEA-HFN narratives that are my particular focus. Using the academic framework I had assembled, one that I consider to be dynamic, malleable, and adaptable rather than fixed, stable, and unresponsive, I constructed a research inquiry to share, explore, and co-construct insights in community to investigate what HEA-HFN discourses mean to women readers today, how women readers react and respond to these powerful narratives, and how they understand the way these stories operate in the world today.

Chapter 3.

Reading and Talking Together: Methodology

> *"In popular culture love is always the stuff of fantasy. Maybe this is why men have done most of the theorizing about love. Fantasy has primarily been their domain, both in the sphere of cultural production and in everyday life. Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality, whereas female fantasy is regarded as pure escape. Hence, the romance novel remains the only domain in which women speak of love with any degree of authority."*
>
> *bell hooks, All About Love. New Visions, p. xxiii*

The interest in women as readers, women's reading practices, and communities of women readers, has occupied the attention of many scholars, from research inquiries that intersect with feminist epistemology (Burwell, 2007; Rehberg Sedo, 2004), to women's culture and identity (Craig, 2016 & 2019), to reconciliation (Clarke & Nolan, 2014). My specific research interest is in the way women readers negotiate their relationships to happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives through the process of reading romance fiction. My intent was to explore this topic in a systematic and scholarly approach that seeks to understand "truths, realities, and meanings" which are "relative, situated, and context-driven" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 2). As a result, this is a qualitative study rooted in interdisciplinary critical feminist methodology (Ahmed, 2006; Lather, 1991; Shabot & Landry, 2018; Young, 2005) that is characterized by disciplinary breadth, and draws on work in women's studies, literary theory, cultural studies, and feminist methods. Another advantage to this kind of interdisciplinary approach is that it preserves the aspirational goal of not providing privilege to one method of knowing, theoretical perspective, methodology, or set of methods (Hill Collins, 1990, p. xiii; see also Allen & Kitch, 1998; Friedman, 1998; Pryse, 1998 & 2000; Trussell et al., 2017). The choice to engage with interdisciplinary approaches is about adopting a more expansive attitude to knowledge production, one that has the potential to make dismissed issues visible and contributes to the struggle against multiple forms of oppression (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Lather, 2013 & 2016).

Overall, I have situated my research inquiries in the wider context of women's lives to study subjectivities, relationalities, social positionalities, and the materiality of

cultural engagement, an area of interest in cultural studies (Lury, 1991/2007, p. 101). Using a critical feminist framework, I have sought a fuller understanding of the mechanisms and scripts that operate in my social, relational, networked world, as well as the worlds of the participants, through shared conversations about our experiences and through my study and interpretation of cultural and historical legacies (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 59). While the issues of the trustworthiness of research stem from positivist interpretations of the "usefulness" of data, my academic training and life experience, along with my personal interest in the research question I have posed — and the ones that emerged through the research process — ensure that I have made the effort to align my research with my theoretical standpoints. For this study, I participated in, observed, and listened carefully to group conversations because I believe that each life is a story, each person is a storyteller, and each point of view is a narrative of shared experiences and divergent ones.

Research inquiries into women as readers often feature gatherings that draw women into community to read together, emphasizing the importance of such gatherings to women, and highlighting women's enjoyment in talking to and with others about what they read (Burwell, 2007; Clarke & Nolan, 2014; Craig, 2016 & 2019; Kraxenberger et al., 2021; Long, 2003; Rehberg Sedo, 2004). The nomenclature in public and academic discourses tends to describe these social arrangements as book clubs, and book clubs function as epistemic communities that offer sites for critical analysis (Code, 1991, p. 224). Since these communities are also "interdependent relationships" (Pascale, 2012, Chapter 6), they facilitate multiple avenues for critical inquiries including the analyses of knowledge and power dynamics. Drawing on the existing academic scholarship, along with my motivation in pursuing this research study, my academic and personal interests in the genre, and my familiarity with women readers of romance fiction, I determined that facilitating a discussion with a group of women would be the best way to explore the power dynamics of HEA-HFN narratives.

Similarly, I knew that the research study would emphasize reading and the discussion of reading as a social activity. Because my interest was in women's relationship with and to HEA-HFN narratives, I also wanted to emphasize the role of negotiation or the agentic act a reader has in meaning-making through their media interactions. Drawing these multiple threads together, I developed the following question for the research study I was contemplating:

In what ways does the engagement of women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with "happily ever after" and "happy for now" narratives?

With this research question as my guide, I had to confirm the methodology that would be best suited to learning alongside a gathering of women readers. Engaging with members of an existing book club or an established reading group entails the consideration and evaluation of a set of pre-existing interpersonal relationships and that was a realm of inquiry that I did not want to be my focus. As a result, I concluded it would be more effective to establish a project-specific reading group. I also chose to refer to these gatherings as *reading salons* because this term echoes a particular historical reality.

Prior to the seventeenth century, reading was ensconced in the privilege, socio-economic class, material wealth, and social status of power holders, and the reading habits, needs, and wants of the aristocracy and the clergy propelled the European book trade. However, technological innovation in book publishing and production characterized the new era and new readers helped drive competition in the industry (Jack 2012 pp. 145-146). This market diversification featured many new women readers, and the phenomenon of women readers as an emerging demographic of book consumers was also evident in places around the world including China and Japan (pp. 180–181). In the European context, readership diversified to include the mercantile class and the interests of mercantile women readers shifted over time from ballads and broadsides, "the first means of mass written communication," to novels (p. 150). Salons, which started at the beginning of the century as successors to court circles, a reading practice predating the use of the word by a century, increased in the latter half of the century (pp. 174-175). The women's salons that emerged in Paris reflected the reality that at this time women's reading was primarily an urban phenomenon (p.153). Women, married or widowed, met in the city for conversation and to discuss what they had read for entertainment and edification (pp. 174-175).

This complicated web of women's reading as leisure and social advancement, albeit always in the context of some women and not all women, drew more attention in the public sphere and became "the subject of continuing and intriguing debates" (Jack, 2012, p. 183). Much of the furor in the eighteenth century about women and their reading practices was about the novel. It had supplanted manuals for good conduct and lifestyle books as the reading material of choice, and public outcries often centred

around the danger novels posed to women (pp. 182-183). In using the term *reading salons*, I did not enshrine privilege or uphold the exclusionary origins of such gatherings. My intent was to celebrate the historical legacy and the power of women meeting in community to socialize and learn, to bond and commiserate, to empathize with one another and celebrate each other in a *more than* personal, informal environment. It is also about identifying the feminist potential of women's meeting spaces to resist structures, systems, and institutions that demarcate limitations on what a woman can say, do, or be. A *reading salon*, in my conception, is a space where women can be fully themselves, demonstrate their capacities, capabilities, and competencies, and reflect on their lives, free their imaginations, and dream of their futures beyond the social scripts that abound to constrain their curiosities, choices, and imaginations.

During the summer of 2022, when I was preparing to launch the reading salons as the mechanism for data collection, regulations were still in place to contend with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and those regulations were constantly in flux. Fortunately, the reading salon members and I were able to meet in-person for all three of the planned meetings. The ability to meet face-to-face in a salon format encouraged an unstructured form of dialogue and allowed for a wide range of ideas, reactions, thoughts, feelings, and contradictions to emerge. I served as the discussion facilitator and companion reader in this participant observer model, and I situated and presented myself as a knowledge seeker as opposed to one who knows, has the answers, or is merely investigating a topic to validate my assumptions and presumptions. The overall effect resulted in a forum that encouraged a dynamic exchange of ideas. Gathering the group together in this manner functioned as a form of elicitation and created a context for participants to speak about their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 52). In this way, I gained insights into the reading salon members and their engagement with romance fiction, and they gained insights into mine. Collectively and cumulatively, our community worked together to illuminate women's perceptions of HEA-HFN narratives and their negotiations of this cultural medium.

3.1. So, I Am …: Reflexivity and Positionality

A key obligation of researchers, particularly those espousing qualitative approaches, is to be aware of their own positioning and personal characteristics, which necessitates a reflexive outlook (Anders & Lester, 2015; Berger, 2015; Haraway, 1988;

Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983b). Being reflexive means the researcher is aware of and adjusts for the influence and impact of their social position, identifications, characteristics, experiences, and relations (Berger, 2015). Such reflexivity is a shift from a model that privileges what a researcher knows, observes, and thinks to one that emphasizes listening to what participants say, tell, and describe. This forms a practice of reflexivity that applies from the start of the research cycle through to its completion and beyond. It is a process of "continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation" that recognizes the influence of the researcher's position on the process and outcome of the research (Berger, 2015, p. 220). It also delineates the ethical relationships involved in research, particularly regarding a decolonization of "the discourse of the 'other'" (p. 221). Addressing one's reflexivity and positionality is also an avenue for researchers to explore, acknowledge, and consider how their work is implicated in the ongoing epistemic dominance and epistemic injustice of systems, structures, and institutions that were formed in the crucible of oppressive colonial legacies, philosophies, and ideologies (McIntosh & Wilder, 2023). This is one area that I did not address as fully as warranted in terms of who I am, how I see myself in the world, and my desire to be a conscientious scholar and researcher. It is a goal that I will continue to strive for in the future.

To record my "thoughts, reactions, hunches, assumptions, and beliefs" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 13) and to assist me in my reflexive efforts throughout the research process, I maintained a journal. This researcher's journal (*RJ*) captured my feelings, impressions, and preliminary views on what I saw as emerging themes. It proved to be helpful later when I started to review the data to prepare a description of the findings. In the first entry of my journal, and after bemoaning the fact that I had waited for three weeks after the recruitment survey link went live, on April 22, 2022, to put down my first words, I wrote this:

> Okay, where to start? First, opted to go the paper/pen route for this journal. It just feels truer and more authentic to/for me especially in re the subject and approach for my research study. Having said that, it's been forever since I did extended writing on paper with a pen like this and it feels very weird! And also feels very familiar, if not downright nostalgic. (*RJ*, May 17, 2022)

The journal I used was an 80-sheet, 160-page (one hundred percent consumer-waste recycled paper), copybook of college-ruled paper that was 19.06 x 24.77 cm in size. The cover is decorated with pinkish-red dogwood flowers with green stems and leaves, and

the pen I used was purple. The nostalgia I felt in using pen and paper reflected my history as someone from a generation that grew up, studied, and learned before the advent of personal computers, and my focus on hand-generated script echoes the way the embodied practices of writing and reading are linked.

In reading my researcher's journal now, it is amusing to see the snippets of daily life that intruded when I was writing my entries at home. This reflects the multiple identities I carry, which include caring for an elderly father who lives with me, being a PhD student, a sessional instructor, a teaching assistant, a community volunteer, and a mother to a son who lives in Victoria, British Columbia. There are details of interruptions when people arrived to visit my father or of me trying to ignore household shenanigans whether from the quiet privacy of my bedroom or home office. During the data collection period, I found it easier to maintain the journal because I timed my written entries to when each reading salon was held. However, my practice was inconsistent in the time between posting the online questionnaire for recruitment purposes, and during the time of data analysis and writing. Thus, it feels like my researcher's journal is an incomplete record of my experience. Much of how I felt or what I thought or what I learned became a process of drawing on internalized recollections and reliving conversations as I transcribed the audio recordings rather than documented impressions.

Before embarking on the research study, I was mindful of the relationship between my feminist identification and my research because feminism is an ideologically informed paradigm. That is, while I can claim an identity as a feminist researcher, I also need to scrutinize that claim, and I have an obligation to question feminism as a theoretical orientation. Such diligence allows me to locate myself in a position that informs my praxis but does not ideologically bound it to foregone conclusions or presupposed observations, a dilemma that reflects a long-standing issue in feminist theory (Code, 1991, pp. 298-299). I also need to ensure that my interpretations and analyses do not embed feminism as automatically offering better solutions for women's concerns. That is, to avoid a "recruitist feminism", an issue that emerges "from the power relationship between the researcher and the researched in a methodology that involves contact with 'real' women" (Wood, 2004, p. 151). This did not prove to be an issue as I found myself surrounded by women who identified as "badass", a word that emerged for the first time during our second meeting combined with "chick" and in the final meeting combined with the word "feminists". As a group we did not spend time comparing

feminist perspectives, nor did anyone state an objection to being identified as a feminist. Rather, there was a sense of being a group of like-minded women although I recognize that individual feelings and relationships to being a feminist or feminism in general may have been muted, moderated, or concealed.

From the start, I also knew that there would be tensions between the various insider (emic) and outsider (etic) positions I inhabit. I am a mature woman, a junior scholar, and in many ways, I exist in between several intersecting polarities of age, experience, and status. In terms of the rapid technological and social changes of the past five decades, I am aligned more closely to a senior demographic. However, my education, especially the extent of my learning since I started my Ph.D. programme, and my experience as a mother of a twenty-three-year-old, skews that alignment towards a younger sensibility. I often find myself in a limbo of social understanding regarding the contentious issues of this era that centre around markers of difference and oppression including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability. More than this, I must consider the ways in which my privileges, such as my access to higher education, a life of economic stability, and multiple normative identities, affect my views and understandings and how they limit what I see and hear. Delineating and considering such boundaries and standpoints are important in building trust because the life of the researcher is interwoven into the complexities and the relationships of the research process (Mathijssen et al., 2023; Miller, 2017). My efforts to negotiate these various positions and tensions were successful in that reading salon members indicated how comfortable they felt. For example, at the conclusion of the third reading salon, Elif said, “Okay. I have learned to love a new genre because of the safe space it’s been presented in” (RS3 transcript, p. 112). Gina echoed this sentiment when she said, “Um, I learned that it is really interesting to come into a, a safe space — I’ll say the same words — um, of people that I would normally not have the chance to sit around a table with because we're in different worlds” (RS3 transcript, p. 115).

This sense of kinship between the women in the group did not develop only at or by the end of the time we had allocated to spend together. Its presence was notable from the first reading salon when Maureen said, “Yeah, no, actually this has been really very exciting, very interesting, I really enjoyed the, this discussion” (RS1 transcript, p. 66) and Amna added, “This felt like a safe space. I really enjoyed this” (RS1 transcript, p. 67). Although, as I have stated earlier, I used the terminology of a reading salon to

describe our meetings, to the participants our gatherings were more akin to a book club. In referring to the first novel we discussed, Elif, who is not a regular romance fiction reader, described the obligation she felt to read something she would not normally have read when she said, ""I have to read this for book club" (RS1 transcript, p. 43). For participants to characterize the meetings as a book club, despite seeing me take notes, listening to me pose questions from time to time, and being aware of the audio and video recordings, means they saw the group as a community, and I was someone in the circle not outside of it or directing it. In this fashion, the institutional space we co-occupied assumed the characteristics of intimate familiarity of a gathering space in a home, the type of environment that is more often associated with book clubs.

As a member of the reading salon, the host of the evenings, and the one documenting the group's interactions I occupied multiple positions in and for this research study. I also occupied multiple positions outside of it. For example, I am an academic-outsider and romance-insider as well as an academic-insider and romance-outsider. I have been a devotee of romance fiction in the past, drafted romance novel manuscripts, pitched to editors, and entered writing contests. I was once a member of the Romance Writers of America (RWA) and attended a national RWA convention in Atlanta, Georgia, an experience director Laurie Kahn (2015) captures in her documentary *Love Between the Covers.* I would argue that I have outgrown the genre although I do not neglect it entirely as a reader and media consumer. I, too, watched *Bridgerton* (Beers et al., 2020), a Netflix series adaptation of Julia Quinn's romance novel series, but I am not an aca-fan (Roach, 2014). In terms of my personal life, I am single, a never-been married woman with past romantic entanglements, a single mother, and a woman no longer searching for Prince Charming. As a result, I wrestle with the suspicion that I have fallen out of love with love, and I had to try over the summer of 2022 to ensure that my skepticism did not overwhelm my ability to empathize with alternative viewpoints that see love as a key component of identity and a path to individual fulfilment and happiness. This required me to pay attention to the emotional frame of all my research interactions and how I embodied and performed in my capacity as a researcher building relationships (Ezzy, 2010).

3.2. What I Wanted to Learn: Study Design

The essence of Janice Radway's research on romance readers (1984/1991) was to consider what people do with literary texts and what evidence literary texts provide about contemporary society (Wood, 2004, p. 148). Following Radway, and in the tradition of feminist cultural studies (FCS), I am interested in the connections between readers, texts, experiences, perceptions of reality, knowledge, privilege, and power. As a result, my work stands in dialogue with the shifting perimeters of literary studies, which "adapts methodologies and knowledge bases from philosophy, history, sociology, media studies, legal studies, economics, linguistics, psychology, … ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, lesbian and gay studies, queer theory, and women's studies" (Friedman, 1998, p. 320). My interest is in reading as it brings subjects into "socially organized relations" because texts are "hole[s] in the actual through which all kinds of magical things become possible" (Smith, 1991, p. 160). This understanding is evident in the work of scholars researching the various iterations and manifestations of happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives who have focused on women's engagement with the resultant cultural scripts and cultural products. The relationship of other groups, such as individuals with diverse gender identities, is an avenue for future research, but it was not the topic I chose to focus on. Rather, my intent was to explore the "comings to know" (Lather, 2016, p. 125) of women readers. I wanted to work with those who self-identify as women to build on the continuities of existing research inquiries, to create the space for emergent discrepancies, and to ensure the relevance of this project to the conversation in the public realm where the gender binary is strongly operative. Throughout the process, I did strive to avoid the pitfalls of feminist theory that can be found at the extremes of cultural feminism's essentialism and post-structuralism's nominalism (Alcoff, 1988; see also Heyes, 2003; Marcus, 2005; Namaste, 2009).

3.2.1. Gender is Not The Only Factor

In designing this research study, I endeavoured to create a framework that would allow me to pay attention to contextual and situational factors, and to demonstrate my understanding that gender is not the only factor that structures social interactions and social relations (Namaste, 2009, p. 19). Nevertheless, my reliance on the category of *woman* as the basis for analysis in this study was important because the gendered

consumption of media with the themes of romance, love, and marriage skews towards women. Furthermore, in the realm of written narratives, scholars often position romance fiction as a safe space for women's exploration of desire and sexuality, which may further reify the category of woman rather than support challenges to biological categorizations. Despite these considerations, *woman* continues to be a categorization that enables exploration of an issue from the strength of a single standpoint with the awareness that such standpoints are never monolithic, universal, or free from privilege (Code, 1991 & 2014; Harding, 2004; Wood, 2004).

My focus on gender, its link to inequalities in society, the power of gender identification to forge common purpose, along with the focus on reading as an emancipatory act, positions this as a work of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar, 2007; 2017). Inherent in this approach is a political perspective because such an investigation is structured to reveal "the complex and diverse ways by which gender ideologies that entrench power asymmetries become 'common sense' in particular communities and discourse contexts, and how they may be challenged" (Lazar, 2017, np). Aligning a feminist focus with CDA means the intent of the analysis is not only to critique the discursive form, but to impel political action (Lazar, 2007, p. 144).

Exploring happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives as a discursive structure that girds a social order, one that continues to rest on the bounded understandings of a gender binary, is to reveal the ways these narratives obscure alternative possibilities of being for members of society either as individuals or as groups. It is also a way to explore how this influence manifests because "meanings expressed in discourse can be overt, subtle, unequivocal or ambivalent" (Lazar, 2017, np). That is, I wanted to structure the research study design in a way that would allow me to examine the power HEA-HFN narratives have to perpetuate normative assumptions of intimate relationships that are rooted in patriarchal understandings, and which also invite resistance and refusal. It was important then, in the design of the research study, to recognize gender as a socially constructed identity marker, and to acknowledge the importance of feminist epistemology and critical feminist thought in investigating practices, such as reading romance fiction, that are gendered female (Lazar, 2017, np).

To counterbalance what may seem to be a “universal, fixed, and binary” (Lazar, 2017, np) delineation of participants, one that may potentially be viewed as exclusionary, I focused on recruiting participants of diverse ages to capture a plurality of perspectives. Research into women’s lives is often age-segmented, and women’s lives are lived on a continuum of experience. There is a richness to dialogue across age groups that is valuable especially when investigating a narrative that is as fundamental, pervasive, and ubiquitous as the HEA-HFN one. Furthermore, since beauty and youth are often equated with love and power (MacNicol, 2018, p. 192) and a woman’s value in society diminishes with her distance from reproductive ability, multi-generational conversations present opportunities to understand the different ways in which women of different ages with different life experiences engage with the HEA-HFN story. Therefore, for purposeful sampling, I required that participants in the study self-identify as women, be nineteen years of age or older, read for leisure, have a desire to engage with this topic, and were willing to join a reading salon and to commit to a minimum of three meetings.

3.2.2. Searching for Reading Salon Members

As noted above, I determined that establishing a project-specific reading salon would be the most effective approach for this study. Such an approach aligned well with my topic, the research question, my theoretical orientations, disciplinary influences, and the research methodologies I had studied. I then had to consider the size of the group. In qualitative research the process of choosing a sample is fraught with inconsistencies and ambiguities (Gentles et al., 2015, p. 1772) in part because the objectives, context, and purpose of each project vary (p. 1775; Mthuli et al., 2022). In this case, I wanted to invite approximately seven to ten individuals to join me in conversation to discuss novels that featured happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives. My intent was purposeful and adaptable because the numerical range I identified meant that the final size of the reading salon depended on the number of responses I received during the recruitment process and my review of these expressions of interest. The variability of attendance over the three reading salons introduced a randomizing effect because the group composition was different for each reading salon meeting.

Small selections are characteristic of qualitative research because “the general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon,

rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research" (Gentles et al., 2015, p. 1782). The intense experience of a small group allowed me to open space for a more intimate experience and demonstrated how I had prioritized engagement with the reading salon members in this inquiry (Mthuli et al., 2022, p. 810). While the addition of one-on-one interviews to the study would have also reflected the multi-dimensionality of qualitative research (p. 811), my specific interest was in the discussions of women as a group and the trust that women establish amongst themselves in such gatherings. These were *a priori* decisions based on the advantages I perceived in the likelihood that a small group would building a stronger sense of solidarity in a shorter period of time and would have the opportunity to engage in deeper, richer conversations together in community.

With this objective, I was undertaking one of the tasks of FCDA, which is to look at "textual representations of gendered social practices, and through interactional strategies of talk" (Lazar, 2007, p. 149). To recruit participants, who self-identified as women and readers, I designed and produced a poster using a template from a word-processing program. The poster features a photograph of books from my personal collection, a picture I had taken during a trip to England of a stack of books for sale at a public market in Greenwich (see Figure 3.1.). The books in the photo were a random selection and did not emphasize romance fiction as a genre. I selected it more for general interest and visual effect. I chose a dusty rose background colour for the banner at the top that featured an invitation to conversation in a heading that reads "Let's Talk About Happily Ever After Stories". This invitation was extended through three questions I listed on the poster: "Do you read for fun? Like to discuss novels? Want to join this group?" I used short questions to minimize the amount of text on the poster and to maximize its visual appeal.

I also wanted to summarize the commitment those interested would have to make and included the following work requirements on the letter-sized poster: read three novels, attend 3 or 4 meetings, and respond to email. The poster, which I finalized with support from my senior supervisor, and which was included in my application to the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Simon Fraser University (SFU), included a challenge to those who might consider participating in the form of another question, simply "Interested?". The call to action that I included on the poster directed those who were looking at it to a SurveyMonkey link, created through the institutional channels that SFU offers. I distributed the poster electronically to my social media networks on Facebook,

Instagram, and Twitter (now X, a platform I no longer use), and to a few personal connections. The Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS) Department Manager distributed the recruitment poster via electronic mail (e-mail) to undergraduates and graduates on a distribution list. This form of distribution proved to be the most fruitful in generating expressions of interest in participating.

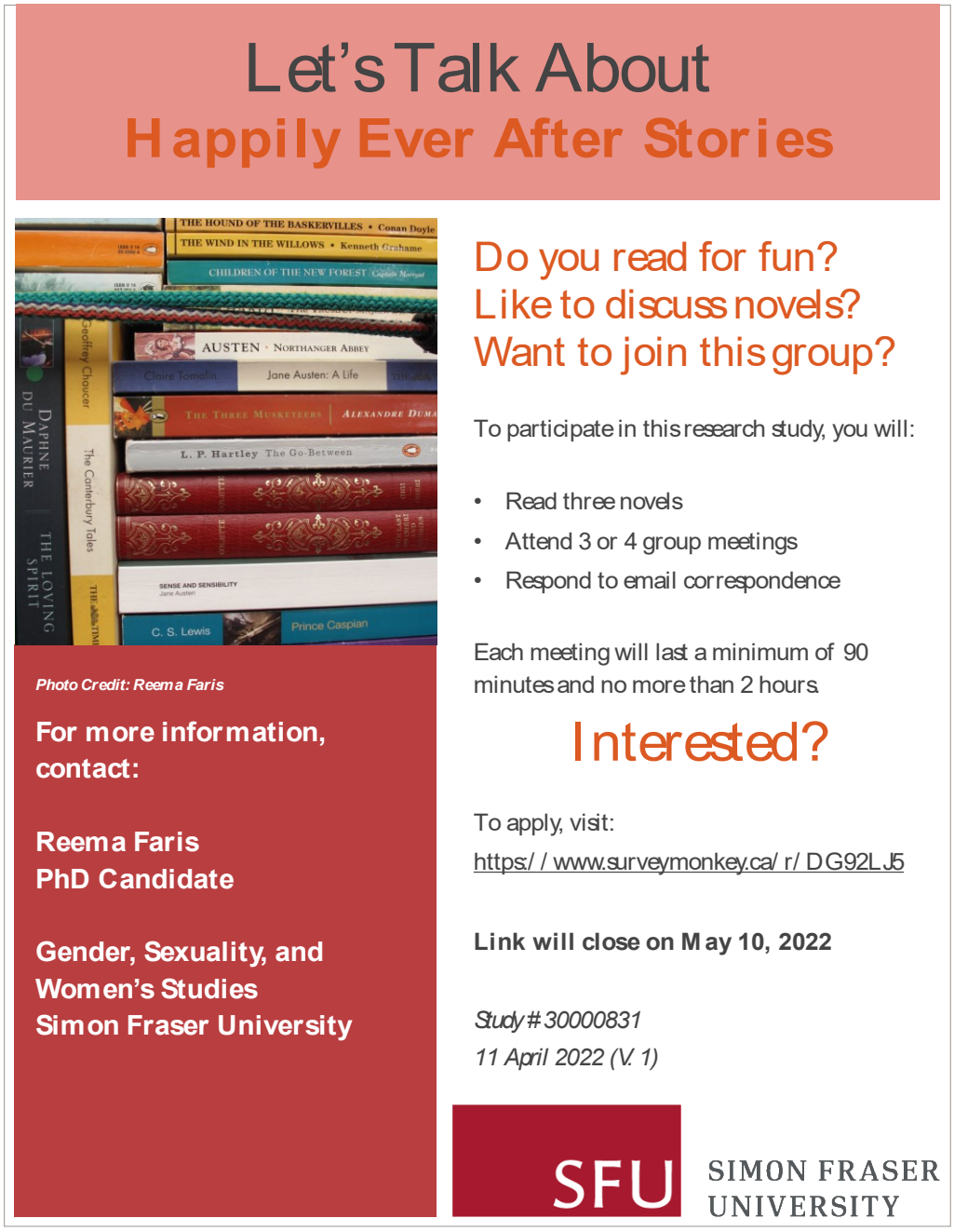

Figure 3.1. Recruitment poster for research study #30000831.

For those interested in this research opportunity, clicking on the SurveyMonkey link led them to an online questionnaire (see Appendix B for the list of questions). Prefaced with an introductory summary of the research study, the online portal also allowed those who filled out the questionnaire to give their consent to participate, identify their preferred methods of communication for the duration of the research project, craft their choice of pseudonym, and answer other questions that were intended to help me confirm the final list of participants and prepare for the first meeting. I was prepared to meet with any potential participant who indicated that they would prefer to review the consent form in person or via a video meeting platform such as Zoom, in an open-ended interaction, with no subsequent transcription, to simulate a bidirectional natural conversation (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127). No such requests were made, and I acknowledge the aspects of privilege I embedded in this recruitment process. These included, and were not limited to, economic means and educational backgrounds that have an impact on the access to digital technology and the ability to navigate social media (Kraxenberger et al., 2021, p. 9).

The first question on the questionnaire asked whether the individual had a passion for reading without specifying a form. This allowed participants to self-identify as passionate readers independent of whether they read print copies of novels, electronic copies, or listened to books in audio form. Following a question about genre preferences, those who filled out the online questionnaire provided information about their age, choosing an age range rather than a specific number of years, and gender identity. Gender identity was included as a criterion because the research study was structured around the conversations of self-identified women. To allow everyone the opportunity to describe their gender, the question was presented in the form of a text box where they could provide their own description rather than as a drop-down box of limited choices that I had selected. In addition to asking about each respondent's interest in HEA stories, the final few questions on the survey asked about the ability each respondent had to satisfy the time commitment I had specified for the research study, their preferences in terms of modes of communication, and their contact information. Because of the ongoing pandemic and my desire to reassure reading salon members about the safety of the space they would be gathering in, the questionnaire also asked potential participants to indicate if they were fully vaccinated. At the time of the recruitment process, being fully vaccinated meant having received three vaccinations

against the COVID-19 virus. Those completing the questionnaire were also given the option not to disclose their vaccination status, and if they chose not to disclose, then I would not have extended an invitation for them to join the group because I could not be certain if they satisfied the criteria for participation that I had established for this in-person, multiple meeting study.

As each stage of the research process and journey unfurled, I made notes in a second journal to track my progress and which I later used to write down notes during the reading salon discussions. Based on my progress notes, the SurveyMonkey link went live on April 22, 2022, and it was set to close on May 10, 2022. In the other journal, the one I had designated as my researcher's journal (*RJ*), I summarized the results once the questionnaire link was public as follows:

> There was a single response almost instantaneously and I thought I'd get a high response rate based on that. I tried not to obsess, so checked again on Monday — the link was activated on the Friday — and by then I had 11 responses. Eventually, the number of responses reached 14 based on the initial posts and distribution. (*RJ*, May 17, 2022)

After the initial call, I had received twice as many expressions of interest than I needed because my target for the number of reading salon participants was between seven and ten. Consequently, I did not repost the recruitment poster and did not expend additional efforts to increase the number of questionnaire respondents.

As part of my application for research ethics approval of this study, I had also developed and included a discussion protocol to show how I planned to facilitate each session (see Appendix C). To vet the discussion protocol before it was officially reviewed, I shared the document with my senior supervisor and incorporated her suggestions and feedback. I also shared the discussion protocol, which included questions I would use to initiate the reading salon conversations and to break any pauses that may arise, with three colleagues from GSWS and a friend external to academia. Their suggestions were invaluable and helped me to adapt the questions I had prepared, consider new ones, and incorporate logistical improvements for my plans as the moderator. The feedback my reviewers provided included a recommendation to make sure I reviewed the results of the previous reading salon each time, a process that is similar to scaffolding in a classroom, in order to allow participants the chance to tell me what I may have missed in my encapsulation of our previous conversation or if my

summary had failed in any way to capture the material essence of our earlier discussion. Talking to the one friend whose professional career is external to higher education also helped me make some of the questions I had designed less academic so that they would serve as a prompt for discussion and not feel like I was conducting an interrogation of those who were joining me in conversation.

Once participants agreed to embark on this academic investigation with me, I made sure to clarify that they were able to withdraw their consent at any time. I also reviewed the process for the dissemination of my findings and assured participants about confidentiality. I worked diligently to create an environment of trust characterized by a respect for a range of views, opinions, and perspectives. Although I stressed that the research space and process were judgement-free, participants always had the option to decline answering questions they considered uncomfortable because I knew such refusals had the potential to provide illuminating information on roadblocks to knowledge sharing (Green et al., 2016, p. 420). I also recognized that the relationships I established with participants would straddle the personal, the professional, and the political. Given this responsibility, it was my obligation throughout to be attentive to the needs of each person, to safeguard them, and to focus on key ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, and justice (Orb et al., 2001, pp. 93-95).

The initial recruitment invitation had suggested the potential for a fourth meeting to celebrate the conclusion of the project and to record final thoughts and feelings about the group's experiences, and the learning and knowledge that they had generated. However, in the end, we met for only three reading salons because despite the enthusiasm of the group for the topic, the content, and the gatherings, momentum began to dissipate towards the end of the summer. I also realized that the richness of the conversations had resulted in an ample amount of material for analysis and that I had reached a point of saturation (Gentles et al., 2015, pp. 1781-1782). My journal notes, written before the third reading salon, describe the factors I was weighing as I looked forward to what might potentially be the last gathering for this group:

> It's boiling today for our last reading salon! The study was set up with the idea of an optional fourth meeting, but I think it's time to wrap up. First, it's going to be virtually impossible to get everyone in August. Second, I have a lot of material! Third the group dynamic has been responsive to discussing a book and I don't think we'll get the same energy if there isn't a "new" book to read. (*RJ*, July 25, 2022)

That evening, when I broached the topic with reading salon members and described my concerns, they agreed and opted to make that evening's meeting the last one. It also happened that the third session had the smallest participation rate. While absences were compelled by external factors, it further reinforced the feeling that it would prove difficult to maintain the same momentum that had made the group such a success. The group's willingness to forego an additional meeting also reflected the fact that one of the participants, Elif would be acting on an idea she had years before, which was to organize a book club with a feminist orientation. Many of the participants had indicated that they planned to be a part of this new initiative. In other words, it did not seem like they were putting an end to a community they had built; they were merely implementing a pause in their association until the first planned meeting of the new book club.

3.3. Building Community: Reading Salon Members

Of the fourteen individuals who submitted a completed online questionnaire, I knew or had a connection to many of them. In addition to women I did not know, the respondents included friends, close family friends, a relative, and academic colleagues, which reflected the fact that I had used my personal social media networks to promote my work and publicize the SurveyMonkey link. As a result, I felt that this pre-knowledge complicated the selection process I had embarked upon because I had a sense of how some of the respondents might fit into or not fit into the reading salons based on my familiarity with them. My evaluation of the suitability of some of the candidates as potential research participants thus became an issue of whether I felt that the involvement of those I knew well would act as a detriment to my facilitation of the group or skew the dynamics of what I envisioned as a new, purpose-specific community. In the end, while some of confirmed participants were people I knew, I declined the participation of some that I felt I knew too well.

In addition to the people I knew, there were six respondents who had completed the online questionnaire whom I did not know. On the advice of my senior supervisor, I contacted each of these individuals so that I could get to know them better before making a final determination as to the composition of the reading salons. I opted to send e-mail messages, rather than text, to schedule voice call interviews as a pre-screening initiative. Although potential participants had provided mobile telephone numbers when they had completed the online questionnaire, using text implied another level of

familiarity and an incursion into a space that I felt was not open to me yet. As a result of my outreach efforts, I was able to schedule four telephone calls to learn more about each person. This process was helpful because I decided not to extend invitations to participate to the two applicants who did not respond to my e-mail. Unfortunately, this included the only individual to identify as non-binary on the questionnaire, which would have diversified the gender identities within the group although the focus of the research study was on those who identified as women.

My decision to exclude the two individuals who had not responded to my email request for a conversation did not take into account that my message may have ended up in their junk or spam folders or had been lost in cyberspace. Whether or not it was fair, their lack of response helped me whittle down the list of potential participants. One of the calls I made resulted in a referral to another person who had expressed interest in being a part of the study. This individual completed the online questionnaire, they were the fourteenth respondent, I did not hold a separate call with them, and they declined the invitation to participate due to a scheduling conflict. Overall, based on these additional conversations and with the details everyone had provided on the online questionnaires, I confirmed the participation of four women I had spoken to and five from the list whom I already knew.

The nine confirmed participants were ethnically and culturally diverse, but not racially diverse and I refer to them throughout as *reading salon members*, *the group, group members*, *participants*, or variations of these forms of address. We met three times on May 30, June 20, and July 25, 2022 (see Table 3.1). In terms of participating in-person, one candidate was unable to attend the first reading salon, five attended all three meetings, two attended twice, and one was able to attend only the second reading salon (see Table 3.2). The person who missed the first meeting due to illness subsequently withdrew from the study completely because her condition became chronic, and she did not feel she would have the capacity to follow through on the time commitment she had made. Another participant was unable to attend the May meeting due to personal circumstances.

For the second reading salon all the remaining confirmed participants attended, and it was the one session with the fullest participation. To accommodate one participant who was ill, the third reading salon started as a hybrid meeting with those in the room

and the one person on Zoom. Unfortunately, that attempt at incorporating the virtual participation of one person did not work well, and the individual logged off after the group's opening round of comments. Another participant had to offer her regrets for the July reading salon due to an unforeseen conflict at work and a third participant was unable to attend due to the collapse of the childcare arrangements she had made for the evening. As a result, the third reading salon featured the smallest group of participants, and the mixed levels of attendance over the three reading salons also demonstrates the pressures women face in juggling their multiple roles. As is the case for many women, their leisure activities are squeezed into the nooks and crannies that exist between their duties, obligations, and responsibilities.

One week prior to the first reading salon, I sent an e-mail to the group to confirm the logistics of when and where we were meeting, and the title of the first novel we would be reading, Julia Quinn's (2000/2015) *The Viscount Who Loved Me*. Picking the book that was the basis for the second season of Netflix's adaptation of the Bridgerton series, introduced a wrinkle I had not anticipated. The copies of the novel that were available through the public libraries in Lower Mainland municipalities were in high demand, whether as print copies, electronic books, or audio books, which meant reading salon members had to either buy the book or pirate a reading copy if they were unable to borrow one. It was an expense that I was concerned would derail their participation in the reading salon. Fortunately, it did not.

Table 3.1. Reading Salon (RS) Details (2022)

Date	Time	People*	Recording	Transcription**	Novel
May 30 (RS1)	6:30 – 8:30 p.m.	8	1:48:54	79 pages (22,565 words)	*The Viscount Who Loved Me* (*Viscount*) Julia Quinn (2000/2015)
June 20 (RS2)	6:30 – 8:30 p.m.	9	1:59:17	120 pages (28,014 words)	*Seven Days in June* (*Seven Days*) Tia Williams (2021)
July 25 (RS3)	6:30 – 8:30 p.m.	6	2:04:09	132 pages (30,231 words)	*Get A Life, Chloe Brown* (*Chloe Brown*) Talia Hibbert (2019)

*Participants and one researcher.
**Word count includes headings and ancillary text.

Table 3.2. Profile of Respondents and Participants

Age	Gender Identity*	Participant	Study Identifier**	Salons Attended
19-29	Cis woman	Yes	Amna	3
	Woman	Yes	Helen	3
	Agender, non-binary	No	--	--
	Woman	Yes	Sara	3
	Woman	No	--	--
	Woman	Yes	Elif	3
30-49	Female	Yes	Paola	2
	Female	No	--	--
50-69	Female	Yes	Alison	0 (withdrew)
	Female	No	--	--
	Female	Yes	Vicki	1
	Female	Yes	Maureen	2
	Woman	Yes	Gina	3
70-79	--	--	--	--
80+	Female	No	--	--

*Online questionnaire field for gender identity was in the form of a text box, and respondents self-described their identity, which explains the differences in the terms they chose to use.
**RMF will be used in this document to identify the researcher (Reema Faris). All other names are pseudonyms.

In my introductory e-mail, I also asked participants for their book recommendations, and these were later included on the book ballots that I used to determine the novel selections for the second and third reading salons (see Appendix E).

Even though each of the reading salon members had granted their consent to participate when they first completed the online questionnaires, I asked them to also sign a printed consent form before the first reading salon discussions began. I later scanned the signature page of the documents and returned a copy to each member of the group via email for their reference and their files. Each person received a gift bag from me that included a $25 CDN gift certificate to an independent bookstore in the Lower Mainland and at least two books from a collection that I had secured as donations from the Vancouver Writers Festival (VWF) and author Wendy Roberts, an acquaintance. I also included paraphernalia from GSWS. Based on my experience with book events and conferences, I knew that readers respond positively to receiving such items, and I also wanted to recognize, with these gifts, the generosity of the reading salon members in giving their time to this research study.

As part of compiling the information describing each participant, I asked those who had attended at least one reading salon to provide a brief positionality statement that I could share as part of the final written document. The following, with pseudonyms, is the information they approved for inclusion, confirmed after the reading salons were held in May to July 2022, and before the end of summer.

- Amna – A university undergraduate, Amna is an international student from the Middle East who follows her religion and is wary of Islamophobic hate crimes. An English major with a minor in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS), she enjoys reading novels, especially LGBTQ+ romance fiction, and watching movies as well as television shows.

- Elif – A Masters' student in GSWS, Elif is passionate about representations and diversity in children's books, the type of book she intends to write in the future. She may venture into writing for adults, too, and hopes to work on issues relevant to women. Elif works as an actor and enjoys reading books as well as watching television.

- Gina – A mental health professional who has worked in the field of adult mental health for several years. Gina is the mother of a young adult child. She is interested in gardening, reading, and writing.

- Helen – An undergraduate student pursuing a double major in GSWS and Psychology, Helen is a lifelong learner with boundless curiosity. She is of Dutch and Métis ancestry. For Helen, reading fiction was a childhood escape and she has developed a critical eye regarding the reading she does now because of her workplace experiences and of violence.

- Maureen – A mother of three young adult children, Maureen has been happily married for over thirty years. She is a human resource professional with a mid-size not-for-profit organization in North Vancouver and likes to read a variety of genres.

- Paola. – A recent Masters' graduate in GSWS, Paola holds a BA in Architecture and an MA in Corporate Social Responsibility. She is the mother of a male-born toddler, and currently works as a project manager. She enjoys travelling, discovering new restaurants, and reading, especially books that promote intersectionality and empower women.

- Sara – A recent graduate with a double major in English and GSWS, Sara is about to start her Masters in English with a special interest in print culture as well as eighteenth century Scottish women's writing. A passionate reader of all genres, she has a particular interest in romance fiction and novels whose plots also feature romantic elements.

- Vicki – A divorced mother of two, Vicki works as a manager of a customer service team in a professional organization. Following the example of her parents, she became an avid reader who has learned to look at romance stories through the lens of life experience and with a grain of salt.

After our first meeting, I recorded my initial impressions in my researcher's journal (*RJ*) once I had returned home from the reading salon and was able to gather my thoughts. At 10:48 p.m. on May 30, 2022, I wrote:

> In terms of the group — WOW! I couldn't have asked for better. Everyone spoke and participated — there was [sic] some great insights and comments — and I really have no idea of how I'm going to mine the data — there's so much of it!!! Or will be after 3 salons. The age and character mix seemed fantastic and so gratifying to hear the participants talk about feeling like they were in a safe space. (*RJ*)

Aside from my regret now about the extractive word choice in "mine the data", I remember the excitement I felt after that first encounter with the group. The alchemy of the interactions and the sustained energy meant everyone was active and engaged throughout the evening. This was reflected with the next entry in my researcher's journal when I wrote this the following morning:

> Through the night thought about the way the group started to build community instantaneously — sharing stories & experiences — self-reflection while discussing the topic — more so at the end with the words about how they felt about the evening and talking about connecting/sharing afterwards — such as sharing book recommendations, etc.
>
> (*RJ*, May 31, 2022)

During the first reading salon and each subsequent one, there was laughter, empathy, commiseration, and no awkward pauses other than a couple brief moments of silence. Over the course of the three reading salons, I realize that we all had so much fun, which I confirmed as I listened to and transcribed the audio recordings, and what I may treasure the most from this experience is the laughter we shared. Because of the history of reading salons that I mentioned previously and because of this sense of community that was established from the start, I use the term *reading salon members* more often than *research study participants* to describe the women who joined me. In my view, *reading salon members* is a more accurate and intimate terminology to describe a group that began as a mix of strangers and ended as a melange of friends.

3.4. Gathering and Gatherings: Data Collection

The three reading salons for this research study were held at Harbour Centre, the location for Simon Fraser University's (SFU's) Vancouver Campus, and each salon

was held in a different room. In each case the seating capacity of the room was greater than needed and I felt it was a detriment to the comfortable context I wanted for our discussions. To create a more intimate environment, and to allow participants to sit in a circle facing one another, I rearranged the furniture. This was one way to replicate the feeling of the spaces more likely to be associated with book club meetings, such as a living room in a home rather than a classroom in an institutional setting, emphasizing the importance I attributed to the impact the physical space would have on our conversations and interactions (Mathijssen et al., 2023). To enhance the feeling of community, I also provided catered snacks for the participants to enjoy, which was especially important since the reading salon times coincided with what may have been dinner time for those involved. To capture the substance of the conversations, I used Zoom to record the evening's proceedings, both in the form of audio and video, and I relied on the software to generate a transcript. I also used my mobile telephone to make back-up voice memo recordings of each salon. Due to technical difficulties, none of the three attempts I made to video the conversations worked properly. This meant I was unable to analyze body gestures and visual cues or have a tool to help me distinguish who was speaking when several reading salon members spoke at the same time. While I had not intended video to be my primary capture method, and I had planned to base my interpretations on the spoken word and written text, I missed having the opportunity to consider the additional information a video record would have provided.

3.4.1. The Books We Read and Discussed

From the outset, and throughout the research process, my focus and intent were to centre the experiences of the reading salon members. As a result, I originally wanted to leave the matter of text selection to those who would take part in the study. However, upon reflection and to streamline the process of data collection, I decided to specify the novel for the first reading salon. I also understood that no one book can stand in for an entire genre just as no one reader or group of readers can stand in for all readers and all groups. Since the academic spotlight is often cast on romance fiction or genre romance novels, I felt that this would be the strongest starting point although I had hoped to broaden this focus to novels that traverse the boundary between romance fiction and what the book marketplace refers to as women's fiction.

In considering various options within the conventional genre of romance fiction, I opted to start with a novel that incorporated romantic elements and history because of what it offers readers and what it says about the nature of romantic love. Readers see reading romance fiction as an opportunity to learn about different times and places and this information acquisition often justifies the time readers need to read for leisure and to elevate content that public perception tends to denigrate (Radway, 1984/1991, p. 106). Furthermore, historical fiction tends to perpetuate the notion that love is transcendent, universal, and immutable, attributes I was interested in exploring with the reading salon members. Another benefit of using fiction as a base for collecting data is that the novel accommodates the examination of interiority and the inner life of characters. In a personal conversation with Canadian author Mona Awad, during a private luncheon my sister had organized in support of the Vancouver Writers Festival (VWF), Awad explained to me that writing fiction allows an author to engage with psychological processes in a more authentic and truthful manner. According to Awad, author of *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, a collection of short stories, and the novels *Bunny*, *All's Well*, and *Rouge*, in fiction there is no holding back. Another benefit to gaining access to the thought processes of the characters in novels is that the reader can establish micro-macro links when juxtaposing thoughts and action. In this way, fiction shows the difference between thinking, feeling, and doing, between being and appearing, and it also "promotes empathetic engagement and compassion" (Leavy, 2019, p. 2929).

In thinking through which romance novel would establish a strong foundation for the research study's first reading salon, I decided to start with a Julia Quinn novel from the author's Bridgerton series. A book from this series met the criteria of being an example of a conventional, historical romance fiction novel, in this case a Regency romance, and the series had gained renewed notoriety and popularity because of the Netflix adaptations. The first televised season of Bridgerton, based on Quinn's novel *The Duke and I*, aired in December 2020. It was the biggest hit that the streaming service Netflix had had, garnering a viewership of 82 million households in its first month online (Park et. al, 2021). Netflix subsequently confirmed a further three seasons for the televised series and the second season aired in 2022, which aligned with the timing of my research project. The second Netflix season was to be based on Julia Quinn's (2000/2015) *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (*Viscount*), and I decided to make this novel

the inaugural selection for the first reading salon to capitalize on the public buzz and anticipation that surrounded the show.

Originally published in 2000, *Viscount* was easy for the reading salon members to access because the publisher had released new editions of the novel to profit from the public awareness of the series and the interest in the production that was to air. When Season 2 of Bridgerton did air, on March 25, 2022, it reached a viewership of 627.11 million hours as of April 17, 2022, five days before the SurveyMonkey link for the research study went live, and it surpassed the popularity of the first Netflix foray into the Bridgerton universe (Maas, 2022). To be prepared for any comments participants may have on the streaming service's version of the novel, I made sure to watch all eight episodes of the second season. I found that it was, at times, in concert with the text and, as might be expected with any adaptation, varied significantly regarding various details and plot points. I was curious how participants would feel about the show, especially about its diverse cast. However, the process of putting a print novel on the screen did not relate to my primary avenue of inquiry, and I did not purposefully include any questions relating to this matter on the discussion protocol I compiled. I was prepared in case participants chose to comment on the televised adaptations, which they did although this did not dominate our conversation about the book.

In choosing books for the remaining two reading salons, I wanted to work with the group members in a collaborative selection process. I was prepared to suggest various titles for them to consider including those that ranged beyond the confines of romance fiction to support my contention that happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives are embedded in many different types of books targeted to women readers (Wendell & Tan, 2009). My list of other works to propose included novels by authors Susanna Kearsley and Juliet Blackwell. Susanna Kearsley's (susannakearsley.com) most recent release at the time was *The Vanished Days* (2021). Over the years I have read and enjoyed Kearsley's books, which have been increasingly identified with the single-title romance market. These include *The Winter Sea* (2008), *The Rose Garden* (2011), *The Firebird* (2013), *A Desperate Fortune* (2015), and *Bellewether* (2018). Similarly, Juliet Blackwell's (julietblackwell.net) contemporary fiction uses parallel stories, one set in the past and one in the present, both of which are resolved through the course of the novel. Her books all feature an American female protagonist, and all the stories are set in France, incorporating a travel element that is

often included in books where women must remove themselves from their existing context to heal, become whole, and find love — themes I felt certain would emerge over the course of the three reading salons. Blackwell's most recent release at the time was *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany* (2021) and her other titles in this vein are *The Paris Key* (2015), *Letters from Paris* (2016), *The Lost Carousel of Provence* (2018), and *The Vineyards of Champagne* (2020).

In whichever list I chose to share with the group, I also wanted to include at least one example of a novel that was more reflective of the increasing diversity in the genre of romance fiction. For such a selection, I looked at the catalogue of Bold Stroke Books (Bold Stroke), which, according to the publisher's website (www.boldstrokesbooks.com), "offers a diverse collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer general and genre fiction." In browsing the many Bold Stroke titles available, I felt that the writing of Jane Walsh (www.janewalshwrites.com), a queer historical romance novelist whose work was new to me, would be a strong option. Her published titles included *Her Lady to Love* (2020) and *Her Countess to Cherish* (2021), and her upcoming titles with Bold Stroke were *Inconvenient Heiress* (2022) and *Her Duchess to Desire* (2022). For me, Walsh's work would be my introduction to the world of Queer Regency romance and would serve as an interesting counterbalance to the more classical Regency Quinn novel that I knew we would be reading first. I also felt that if the group were to support such a selection, it would align my experience more closely with that of the project participants who may be encountering this world for the first time and would allow me to be a learner in relation to those project participants who may be more conversant with Queer romance fiction. In addition, it would present an opportunity to explore a modern depiction of women's sexuality, albeit within the structure of the HEA-HFN narrative, in a way that presages "perhaps, finally, a loosening of the patriarchal knot of allowable sexual expression" (Roach, 2010, para 3).

My plans surrounding book selection changed because I did not have to generate a list of additional titles for the reading salon members to consider. After I had sent out an introductory e-mail to all confirmed participants, which included a request for them to send me titles of books they would like the group to read, I received enough suggestions to create a list of multiple options. From these suggestions, I created book ballots for reading salon members to use (see Appendix E) and allowed time at the end of each reading salon for the participants to fill out the book ballots anonymously. I later

tallied the results and used e-mails to inform reading salon members of which book they had ranked as the top selection for the next reading salon. Entering the data collection phase of the project, my hope had been that the group would choose to read at least one non-traditional romance novel or one that transgressed the boundaries of binary gender identity and heteronormative sexual identity. While each book ballot identified genre categories that included queer titles or LGBT titles, information I gathered from online searches, in the end, as a group, we read and discussed three books that featured heterosexual relationships, each of which conformed to the strictures of HEA-HFN narratives. In addition to *Viscount*, the books we read were *Seven Days in June* by Tia Williams (*Seven Days,* 2021) and *Get a Life, Chloe Brown* by Talia Hibbert (*Chloe Brown,* 2019).

From planning and organizing, my focus shifted, with the first reading salon to talking, sharing, and documenting. This represented and reflected my effort to locate women, an identity I held in common with the confirmed participants, in critical, analytical, and substantive dialogue countering a tendency to locate women only in talk and gossip (McRobbie, 1982). Although as bell hooks (2000/2018) notes, regarding the function of gossip for women when they gather,

> One reason women have traditionally gossiped more than men is because gossip has been a social interaction wherein women have felt comfortable stating what they really think and feel. Often, rather than asserting what they think at the appropriate moment, women say what/ they think will please the listener. Later, they gossip, stating at that moment their true thoughts. This division between a false self invented to please others and a more authentic self need not exist when we cultivate positive self-esteem. (pp. 59-60)

In terms of the environmental context for the meetings, the effect was to replicate the warmth and intimacy of a book club. In fact, participants referred to the research study reading salons as a book club several times (RS1 transcript, p. 43, p. 52, p. 67; RS2 transcript, p. 46, p. 109; RS3 transcript, p. 12, p. 99). To maintain momentum and connection between the meetings, I had originally anticipated sending out regular e-mails, but because our in-person dialogues were so rich and intense, I was hesitant about imposing further on the time participants were giving to the project. As I result, I opted not to send substantive correspondence to group members between meetings other than cursory communications about logistical issues, such as confirming meeting

dates and the book selections. The cumulative effect of collaboration and camaraderie was captured in notes I made one week before the second meeting. At that time, I wrote:

> I'm so happy the project is moving forward and I'll be very curious to see how many participants actually show up next Monday or if there will be a drop off in participation. It's such a solid group though that I think the discussion will be fabulous no matter the actual configuration.
>
> (*RJ*, June 12, 2022)

And they were. After the final reading salon, and with the audio recordings complete, my research efforts shifted from collecting data to analyzing the information reading salon members had made available to me through this dynamic, dialogical, conversational journey of discovery that we had shared.

3.5. What did I Learn? Data Analysis

From the outset of this research study into the relationship women readers have with happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives, I wanted to root the work in the real-life experiences of the reading salon members and my own, and to understand our conversations as reflections of our own life stories. Once the reading salons were completed, I set the horizon for my analysis of the data beyond the words themselves and focused on exploring the ways we as a group co-constructed meaning and knowledge in one another's company (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 158). As such, the objective of my approach to data analysis has been to *re-present* what the reading salon members shared with me rather than to *represent* their insights, observations, thoughts, questions, and ideas (p. 158).

To accomplish the goal of *re-presentation*, I transcribed the audio recordings myself. In doing so, I was able to refer to the Zoom transcripts, but these turned out to be of very little help and I had to essentially re-transcribe the conversations as I listened to them again. Although the work was onerous, I did not outsource the task. Given the intimate nature of the gatherings and the subjects we explored, I also opted to use manual open coding rather than working with a digital software program. This process of working with the transcriptions and recordings directly allowed me to develop a more thorough understanding of the information I had gathered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 132). Listening to the audio recordings carried me back to the spaces we met in and to

the times we spent together. I could visualize the conversations again and remembered what it felt like when the group appreciated a witty remark or laughed at a raunchy one. This intimate familiarity with the substance of our discussions, this process of reliving the experience, also enabled me to catch surprises, discrepancies, unanticipated disclosures, and new directions, a measure of validity that ensured my research was "not simply a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 148; see also Miller, 2017).

3.5.1. Transcribing Reading Salon Audio Recordings

In approaching the task of data analysis for this research study, I wanted to ensure that my process would be an ongoing, iterative, and inductive one conducted in conjunction with the process of data collection and not left until after the reading salons had concluded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 297). To do so, the researcher's journal (*RJ*) I maintained became key. In the journal, I explored my concerns, fears, and anxieties before each reading salon and reflected upon the group's conversations afterwards. As shown in Table 3.3, I would make an entry on the same day each reading salon was held and would often make another entry the next morning to capture the reflections that occurred to me overnight. The *RJ* also became the place I would sketch out items from the reading salon discussions that had made a specific impression on me, whether those were themes that were repeated from one salon to the next or whether it was a thread that I wished I had tugged on and pursued. In addition to my *RJ* reflections, I made notes during each reading salon in another notebook, and both tools were helpful guides when I launched the process of transcribing the audio recordings.

It was not until I began to transcribe the audio recording of the first reading salon that I realized that the Zoom transcripts, which I had presumed would provide a solid template to work from, were terrible. They were, in many respects, unusable. For example, because of the technical difficulties I encountered, every contribution on the Zoom transcript was identified as being from me. Entire sentences were missing, and many words were simply incorrect. As a result, I had completely underestimated the amount of time it was going to take for me to transcribe the voice recordings I had. The difficulty was not in recognizing the voices of the reading salon members who were talking, but that I was transcribing from scratch. The Zoom transcripts I thought I would be able to rely on, provided little beyond a time signature for each utterance, and even those details did not entirely correspond to the time signature of the voice memos I

recorded on my mobile telephone. Transcribing the first reading salon recording took me four ten-hour days of work over the 2022 Labour Day holiday weekend and it was the shortest transcript I had to compile (*RJ*, September 7, 2022).

Table 3.3. Researcher's Journal (*RJ*) Entries

Time Context	Entry Date*	Content Summary
Pre-Reading Salons	May 17	Reflections on research process and the start of the recruitment process
	May 23	Notes about *Viscount* and anticipation one-week from the start of RS1
	May 25	Email to reading salon members
	May 27	Notes about *Viscount*, participant cancellation, and book suggestions received
Reading Salon 1	May 30	Impressions of RS1
	May 31	Comments about RS1 and sense of community
	June 12	Review of discussions with Senior Supervisor
	June 13	Anticipating RS2
Reading Salon 2	June 20	Impressions of RS2
	June 21	Comments about RS2
Reading Salon 3	July 25	Anticipating RS3
	July 25	Impressions of RS3
	July 26	Reflecting on next steps
Post Reading Salons	August 9	Concern with progress on data analysis
	September 7	Completion of RS1 transcription
	September 8	Reflections on RS1 transcript
	September 9	Reflections on ubiquity of romantic representations
	September 10	Potential epigraph
	September 23	Reflections on transcribing and how women read
	January 4, 2023	Potential epigraph and/or quote
	January 5, 2023	Potential epigraph and/or quote
	March 23, 2023**	Potential epigraph and/or quote

*2022 unless otherwise noted.

**After attending a Thesis Writing Retreat in February 2023, my focus shifted to working solely with the thesis template.

Here is a brief exchange from the first reading salon to demonstrate the flow of my transcribing efforts, from the notes in my notebook to the Zoom transcript to the Word document I created and used as the basis for data analysis. My handwritten notes from the first reading salon on May 30, 2022, read as follows:

Maureen: This is the way it should be so I must be happy.

Elif: Expectation of happiness tied into wealth.

Paola: Got her love & happiness @ the end despite protestations.

Helen: Worked through their own trauma.

Gina: HEA – not money, etc. – selling fantasy, selling perfection. Nothing will tear them apart. Only one person for another.

The Zoom transcript of the same exchange appears in this way:

122 00:19:22.500 --> 00:19:30.840

Reema (she/her): So so different Apps are ready for their expectations are because it sort of their traditional they're like I want I was, like all right, this is the way it should should be and so it's like.

123 00:19:32.370 --> 00:19:43.200

Reema (she/her): You know so well also especially I think another aspect of, especially in the service and she came from like money and like wealth, with such a big thing about point yeah and he was he is the most eligible bachelor and.

124 00:19:45.720 --> 00:19:48.450

Reema (she/her): And she came from nothing and.

125 00:19:49.620 --> 00:20:03.420

Reema (she/her): conditioning likes so like that's another aspect of happiness like that is like you, you, you had your expectations of what happiness was you get more than that which is what she thought was well and she could support her mum as well, I think.

126 00:20:07.080 --> 00:20:26.790

Reema (she/her): That like I will marry you and make you happy, but you won't get lunch right like they kept like that was his narrative and on and on, and the fact that he and she did get her happiness and love just reinforces the idea of oh yeah this was a true love match, so it was a true happiness.

127 00:20:28.110 --> 00:20:29.700

Reema (she/her): And they both work through their like.

128 00:20:33.420 --> 00:20:33.870

Reema (she/her): These.

Using what I could from the Zoom transcript, I would copy and paste portions of the text into the table I had created in Word, and then listen repeatedly to the audio recording to verify what was said and by whom. The same exchange I have shared above, as it appears in my notebook and on the Zoom transcript, reads as follows in the document referred to here as Reading Salon 1 Transcript (RS1 transcript):

> Maureen: But the expectations were also so different. Like they didn't have sort of any ... their expectations of their ... this was sort of the expectation of their life. [Interjection - I want kids cool – Elif]. That's right. This is the way it should be and so it's like well I must be happy. Right, you know, so ...
>
> Elif: Well also especially I think another aspect of it, especially in this book, is that she came from ... like money and like wealth was such a big thing at that point and he was ... he is the most eligible bachelor of the *ton,* and she came from nothing in quotation marks. So, like that's another aspect of happiness like that is like you, you, you had your expectations of what happiness was, but if you could get more than that which is what she got with wealth, then she could support her Mom as well. So, I think that's another aspect of happiness.
>
> Paola: Also, the reinforcement that like I will marry you and make you happy, but you won't get love, right? Like they kept like that was his narrative, on and on, and the fact that in the end she did get her happiness and love, just reinforces the whole idea of oh yeah this was a true like love match, so it was a true happy ever after.
>
> Helen: And they both worked through their like weird trauma ... or stuff ... [group chuckles] bees and rainstorms. [Group laughter.]
>
> Gina: Well, I think it's selling a fantasy. Like, I think the happily ever after is more like ... less to do for me with money or this and that. It's really to do with selling a fantasy, which is perfection, which is that these two people form a union that is perfect, and nothing will ever tear them apart. You know that's to me is the essence I think as I'm thinking about it. It's the fantasy. It's the perfection and it's the idea that there's only one person for each of these people and they have found the one.
>
> (RS1 transcript, pp. 13-14)

Given the time-intensive nature of the transcription I had to do, I found it difficult to prioritize the work while juggling teaching responsibilities and care obligations at home. I completed the transcription for the first reading salon on September 7, 2022, and I finished compiling the remaining two by February 2023.

3.5.2. Reviewing The Transcripts to Structure The Findings

As noted in Table 3.1, the transcripts I produced ranged from a document of 79 pages (22,565 words) for RS1, 120 pages (28,014 words) for RS2, and 132 pages (30,231 words) for RS3. Knowing that there is no "'best' way to analyze qualitative data" (Saldana, 2016, p. 2), I used my journal notes, my notes from the reading salons, and my reactions to the audio recordings as I transcribed them, to focus on particular words and concepts that linked with each other (p. 7). I began to think in terms of what a code would mean to me recognizing that "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). In an early exercise to sketch out the directions the data were indicating, I identified a set of broad themes. My first attempt to define these linkages resulted in five categories, which I labelled as (1) how women read, (2) lasting impacts, (3) relationships and the erotic, (4) erasure of the single woman, and (5) outliers. As I developed my familiarity with the data, I eventually rephrased these as follows: (1) women readers, (2) reality and fantasy, (3) vulnerability and trauma, (4) sex, shame, and security, and (5) identity and aspirations. However, after careful consideration, I reduced the number of thematic groupings to three. I eliminated women readers as a separate category because I recognized that this research study was not specifically about the nature or characteristics of women readers. Instead, I knew that my observations about this topic would be captured in my elucidation of the group's reactions to the content of each novel and their discussions about them. Similarly, the idea of identity and aspiration fit under the umbrella of reality and fantasy, so I decided to discuss those portions of the reading salon transcripts as a subsection rather than a separate category of findings.

This reorganization of categories and themes did not represent a loss of content. Rather, it strengthened the thematic groupings and allowed me to better identify the words I wanted to use for my analysis of the transcripts. These were words that were related to the concepts under discussion, and which captured the meaning participants expressed in their commentary. On occasion, a word or a variation of a word would relate to a different context such as feeling safe in the room we met in rather than feeling safe when reading romance fiction in public. I have included such uses in the frequency counts shown in Table 3.4. However, I would later account for such distinctions and

disregard occurrences of a word, words, or phrase from consideration in my analysis of a particular finding if it were not materially connected to the theme I was discussing.

Table 3.4. Word Search Frequency

Thematic Grouping	Root Word (alphabetical order) *	RS1	RS2	RS3
4. "We can be whole together": Trauma, Diversity, and Violence				
	Fear	1**	0	0
	Fix	1	3	10
	Harm	15	0	0
	Heal	13	6	6
	Trauma	7	30	7
	Violence	2	0	2
	Vulnerable	1	1	6
5. "It's just so taboo!" Sex, Shame, and Security				
	Bodice	1	0	7
	Danger	0	0	0
	Desire	0	1	0
	Erotic	22	4	1
	Male Gaze	5	1	0
	Pleasure	6	2	5
	Porn	8	0	15
	Safe	1	0	10
	Secur (for secure, etc.)	0	1	4
	Sex	53	30	53
	Shame	0	1	12
	Smut	0	5	28
	Taboo	0	2	10
6. "Romances are not meant to be realistic": Aspiration, Experience, and Harm				
	Comfort	5	3	3
	Dream	7	2	3
	Entertain	0	5	4
	Escap (for escape, etc.)	12	1	8
	Expectation	14	6	0
	Fantasy	16	15	7
	Missing	3	2	0
	Perfect	24	12	8
	Realistic	5	25	2
	Reality	3	4	5
	True Love	1	0	1

*Word search frequency results include variations. For example, the frequency for the word trauma includes variations of the word such as traumatic, traumatizing, traumatized, etc.
**Numbers are the number of times the word and its variations appeared according to the search function in Word.

There were a few words that I knew were important to investigate, but a preliminary search turned up too many results for the examination of those words to be practicable. This was the case with the word *whole.* I knew it was important in the sense of finding one's other half to become whole, but the search turned up unrelated examples such as a whole book, whole series, etc. Consequently, I reviewed the transcripts and the passage that related to the topic rather than relying on the word search. Other words that had the same effect included *complete*, *change*, *expect*, *happy*, and *romance*.

Having identified code words and phrases, searching for them through the transcripts, and assessing the conversations I had recorded, it was time to embark on compiling the information I had collected. Another factor I considered was the participation of individual reading salon members. Reflecting on my impressions of the gatherings and what I could hear in the audio recordings, it was clear that some voices appeared more prominent than others. This indicator of a potential imbalance in power dynamics, was countered, in part, by the connections the reading salon members made with one another and their expressions of satisfaction. I was never approached by any member of the group to say that they felt unheard or that they could not speak up. Group members, on numerous occasions, commented instead on how safe they felt, how the comfortable space and comfort with one another invited their active participation. At the end of the second reading salon, Vicki said, "I loved listening to everyone's perspectives here. I'm so honored to be a part of this group. You are some smart ladies and I'm really happy to be here" (RS2 transcript, p. 109). With the vagaries of life to contend with, the third reading salon was the smallest. This amplifies the impression, in my discussion of the findings, that a few voices contributed the most. However, the absences, particularly in the third salon, allowed other voices to shine through, too, and helped again to balance other times when some group members may have spoken less. As noted in my researcher's journal after the third reading salon, "It was actually a great discussion and there were so many tantalizing tidbits. The two hours really flew by as someone remarked in the closing round" (*RJ*, July 25, 2022). Overall, participants referred to their experiences in positive terms and the quality of their discussions reflected this buoyancy.

3.5.3. Preparing The Final Written Submission

Final dissertations in qualitative research encompass diverse, unique, and creative representations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 268). In considering the best fit for

my subject and the structure of this research study, I decided on the traditional five-chapter written form to present my findings and analysis. In drafting the chapters, I focused on negotiating a balance between providing enough information for a thought-provoking exploration of the topic and not overwhelming readers with the amount of information I provided (p. 280). I also endeavoured to use language that was rooted in sound academic practice and yet remained accessible, largely jargon-free, to provide an informative and enjoyable reading experience. After completing, reviewing, and receiving feedback on my first draft, I opted to divide the chapter on findings into three resulting in a finished document of seven chapters.

Throughout the research process, and despite the evidence provided by the level and quality of the reading salon interactions, I had to manage my anxiety about getting it right. Even though I am a mature student, this is a challenge I share with junior scholars, and I had to continually remind myself that my task is to shape my contribution to knowledge on this subject (Blaxter et al., 2010, p. 251). It is not about being perfect or perfectly authoritative. I treated the process as dynamic throughout the duration of the project and adjusted my action plans in response to events as they unfolded. Finally, I submitted various versions of the draft to my senior supervisor for review and feedback, and we met frequently to discuss changes, some of which resulted in the need for revisions to chapters that had already been completed. Although the process took longer than I had anticipated, it has unfolded in a relatively timely way and the results of this research inquiry into the responses women readers have to HEA-HFN narratives has raised new questions for me to consider and satisfied my curiosity about others.

3.6. The Reading Salons: Findings

I opened Chapter 1 with an anecdote about a conversation I had with a young graduate student during a workshop coffee break. During that informal chat she had shared with me her reaction to the description I had provided about my research into happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives during the round of participant introductions. As I mentioned at the outset, this exchange illustrates the resonance women often express in relation to my research topic. It also echoes the idea that women are in constant negotiation with the representations of love, romance, marriage, sex, and relationships in popular culture. The depictions and the portrayals of these aspects of a person's life also overlap, intersect, and interconnect. Given my

background, experiences, and interests, I chose to focus my research study on reading and reading text although the form and nature of what constitutes a text has changed over time. My initial intent was to explore a variety of fiction genres to explore the prevalence of HEA-HFN narratives in popular culture because I find that they are embedded across category boundaries and media forms. However, the research study participants voted to read romance novels that featured heterosexual relationships for RS2 and RS3, the reading salons where they were the ones to select the text. In fact, this outcome supported my inquiry more effectively because romance fiction and women's fiction with romantic elements align much more clearly with the tropes, characteristics, and values of HEA-HFN narratives.

One of the revelations I had as I compiled, reviewed, and analyzed the data I had collected was the generosity of the reading salon participants who were at the heart of this research study. Reading, as I often remind my students when I am teaching, takes time and time is a resource that is subject to multiple demands. It is an activity intimately connected to the body, senses, and material conditions because literacy and class are intertwined (Mace, 1998, p. 34). The answer for women readers to the question of when they read, especially in terms of leisure reading, is that they read when they can. This raises the issue of who and what claims one's time and attention, and to what end and purpose. Historically, the support of women's reading has been linked to activities that accrue to the benefit of family and society. This includes one's self-improvement to fulfill prescribed roles, positions, and responsibilities including the burden of ensuring the literacy of the next generation (Mace, 1998). In other words, authorities have encouraged women to read if it does good according to dictated normative standards without necessarily addressing the gendered nature of time or the economic hardships that prevent women from having the time to read (p. 17).

In studies of women readers, participants often remark on time to read as an escape and a release from the nature of daily life devoted to keeping a home, raising children, tending to husbands, and fulfilling work obligations (Radway, 1984/1991, pp. 88-89). In an environment where social norms value work more highly than leisure, women's insistence, and persistence, in finding time to read by themselves and for themselves is a form of transgression and subversion. It is also an assertion of subjectivity, selfhood, and agency that bestows reading on the reader as a gift to oneself (p. 91). However, the rationalization of time women spend reading is complicated as

they navigate the perception of what they ought to be doing with what they want to do. Such justifications tend to focus on reconciling their right to pleasure with societal values. Often the pressures of time and the juggling of multiple demands has resulted in readers outsourcing the process of selecting material to read to commercial interests (Thelwall & Bourrier, 2019) more than religious institutions and other external authorities although these still hold sway in many parts of the world.

Through this outsourcing, women have expedited the process of choosing something to read and to increase the amount of time they have for reading. Readers incur the risk though that the ancillary activities of participating in book culture will absorb their reading time. This is one aspect of belonging to a cultural economy and a form of creative labour (Noorda & Marsden, 2019, p. 389), one that is voluntary and has the potential to be exploitative since the benefits of content generation often accrue to a different entity. In addition, readership and book culture has expanded, but rather than democratizing literacy, this proliferation of activity makes it more difficult to discern the ways in which cultural hierarchies of taste are perpetuated and continue to operate as filters that exclude voices from geographical contexts beyond North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe or privilege literary forms over popular ones (Philips, 2020; Rehberg Sedo, 2008).

Despite the risk that one's engagement with reading may present a threat to the control and management of time, there are more readers and more ways to engage with reading. Readers, including women readers, have determined that there is value in investing their time in reading, beyond the basic function of being literate, although the valuation of the activity, the motivation for reading, determining the why one reads differs from person to person and group to group. In giving their time, the reading salon members demonstrated the value they assign to reading, a valuation that extended beyond their interest in the specific content of the research study or in being a part of an academic inquiry. Even more significant than the commitment of time was the feeling of community that they built and the sense of shared discovery that imbued each of the reading salons. The wide-ranging discussions in each session covered issues such as the craft of writing, authorial intent, and story lines to larger social ramifications, personal experiences, and life aspirations.

After listening to the audio recordings and poring over the transcripts, many themes emerged in response to the research question I had developed. The question that guided my work throughout was:

> **In what ways does the engagement of women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with HEA-HFN narratives?**

As a result of thinking, reflecting, and adapting as I prepared this document, I chose to discuss the findings under the three major headings that took shape as I worked with the transcripts as a whole and with the words, variations of words, and combinations of words that I used in my word searches. The categories I finalized for discussion are:

- **Chapter 4:** “We can be whole together”: Trauma, Diversity, and Violence
- **Chapter 5:** “It’s just so taboo!” Sex, Shame, and Security
- **Chapter 6:** “Romances are not meant to be realistic”: Aspiration, Experience, and Harm

In each case, the first part of the heading is a direct quote from a reading salon member that exemplified the thematic group I was exploring. I decided on the final shape and form of each heading based on my search of the transcripts using the coding words I had chosen to highlight. Woven throughout the discussions that follow are my reflections on and analyses of the three reading salons. My re-presentation is based on the generous participation of the reading salon members and our conversations about the impact of romance fiction on women’s quests for identity, autonomy, and agency as they navigate and negotiate their relationships to HEA-HFN narratives.

Chapter 4.

"We can be whole together": Trauma, Diversity, and Violence

> *"And yet, I realized now, it was in this room, Larissa's, that I had first learnt that history is not dates or abstraction but a space where memory becomes layered and textured. What is real is what you carry around inside of you."*
>
> *Olive Senior, The Pain Tree, p.7*

When I heard the words *trauma* and *violence* during the reading salons, I was stung. After the first meeting and first book discussion with the group, I remarked on the use of these words in my researcher's journal when I recorded my impressions of how the evening had unfolded. My notes are filled with gratitude about the group, "Everyone spoke and participated – there were some great insights and comments" and specifics from the conversation, "the undertones of violence … and the appeal of the enemies-to-friends trope" (May 30, 2022). Regarding the latter, I also made mention in my researcher's journal that participants recognized the potential of "'harm' in that message" (May 30, 2022). The prevalence of words and ideas relating to *trauma* and *violence* as well as the substance of their impact was reinforced as I transcribed the audio recordings of all three meetings. *Trauma* and *violence* are strong words to use and the effect of hearing them used in conjunction with our conversations about romance fiction and happily-ever-after/happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives was jarring and dissonant.

To assess and analyze the concepts of *trauma* and *violence* in romance fiction, I searched for the words in the transcripts of the three reading salons. The first mention of *trauma* occurred in RS1, less that twenty minutes after the group's discussion had begun. After a round of introductions, Helen provided her perspective on the resolution of *Viscount* and summarized the events of the plot as, "they both worked through their like weird trauma … or stuff … bees and rainstorms" (RS1 transcript, p. 14). In fact, the first part of the title for this chapter, "we can be whole together," are Helen's words (RS1 transcript, p. 24) and her categorization of Anthony's and Kate's traumas as "bees and rainstorms" elicited group laughter and chuckles. The hilarity invoked so early on was a feature of subsequent discussions and a key element in the feeling of community that

reading salon members established. In total, reading salon members used the word *trauma*, and its derivatives such as *traumatic*, seven times during RS1. They used it thirty times in RS2 and seven times in RS3. In RS2, I was the first to use the word *trauma* in a guiding question to the group. I wanted to probe the idea that had emerged from about HEA-HFN narratives requiring readers to suspend disbelief and to embrace the triumph of love. Specifically, I asked,

> Vicki just said … as … a reader [when] you pick up a romance you're willing to suspend disbelief … However, … um … this book also had a lot of … trauma in it. So, I'm just wondering how those two things work together. So, you're willing to … you know willing to cut it some slack, it's a romance I know it's not real, but then it was trying to be really real. And I'm just wondering about that tension there. Did that … offset the pleasure of reading it, or were you still in that, "Oh, it's a rom-com, eventually things will work out." Like where … how did you navigate that? How did you navigate the trauma in the book in other words? (RS2 transcript, p. 24)

I was curious to know what steps the readers took to reconcile the content of a book that presents issues such as substance abuse, self-harm, incarceration, abandonment, and murder with its ultimate resolution in a HEA-HFN ending.

Overall, the use of the word *trauma* increased four-fold during the second meeting. This reflects, in part, the nature of the book discussed in RS2, *Seven Days in June* (*Seven Days*) by Tia Williams (2021), which is also a meditation on what Elif called "generational trauma" (RS2 transcript, p. 25). Specifically, the book shows inter-generational trauma in the life of the female protagonist, Eva, especially as it relates to her maternal lineage or between the women in a family (RS2 transcript, p. 61). It is also possible that once the concept of *trauma* was introduced in RS1, it gained stature among participants as a conceptual framework for later discussions. That is, *trauma* became a concept that was acceptable to use for the analysis and discussion of the books the group was reading. In contrast, the word *violence* and its derivatives were used only twice in RS1 and twice in RS3 and not at all in RS2. However, the discussions that revolved around the undertones of *violence*, particularly those in the first book we read and discussed, were significant and merit examination in the context of patriarchy and the role of *violence* and/or the threat of *violence* in sustaining patriarchy within social and cultural contexts.

In introducing the idea that a reader must negotiate their reactions to the *trauma* an author presents in a romance novel, I may have influenced the participants to use the word and concept in their analysis of *Seven Days* even though it was a reading salon member who introduced the idea of *trauma* first in RS1 in relation to *Viscount*. Over the course of our three meetings and the exchange of ideas throughout, the function of *trauma* in romance fiction became clearer to us as I will discuss in greater detail below. The group understood that each protagonist, the two prospective lovers, must have an issue or issues to resolve, and they are only able to do so through the process of falling in love, learning to love, and being in love. In doing so, they each become whole in themselves and as a couple rather than existing as broken and/or damaged individuals. As Gina noted, romance authors use *trauma* "to drive the deep conflict for the romance and fixing the other person" (RS2 transcript, p. 25). In other words, *trauma* in romance fiction increases the stakes and the risks. It makes the characters worthy and deserving of love. In this model, the greater the *trauma*, the greater the love. This makes the significance of the redemptive arc more substantial and more rewarding for the readers who witness the principle of reciprocity in the HEA-HFN outcome of these narratives. To discuss these ideas and concepts more fully, I have identified four subcategories:

- 4.1. Romance Fiction Centres Lack and Healing
- 4.2. Women Carry the Burden of Loving
- 4.3. Readers Approach Narratives of Difference with Intention
- 4.4. The Threat of Violence Dulls the Charm of HEA-HFN Stories

These discussions are presented in detail below.

4.1. Romance Fiction Centres Lack and Healing

Each woman, in her opening comments, included a description of herself as a reader in response to the request I had made to do so. In their replies, reading salon members shared the type of reading they enjoyed and addressed the changes in their reading habits over time. There were exchanges between participants about the first two seasons of the Bridgerton novel adaptations on Netflix as well as a discussion of the original series of novels. When the conversation shifted to the novel we had read in preparation for the evening, Julia Quinn's *Viscount*, reading salon members identified

the story as a HEA narrative because the protagonists, Kate and Anthony, were successful in their quest to find their one true love. Participants interpreted the epilogue, and a second epilogue in later editions, showing the couple still together in the years that followed the end of the original story, as further evidence of the longevity of their relationship. In terms of the issues that traumatize each of the main characters in *Viscount,* Helen had identified these as “bees and rainstorms” during the opening rounds of the first meeting (RS1 transcript, p. 14).

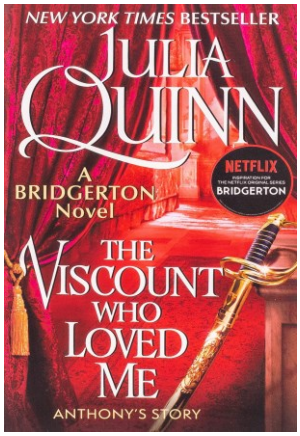

Figure 4.1. Book cover for Julia Quinn’s *The Viscount Who Loved Me*

With this emphasis on personal issues that plague the protagonists, HEA-HFN stories reiterate the convention that individuals are flawed beings. The process of finding one’s true love is a process of finding remedies to ameliorate those flaws. It is in this way that these narratives establish a discourse of what constitutes a perfect union. As Elif noted, ‘‘There's definitely some sort of level of like imperfection. Like you might not be changed, but like that needs to be overcome” (RS1 transcript, p. 17). Paola’s summation, which she shared during the RS2 discussion of *Seven Days*, was this:

> And then, also to the point of like showing that Shane has in a way grown emotionally or that like he, he is working through his addictions, because it could have been very easy for him to go through that and fall into his old ways. But he's so in love and reconnected to Eva at this point that like he can keep going with his sobriety and keep like doing the steps, even if he had like this very traumatizing thing that happened to him right now, as opposed as before that he will cope very differently. So, it's just saying, “Oh, he is a better man now so now he is actually ready for her.” (RS2 transcript, p. 68)

Or as the leading man in Julia Quinn’s novel, Viscount Anthony Bridgerton, proclaims:

> It means that love isn't about being afraid that it will all be snatched away. Love's about finding the one person who makes your heart complete, who makes you a better person than you ever dreamed you could be. It's about looking in the eyes of your wife and knowing, all the way to your bones, that she's simply the best person you've ever known. (p. 345)

This cycle of redemption and healing through love becomes a transformative power. It is a healing process and a way to surmount one's insufficiencies.

This framework creates the conditions, the vacuum that love fills through a process where a duo learns to trust each other and whose lives become dependent on one another's presence to heal. *Heal* and its derivatives appeared six times each in the transcripts for RS2 and RS3 although in different contexts. When such words were used in relation to the discussion of a book's content, reading salon members made the association between *healing*, *health*, and *fixing* an individual. In an early RS2 exchange for example, Gina, initiated this exchange when she delved into this romance trope:

> Gina: Yeah. I would say ... again having been a fairly extensive romance reader back in the day, especially for regencies and stuff, I'm not surprised by it in any way because I think that ... um ... romance trope often uses marked trauma for both characters. Because they're always ... and it's pretty superficial. Like it always is. Like, you know, Bridgerton it was his dad. He witnessed his death, right? [Interjection – multiple voices in assent.] ...
>
> Elif: And such a random thing to hold on to life.
>
> Gina: Exactly. So, I'm not surprised at all. I think that tension is there in all ... in so many romance novels. [Interjection – multiple voices in assent – okay (Elif).] That's what they use to drive the deep conflict for the romance and fixing the other person. And ...
>
> Paola: And for them to bond, too.
>
> Gina: To get them together and heal each other. Totally, yeah.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 25)

In this dialogue, reading salon members demonstrated their awareness of the links between trauma, healing, and love in romance fiction. They also recognized the centrality of this triad to HEA-HFN narratives as the glue individuals use to mend the broken parts of themselves in the process of becoming a whole and complete self.

In a discussion during the last reading salon, Elif saw this theme reflected in *Chloe Brown*, which she summarized as, "And I think the trauma of people not caring for

her illness will make her stay [in the relationship]. Because that's the only person that ever has [cared for her] ... outside of [her] family" (RS3 transcript, p. 27). This sentiment is also reflected in the Netflix adaptation of *Viscount*. In the streaming service's show, during his confession of love to Kate in the climactic scene after Lady Featherington's ball, Anthony says, "I want a life that suits us both. I know I am imperfect, but I will humble myself before you because I cannot imagine my life without you. And that is why I wish to marry you" (Brownwell, et al., 2022, 61:36). The notion of dependency is also present in the novel we read for the second reading salon, *Seven Days*. In that story, Shane, the male protagonist, learns not to be emotionally codependent. As Elif said during that discussion, "So, in order to not become too dependent on Eva again after they reconnected, something needed to happen that would stop his codependence with people ..." (RS2 transcript, p. 66). However, even though he must address his codependency on others, Shane needs to know he can depend on Eva.

Regarding Eva and Shane in *Seven Days*, I had read their story, particularly their backstories as full of trauma. In contrast, reading salon members, particularly those significantly younger than me did not characterize the story in the same way. They acknowledged that the protagonists had led difficult lives in their youths, and the following exchange shows how our viewpoints diverged on this topic:

> RMF: So, let me understand this though ... ... because both characters, Shane and Eva, have a lot of trauma in that early era. So, I'm not ... help me understand ...
>
> Sara: I feel like because it was more balanced.
>
> RMF: How this isn't centred in trauma, I guess is what I'm asking.
>
> Helen: Because they're thriving at the end.
>
> RMF: Ah, okay.
>
> Sara: They have the back and forth.
>
> Elif: But also ...
>
> Vicki: But also, their trauma wasn't ...
>
> Elif: Yeah ...
>
> Vicki: ... all that trauma.
>
> Elif: ... exactly.

Vicki: It was teenage drug use.

Helen: Lack of parenting.

Vicki: And bad parenting.

Sara: Bad parenting.

(RS2 transcript, pp. 73-74)

The participants did not see the teenage drug use, lack of parenting, and bad parenting as trauma in the way I had understood it. In addition, reading salon members felt that the happy outcome of the love story between the adult characters helped the readers negotiate and digest the negative experiences the author presented in the book. For example, Sara said,

> I feel there were moments of happiness that helped like mask it and helped like make it not so hard to read because they found each other, they had good moments together and obviously that was mixed with horrible, traumatic things but it felt like it was easier to digest. Because it wasn't just like here's a chapter of someone getting killed or something. (RS2 transcript, p. 75)

For the participants, the dominant theme of a thriving couple (Helen, RS2 transcript, p. 74), each of whom had built a successful career as a published author (Sara, RS2 transcript, p. 75), helped to offset the impact of reading about the suffering of each character.

4.1.1. Summary

Over the course of our three discussions, reading salon members identified that the fictional characters, the hero and the heroine of each story, carry personal scars and contend with issues that come out of their life experiences. These traumas often act as obstacles to the character's ability to love and as the romance unfolds, the success of the plot swivels on the resolution of this legacy of trauma. As such, love is a compensatory experience that helps us overcome these imperfections. In this sense, trauma is a metaphorical wound that internally scars the character, and which has a direct bearing on their conduct and behaviour in the story. In romance fiction, a character may have physical wounds, or their trauma may stem from abuse. In the novels we read for these reading salons, the source of the crises were not external scars. In *Viscount,* the characters are dealing with phobias stemming from earlier life experiences, in *Seven*

Days the issues stem from experiences of loss and abandonment, and in *Chloe Brown* they emerge from experiences of chronic illness, dissatisfaction with body image, and heartbreak. In all three novels, family dynamics also play a key role although the family structures vary. The importance of all these configurations and themes is that the events a character experiences in their life results in a loss of self-esteem, a sense of worthlessness, and an inability to love oneself or another.

These are the issues that contribute to the fears in the lives of the characters and their sense of lack, which is remedied through love. The ability to depend and rely on that one other person, the love interest, is embedded in HEA-HFN narratives. It is about establishing a healthy, nurturing attachment grounded in love, and avoiding overattachments that may be unhealthy because they are rooted in insufficiency rather than sufficiency or wholeness. When we met for the third and last reading salon, I pointed out that participants were not comfortable with the trope in HEA-HFN narratives that focused on fixing people, whether that is a matter of fixing oneself or fixing another. I identified this theme as one that had emerged in our previous conversations and as one of the features to consider in our third and final discussion. Building on the insights and observations of the group, this thematic thread continued to form a context for our critique, analysis, and conversation as we considered the importance of gender differences to the structure of these trope-laden stories.

4.2. Women Carry The Burden of Loving

To continue with the analysis of HEA-HFN narratives and the segments of these plots that focus on transformation, I conducted a word search of the transcripts using terms such as *whole*, *complete*, and *change*. However, these terms were too indistinct, and the search results included many unrelated examples such as references to a whole book, a whole series, and so forth. Instead, I read through each transcript carefully to revisit the parts of the reading salon conversations that dealt with the links between *trauma*, *wounding*, *incompleteness*, and the process by which the protagonists saved each other and embodied a new state of being. For example, in the RS1 discussion, after Helen mentioned trauma, Gina summarized the process as follows: “Because he sees the true you, right? He sees past everything, and you get to work on him and change him” (RS1 transcript, p. 15). Implicit in Gina’s contribution to the conversation is

that there is an emotional burden women bear in this transformative process. The female protagonist's role is to change the leading man. It is her responsibility to tame the beast.

This trope and these experiences are not unique to the fictional worlds of love, romance, and fairy tales. bell hooks, for instance, writes about her own life saying, "One pattern that made the practice of love especially difficult was my constantly choosing to be with men who were emotionally wounded, who were not that interested in being loving even though they desired to be loved" (2000/2018, p. 10). This reflects a widespread belief that a woman's love is an instrument of salvation and that women can fulfill the role of saviour. Elif put it bluntly when she said, "We can change men" (RS1 transcript, p. 16) and she later described the process as "trauma bonding" (RS2 transcript, p. 25). This burden on women to change men also led to generalizing about men as a group and to decline the work being with them entailed as in this exchange that Sara precipitated with her remarks:

> Sara: And ... um ... yeah, that's ... It's kinda hard reading romance. I also have like those depressed moments where I'm like, ugh, it would be so much easier if I just had a boyfriend, so I don't have to like read romance books and ... I still would ... because ... I love them but, like [nervous giggle] ... it's ... I dunno ...
>
> Elif: But you could turn over and have it in real life as well then?
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Elif: And I think ... I ... like, like I completely get it. I just, it's ... it's ...
>
> Sara: It's weird because when I ... outside of reading them ...
>
> Elif: Exactly!
>
> Sara: I'm like whatever.
>
> Elif: Who cares?
>
> Sara: Like I love being a girl boss like let me live my life, but then ...
>
> Elif: Also, because the expectations are unreasonable.
>
> Sara: Mmhmm.
>
> Elif: Like ... I ... like ... I wouldn't want any man I see on the street [Group chuckles] because like [Group murmurs, chuckles] they suck. [Elif nervous laugh] When like .... because, like they need to be changed, and like I know that in real life, I can't change them. But like I keep on reading that you can.

> Sara: Mmhmm. It's not even ... th, the effort's not even worth it. It's like, whatever [Group laughs] But ... [Group chuckles] I'd rather just have a fictional husband. [Group laughs] Not Anthony [Bridgerton], but ... [Group laughs]
>
> (RS1 transcript, pp. 49-50)

Sara recognized the work involved in having a boyfriend and that the burden would be on her to change him if she were to succeed in love as it is portrayed in fiction and often understood in life.

In many ways, reading romance fiction remains a highly gendered practice and representing women as men's rescuers is a central feature of this genre of storytelling. Gender is also a feature in the way that women readers interpolate the conduct and behaviour of fictional characters into the real world. For example, reading salon members were clear that whether in a story or in real life, men do not understand their own feelings and emotions. In a romance novel, the male protagonist typically exhibits detachment, if not outright hostility to forming an intimate attachment, and the role of the female protagonist is to teach him to be, and to accept being, an emotional human being. She serves as a guide who forces him to contend with the full expression of his humanity. His challenge is to learn to love, to embrace the vulnerability of needing love and of being the one to love, just as the women's challenge is to come to terms with her full humanity which is to recognize her power and strength. As Sara put it,

> Yeah, it's the typical thing of the guy not being able to understand what he's feeling until a woman is like kind of tells him or shows him in a way ... um ... because he wouldn't get there without her being her, you know. (RS1 transcript, p. 29)

According to this perspective, men need women and women need men but the mutual need for one another is fraught with conflict until the ultimate resolution brings them to acceptance of the need for one another. However, this drive towards becoming a pair is not limited to a heterosexual context. Gina demonstrated this when she shared her reading outside of the heteronormative paradigm. She said:

> Gina: I think a lot of male-male romances are written by women. Like if you actually look at them. Some are written by men, but many are written by women, and I think that ... to me ... like I've read some ... and honestly ... I don't honestly think it matters if you read ... for some happily-every-afters, I don't think it matters if it's male-male or male-female, like they are to me they've been the same char ... it's the same

> arc in a way? I think that's what you were sort of saying when you read the happily-ever-after ones, their similar arc ...
>
> Amna: Yeah.
>
> Gina: And so ... I think a lot of ... I think quite a few of them [indistinct]
>
> Amna: Like if it's by men there's also not much different, to be honest [indistinct]
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 34)

The gender of authorship, according to these comments from Gina and Amna, does not affect the story arc in romance fiction. Even in romances that are not heteronormative, as in gay or lesbian romance, this heterosexual framework still dictates the drive towards a HEA-HFN outcome that involves a pairing.

As the RS1 discussion progressed, the reading salon members commented frequently on this pattern of male transformation. In a Regency romance, such as *Viscount*, the first book we discussed in each other's company, the male protagonist is often cast as a rake and the process of the rogue overcoming his trauma is the key to him becoming a better man. As Maureen noted, "Find the right woman and she'll change you for the better, right?" (RS1 transcript, p. 17). In a heteropatriarchal society, such transformative journeys are about the male figure readying himself to assume the mantle of responsibility. He is the one who will be a power holder in society, responsible for maintaining the status quo, and ensuring social order. In previous eras, this is also how society viewed travel for young men. In the British context, the Grand Tour, for example, was "an instrument of social reproduction" (Porter, 1991, p. 35). Where in travel writing the people of various lands are positioned as the *Other*, romance fiction perpetuates notions and understandings of women as the *Other*. In fact, in the fourth installment of the Bridgerton book series, *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* (Quinn, 2002/2021), Colin Bridgerton, the Viscount's younger brother, embarks on such a tour before returning to England to find love.

While the transformative effect of love featured in all three novels that reading salon members discussed, they viewed the conflicts and personal traumas of the protagonists in *Chloe Brown* differently. Sara, for example, felt that the author, Talia Hibbert, had written through a more contemporary lens of understanding relationships, and as she explained:

> It's a good relationship. So, I feel like ... it doesn't have a lot of like weird red flags that *Bridgerton* and *Seven Days* did. So ... and I also think that because of the author ... she's young. This is her. And she's very young and like I feel like that is represented in this, so maybe that's why ... I, as a young person ... feel like it's a good romance because she has a lot of ... I guess it compares with *Bridgerton*, which is written like thirty ... years ago? Twenty-five years ago? And has a bit of ... different writing styles that this one, it just kind of stands out as like ... I think they'll remain together because the basis of their relationship ... is good and like ... the way that they get together is ... healthy ... in my opinion? (RS3 transcript, p. 21).

In Sara's estimation, the coupling of Chloe and Red, the lovers in the book, was healthier. Elif agreed and felt that the trauma of characters in the earlier two novels magically disappeared once they declared their love for one another whereas in this novel "the whole book is about their ... individual relationship trauma and like working through it" (RS3 transcript, p. 21). In this process of working through trauma that doesn't instantaneously vanish because one falls in love, Elif saw a more relatable representation. In Hibbert's work, reading salon members felt the message was that a person needs to be diligent, dedicated, and determined to focus on their own healing and not merely preoccupied, obsessed, or serve as the conduit for the healing of another. This affected their characterization of the outcome of the story as demonstrated in this exchange:

> Amna: I feel like because of that conflict it's neither a happily-ever-after and ... neither like happy-for-now. Like I see them getting into these kind of conflicts ... conflicts ...
>
> Elif: Oh yeah.
>
> Amna: ... a lot over the time.
>
> Sara: Mmhmm.
>
> Amna: And they would have breaks and you know ...
>
> Sara: Maybe.
>
> Amna: And it's not like the happily-ever-after that is usually ... you know ... cold happily-ever-after? So, I would say it's in the middle. Which is great ...
>
> Elif: Interesting.
>
> Amna: I love, I love that.
>
> Sara/Amna: Yeah.

> Sara: Maybe like ... there's no terminology for it, but it's like a, a relationship that is not perfect.
>
> Amna: [Laughs.] Abnormal ...
>
> Sara: That they remain together.
>
> Amna: ... one.
>
> Sara/Amna: Yeah.
>
> Gina: Ha ha.
>
> Elif: A content ever after.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 23)

While the participants felt that although the basis for the relationship was stronger, based on the pattern portrayed in *Chloe Brown*, they predicted that the couple's love was likely to be a cycle of breaking and mending. Although Amna expressed satisfaction with this representation, she also recognized it as falling outside normative boundaries of the genre and characterized this narrative outcome as cold.

4.2.1. Summary

In the world of romance fiction and HEA-HFN narratives, becoming one whole is the overarching directive. As part of this coupling imperative, women accept the emotional burden of rescuing men from a state of lovelessness in a novel, and in life women often accept the guilt that the fault is theirs when relationships fail. Having a fictional husband, as Sara surmised, is to gain all the benefit of love and none of the drudgery, hard work, and risk of failure. This analysis reinforces the idea that the conditions under which the prospective duo meets influences the likelihood of long-term success in the relationship. That is, the couple whose meeting and journey of love is sounder is more likely to be a HEA story rather than an HFN. Furthermore, in the way that reading salon members discussed the books and assessed the outcome of each pair's love story, the language they used was as if the characters were alive. Participants analyzed the way these relationships formed, the preconditions that set the foundation for the outcome of each love story and made calculated guesses about what the characters' lives would be like in the future based on how their stories had unfolded.

The focus on the coupling imperative also demonstrates that romance fiction is steeped in traditional and conservative values. It is only through the act of becoming a couple, through mutual healing and transformation, that the two people at the heart of the story can determine and define their place in the world, which they do according to normative gender roles. The extent of their individual trauma and the significance of the tribulations they experience through the wooing and courtship process dissipates. It is the settling in and settling down that is the critical factor and the crucial outcome. To me, there are echoes in this of the way travel was viewed in earlier centuries. Travel for men operated as a social conditioning instrument that prepared young men for their future. It completed a young man's education before he assumed his role in society and functioned as a moral, literary, and educational complement to the theoretical knowledge he gained from classical instruction.

For the male-dominant patriarchy in the England of the past, young men were sent overseas to experience life amongst the *other*, seemingly free of duty, responsibility, and accountability, before coming home to assume the mantle of duty, responsibility, and accountability to their families, their station in life, and their nation (Faris, 2015, pp. 32-33). The pedagogical value of travel is in the personal growth of the male figure in an outward journey, and a romance novel captures the individual's personal growth through love, an interior journey. Through finding love he has become a better man and is prepared now to fully embrace the patriarchal role to which he is destined. In romance fiction, the union, the HEA-HFN outcome, heralds a new social organization in the sense that the creation of the new pair is the foundation for a transfer of generational power. These men, in accepting their positions of power, rely on women to provide the emotional labour that makes their personal and professional success feasible, and guarantees their acceptable standing in society.

4.3. Readers Approach Narratives of Difference with Intention

Of the three novels we read, the two that participants selected were by Black authors: Tia Williams, the author of *Seven Days*, is from the United States, and Talia Hibbert, the author of *Chloe Brown*, is British. Williams's book features Black protagonists and predominantly Black characters. Given the content of the novel, which features challenging issues presented through a lens of race, I was curious whether this

racial lens led to a difference in reading approaches. I asked the reading salon members if they had taken any measures or prepared in any way to read a book that centred identities they may not hold and featured communities to which they many not belong. My question was, "... what did you have to do to read across ... difference ... how did you deal with that, or ... was it even something that you felt you had to contend with?" (RS2 transcript, pp. 68-69). The reading salon members were conscious of the difference and given their awareness had read the novels with care and intention in a way they may not have done if they had not perceived the differences.

This evidence of intention emerged again in RS3 as part of a discussion reconciling the group's critique of *Chloe Brown* with its popularity in the marketplace. Sara broached the topic of whether a lot of people were choosing to read Hibbert's book, the first in a trilogy about three sisters, because of the diversity it represented. With hesitation and carefully thinking about her words, she said:

> And I feel like a lot of the ... this is going to sound like an awful thing, but a lot of people I think read this because of the diversity. Right now, a lot of people are like looking for books written by Black authors about Black people or people with disabilities. And it opened up a lot for people because there are not a lot of romance books about someone with a disability or a Black person. Especially one that's not all about them being Black. (RS3 transcript, p. 62)

That is, *Chloe Brown* has in its female lead a protagonist who is Black and dealing with the disability of a chronic condition, which is not typical romance fare. The book, and the others in the series, had grabbed the attention of readers who are curious about and intrigued by the representational differences and who also may choose to read a book based on the recommendations of "BookTubers" (Sara, RS3 transcript, p. 62). Sara also attributed part of the success of Hibbert's books to the fact that the author is "approachable" and "active" on social media (RS3 transcript, p. 62), evidence that the digital literary sphere plays a significant role in the publishing world and is a significant factor in building links between readers, authors, and popularity. In the networked reality of our digital age, women readers are navigating not only the books they choose to read, but their bonds, attachments, and relationships, in a world where technology has made distance, time, and space meaningless.

The idea that the Williams and Hibbert novels were not about the characters being Black even though the characters are Black led to further discussion among the

reading salon members as they grappled with the nuance of what they were trying to explain. In part, the answer lies in the implied contract between a reader, an author and the reader's interpretation of authorial intent. Here, the reading salon felt trust in Tia Williams and in the presentations and representations she makes in *Seven Days*. They were adamant that Williams had been very respectful and that she had not made the novel about Black pain and/or Black trauma. Rather, they saw the book as being about people living their lives, falling in love, and negotiating their trials and tribulations. As Sara said,

> I felt I was just more aware of what I was reading because you know I ... with everything that's happened in the last few years, with like Black Lives Matter, I've read a lot more books written by Black authors, and I feel like ... you just kind of have to remember who you are. Because I'm obviously not Black, so I have to remember my positionality while I read, and just be aware that what I'm reading may seem outrageous, but it's someone's life ... in like another ... like another person's life. Because like as we were saying the part of the boy dying might seem like super shocking, but it is the reality for many people. So, I just try and be more aware while I read books by Black authors, I think. (RS2 transcript, p. 69)

Gina echoed Sara's remarks when she said,

> I felt like, yeah, I didn't do anything special, but I knew that, I knew that you know from the back jacket that she was a Black, you know, author. But I feel like I sort of had to trust her to be responsible ... to shepherd me through that ... I have no other position to believe it or not. What I liked, what I felt is that, for this one, unlike some ... I've also been reading more BIPOC authors, but this one was interesting and a little refreshing because it didn't just come from ... like, um, that kind of trope of Black pain all the time. Like I felt that this was just people who were Black ... And I'm like ... not everyone was traumatized by everything. They have their own context and their own life, and there are many issues that come up but I ... and she doesn't shy away from them. There's prejudice, there's this, there's that. All of that stuff, but it was just about ... people. In their context. And I found that refreshing because a lot of the times the books I read are about trauma. Like ... it's nice to see a book that's representational without trauma." (RS2 transcript, pp. 69-70)

Or as Sara had said earlier, the author was "trying to normalize Black people being in romance books without it being about their Blackness" (RS3 transcript, p. 53). This sentiment is explicitly stated in the meta-narrative of *Seven Days*, a book about authors, publishing, and the literary scene. In one of the book's episodes, Tia Williams describes

an author event featuring a panel that includes Belinda, a friend of the protagonist Eva and a “Pulitzer Prize-winning poetess” (Williams, 2021, p. 48).

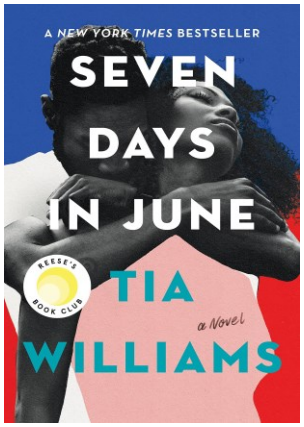

Figure 4.2. Book cover for Tia Williams’s *Seven Days in June*

Belinda talks about the publishing industry and criticizes its difficulty “processing Black characters unless we’re suffering” (p. 51). With the audience nodding and murmuring, Belinda goes on to say:

> We’re expected to write about trauma, oppression, or slavery, because those are easily marketable Black tropes. Publishers struggle to see us as having the same banal, funny, whimsical experiences that every human has — (p. 51)

It is this humanizing effect that the reading salon members had perceived in their own reading and in their own interpretations of the two novels we read by Black authors. There is also the possibility that they had absorbed this message when reading the book, and that it influenced their later reflections and recall.

The group’s comments about *Seven Days* and *Chloe Brown* being romance novels and not about Blackness were countered by a sense of disappointment. For example, there is an episode in the book where Choe verbalizes being Black (Hibbert, 2019, p.195), but as Elif said,

> So, like ... I just feel like having that one moment come up with the race, I don't understand why there was not made a single issue out of, not other people being racist, but like some sort of inter-racial issue in their relationship. (RS3 transcript, p. 52)

Reading salon members felt that although the authors had written about Black characters, they had not fully explored how the reality of race, as experienced in the

contemporary world, would intrude on relationships. This disappointment in the portrayal of a relationship that is interracial was held in balance with the enjoyment the readers expressed in the representation of Chloe Brown's chronic illness. For example, Elif presented this tension in these remarks:

> I don't know what to say the key themes are. Because ... I think ... it leads up to having so many good themes about like disability, interracial relationships, all these things that don't actually ... they, they expanded on the disability thing, and it was very like nice to see how caring he was about that, in the ... like in the way she needed ... But I think ... I don't ... not that everything has to be about race, but to just have one comment about race in it? When that comment was coming from something that was racist. I think ... it's, it's, it's ... I, I found it very odd to add that one little, tiny bit, where something racist happened to her and she was like, "Oh well, I'm Black." (RS3 transcript, p. 48).

These readers felt there was an insufficiency in these books because critical concepts around race were introduced tangentially and not explored fully. Chloe Brown also features a protagonist with a disability. In an earlier reading salon, members indicated that the representation of chronic illness was important to them. For example, in the discussion about *Seven Days*, Sara remarked, "Um, I like that I've never read a book with someone who has migraines, so it was like really nice to see that" (RS2 transcript, p. 27). This is one example of reader identification and demonstrates the gratification readers feel when characters resonate with them.

In addition to disability and race, *Chloe Brown* features differences in socio-economic class between the two main characters, Chloe and Red. Chloe comes from a wealthy family and has left the family home to assert her own place in the world and Red is an artist who is filling in as the building manager, a job he secured with a friend's help. Reading salon members explored the impact of these intersecting identities and points of contestation as follows:

> Amna: She does say that she filters things out. So, I think it's a huge part of the book. Like when you read that one sentence where she says, "Oh it - shit happens. Like that happens to me all the time, but I filter it out because I have to."
>
> Elif & Sara: Yeah.
>
> Amna: So, when you read it again maybe she did experience some like micro-aggressions throughout the book, but she just didn't notice because it's her perspective. And then this idiot – like his perspective – this idiot, ah, doesn't even ... wa-, or didn't even see that she was also

experiencing this because she's Black. So, his perspective wa-, would also not notice that she's experiencing racism. So ...

Elif: No, wasn't he saying it because he ...

Sara: He noticed?

Elif: ... figured it was racist?

Amna: No, it was about how people would be side eyeing him because he has tattoos, or you know doesn't ...

Sara: Oh, right.

Amna: ... looks like a bad boy or like he would ...

Elif: Oh.

Amna: ... do something in the gallery so the high-class people were like side eyeing him.

Sara: Yeah, cuz ...

Elif: Oh. I thought it was almost mansplaining ...

Sara: ... he's poor.

Elif: ... her Blackness to her.

Sara: I don't think ...

Elif: That's how I read it.

Sara: I don't think it was.

Amna: I think it was about that.

Sara: I think it's because he's poor and she's rich.

Amna: Yeah, yeah. It was about that.

Sara: Because I did ... That's the part of this book that I'm like, "Ugh." That he's like so ...

Elif: It's so class ... yeah.

Sara: ... obsessed with her class. That annoys me.

Amna: True, true, true.

RMF: Can you say more about that please Sara?

Sara: I think it's just like ...

RMF: What, what was annoying because ...

Sara: He was so aware of it and like ... punishes her with his language all the time ...

Elif: Yeah.

Sara: ... and always points it out. And it's like she is not even reaping the rewards of her richness right now? Like she's living on her own, she's paying her rent. Her sister makes food for her because of her disability. Like she's not ...

Elif: Yeah.

Sara: ... doesn't have a servant. She's just living her life like a normal person in the same complex as him. But he still has to continually point out like, "Oh, you probably get your food made ..."

Elif: Well, because of his trauma with Pippa in it.

(RS3 transcript, pp. 50-51).

The reference to Pippa is a reference to another character: a rich white woman whom Red dated previously. This class difference is a point of conflict that the characters must negotiate and which, in part, stems from the trauma Red experienced when his previous relationship with a wealthy white woman failed.

Towards the end of RS2, albeit only briefly because the time for the meeting had elapsed, we discussed why *Seven Days* was a Reese's Book Club selection, a popular cultural distinction and recognition that the literary marketplace does not often award to romance fiction. I started with the following question:

RMF: So, then it's a question of why is this a Reese's book club selection, and how does it impact how you read the book? And someone might argue, someone could argue, that's why I was interested in pushing Gina a little about whether this is a romance, because someone could actually argue that even though this has romantic elements that it's contemporary fiction or women's fiction or not quite literary fiction maybe, but ... so up it ... distinguish it from mass market ...

Elif: Fair.

RMF: ... or genre, but that's the ...

Gina: Just a, it's just a smart way ...

Elif: Can I ...

Maureen: I've never heard of the Reese's book club.

> Gina: Maybe she's trying to position it as [indistinct] because the boundaries are breaking down a bit. To me the tropes are all just romance.
>
> RMF: Well, I know, which makes it really interesting. If you're Reese Witherspoon or Reese Witherspoon's people and again you're not ...
>
> Gina: You're being [indistinct] ...
>
> RMF: ... yeah, you're not typically putting a sticker on romance.
>
> Gina: That's true:
>
> RMF: So, what about this book [multiple voices – indistinct] gave them the confidence to make it a Reese's book.
>
> Sara: I think the Black element.
>
> Elif: Black element.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Gina: Black representation.
>
> Paola: She needed diversity.
>
> (RS2 transcript, pp. 115-116)

Several of the reading salon members felt that this recommendation likely reflected the interest the public celebrity book club had in embracing greater diversity. That is, they felt it was likely Reese Witherspoon's team had endorsed the book because it features Black protagonists and a very contemporary setting. *Seven Days* also reads more as women's fiction than what may be considered a genre romance. That is, it reads as a literary endeavour, which may have contributed to the organization's willingness to grant it elevated status as one of the book club selections. The issue of race was also reflected in questions the group had about casting choices in the second season of the Bridgerton series on Netflix, which is based on the book they discussed in RS1. In *Viscount*, the female protagonist Kate is white, and a South Asian actress was cast to play her in the show. The reading salon members appreciated the attempt to diversify the casting and yet critiqued the ways the show's producers handled the question of race during the series. As Maureen summarized it, "They just had characters who just were not white" (RS2 transcript, p. 73). In this way, reading salon members demonstrated their awareness of discourses about race and expressed their

dissatisfaction with attempts at promoting diversity, whether through market recognition or casting choices, which read as performative rather than substantive.

4.3.1. Summary

Over the course of three reading salons, participants read a mix of romance fiction and fiction with romantic elements. For the first reading salon, they read *Viscount*, a traditional and stereotypical Regency romance written by a white female author, featuring protagonists form the same socio-economic class albeit from different rankings within that hierarchy. In *Seven Days*, they read a contemporary women's fiction novel by an African American author with Black protagonists who overcome difficult childhoods. In *Chloe Brown*, the third reading salon selection, the group read a contemporary romance by a Black British author about an interracial relationship between a white man and Black woman of differing social classes.

This range of novels captured a limited representational diversity and did not reflect a comprehensive intersectional reading list, which reflects in part the nature of the romance fiction genre as well as the limitations of this research study. Reading salon members read *Seven Days* and *Chloe Brown* as romance novels and not Black romance novels although they raised concerns around the authentic representation of an interracial relationship in *Chloe Brown*. They were, at the same time, appreciative that the stories were not mired in the realities of race. Trauma and the legacies of trauma, even if not centred in the issue and experience of race, are features of these two books.

Reading salon members commented on the humanizing effect of a romance novel that did not revolve around the distinction of being Black. However, they also wanted more reflection from the author on how Red and Chloe, the novel's protagonists, would negotiate an interracial relationship in a world that can be discriminatory, racist, and intolerant. While the discussion about race predominated, reading salon members were aware of the class issue in *Chloe Brown* as well as the issues of disability. In the same way that the characters had to negotiate the overlapping impact of this identity factor, the members of the reading group also negotiated how they assessed, weighed, and understood these issues. It is an interesting component to consider in relationship to the research question I am exploring, which is: in what ways does the engagement of

women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with HEA-HFN narratives?

4.4. The Threat of Violence Dulls The Charm of HEA-HFN Stories

In romance fiction the struggle to overcome one's trauma, and to mediate one's state of imperfection to become a better person, is an interior journey that the external agent, the other half of the love duo, inspires. For reading salon members, the implicit threat of violence marred this mutually experienced transformation or at least their reading experience. They perceived this potential for conflict and violence most often in the common enemies-to-friends trope. In reference to the popularity of the enemies-to-lovers trope, and the implication of or potential for violence in that trajectory, Amna shared information about a social media post she had seen. She summarized the TikTok she watched, and expressed her enthusiasm for the argument, as follows:

> So that's the appeal of it, because if a man sees you as your equal and you're starting up there, and also like sees you at your worst, it's going to be like the perfect romance, and I absolutely get that. I love that. (RS1 transcript, p. 29)

According to this argument, for a character to perceive someone as an enemy, they must first consider the other character someone worthy enough to oppose and struggle against. It creates a level playing field for the battle to come. The enemies are equal, and women respond positively when men perceive them as equals. However, I feel that there is a fallacy in this perception of enemies as equals because inherent in such an opposition is the idea of a victor. Someone stronger will win. The opponent may be worthy of attention, but that worthiness is only established once the struggle is over, and the two combatants secure a loving commitment to one another. For proponents of romance fiction as an empowering device, it is the woman who is the victor because she teaches the dominant male to love. However, if he maintains his status in a gendered, patriarchal world and she embraces her proscribed role as wife and mother without the potential to be an active participant in the world beyond the domestic sphere, is it a victory or is it a Pyrrhic victory?

To Elif, the effectiveness of the enemies-to-lovers trope is that it adds another transformative dimension to romance fiction. As she said, "There's also passion in it.

Like if you hate someone. Like you already know you can have that passion, just to translate into love instead" (RS1 transcript, p. 29). In this view, HEA-HFN narratives embody a process of transformation in which the individual changes, and they also document an alchemic process by which passion and conflict are transformed into love. The hagiography of this transformative and redemptive process also has real life echoes in the way boys and girls, men and women interact and how those interactions are modelled and molded. For example, Helen reacted to the conversation with this observation, "That just makes me think of when you're little and you're told like oh if a boy's mean to you it means he likes you" (RS1 transcript, p. 30). In this way, real life mirrors romantic tropes and romantic tropes reflect social conditioning.

In terms of social conditioning and its impact on male-female interactions, discussions during RS1 tackled the subject from a variety of angles. However, and as noted above, the question of implicit violence as form of control also emerged during the group's first meeting and it may be an indication of the comfort the women felt with one another that such a substantive subject was raised early on. Elif, not generally a romance reader, was the one to first bring up the issue when she said,

> Elif: One thing I've noticed was really interesting about this book was there's this ... juxtaposition between love and like ... literally like ... like murder? So often in this book has either Anthony or Kate said, oh I'm going to murder you. Or like another way of like saying I'm going to strangle you, it's like every page almost like I cou ... couldn't ... I counted over 20 and then I stopped counting. So many times.
>
> Maureen: I think that's hilarious! I don't even remember noticing that at all. [Chuckles.]
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 39)

Maureen, in her response, indicated that she had not noticed this trend or at least had not reacted to it in the same way as Elif. She and I are similar in age and her not noticing the violence Elif had remarked on mirrored my own lack of awareness. Whether it was our age or the history we had with the genre of romance fiction, this difference in observation indicates a greater awareness of and sensitivity to violence in representations today and the reality of violence against women in particular. I do not believe that violence was any less prevalent when Maureen and I were younger. I do believe that what has changed is the refusal to accept the violence or even threat of violence in intimate relationships as normal, natural, and immutable.

In their analysis of women readers and responses to these undertones of violence, as well as other representations of dominance in the fantasy of romance, reading salon members emphasized the role of knowledge. Knowledge, in the view of reading salon members, was instrumental in allowing readers to negotiate informed positions relative to HEA-HFN narratives and their depiction of violence or their use of threats as a narrative technique. Exercising a feminist lens to her critique of *Viscount*, Paola questioned the idea that one could overlook the violence in a novel because it is a romance and/or a Regency. Her initial comment led to the following exchange:

> Paola: But ... but then, this will tie to, to the enemies-to-lovers, and to how this affects like people reading this without having much of like prior knowledge, right? Like I remember, maybe reading this as ... before I got into the whole feminist movement, and you can just let it slide, you know all of this is part of love like this, I want to like basically harm you because that's passionate and then ...
>
> Elif: And domination as well.
>
> Paola: And then it ... like ... escalates to love, right? And then that might be very ... like a very thin line as well.
>
> (RS1 transcript, pp. 40-41).

In response, Gina noted that these are messages that one finds repeated in fairy tales when she said:

> Gina: I have to say as you're talking, I'm just picturing the Big Bad Wolf and the Little Red Riding Hood. Like, look at that image. Like that is a classic fairy tale of domination, right? Like, like I'm going to eat you. You know. [Interjection – yeah (Elif)]. It's very, very ingrained, I think. And that's way before the male gaze and pornography. [Group chuckles.]
>
> Elif: That is so old.
>
> Gina: So, maybe that speaks to something deeper.
>
> Elif: But that is what, that is what blows my mind that what it's about. It was about like making sure girls didn't go out alone in the forest and got raped by men.
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 41).

Maureen countered that readers do not expect the threats to be acted on and stated:

> And of course, I read ... I think ... I look at that and I think ... [hesitation – looking for words] ... there was never ... you know ... like I would

> never have read that and thought that they actually ever meant to like so it sort of it's like it really was just words you know, like it's like passionate words, but it was not like there was really ever any intent, right? So, it was sort of like kind of washed over me because it's sort of like you know it's not like ... they were really going to go out and murder each other. (RS1 transcript, p. 41)

To Maureen, the author's use of passionate words is a narrative technique that demonstrates the emotional impact intrinsic to establishing a personal and intimate relationship and not as a device to explain what will happen. To me, there are several themes that emerged from this exchange including the understanding that such stories have a long history. These paradigms of love stories are not new, and they encompass the potential for danger emphasizing women's vulnerability and need for protection. As such, both the reading and interpretation of HEA-HFN narratives is a gendered experience, and knowledge, especially through exposure to ideas such as feminism or the content of women's studies courses, is essential in being able to discern the questionable nature of such stories and their representations. This exchange of views between the reading salon members also reflects a central tension in attempts to analyze romance fiction, or any other form of media portraying love, in relation to women's lives. It is an issue of the extent to which media and popular culture directly impact, influence, and shape women's understandings of what is expected of them or what they might expect from love.

If the core of a romance novel is the process of discovery, a process of finding and fighting for that one person who will be the key to self-transformation, then the veil of violence may also reflect that this journey most resembles a hunt or a battle. Casting the parameters of the hunt or a battle as a binary, means that there is a hunter and a prey, a victor and a loser. This notion of a chase is one that reading salon members arrived at in their discussion of *Seven Days* during the following exchange:

> Vicki: I wanted him to show up at her little boarding house or wherever she was deep in the south …
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Vicki: … on the door [Vicki laughs – multiple voices overlapping - indistinct]. Isn't that going to be the movie?
>
> Sara: A classic romance ending.

> Elif: That's a really interesting point because something that really bothered me by the end was when she texted him saying, "Would you come down if I asked you to?" and he was like, "Yeah, if you want me to." And that felt so, like ... it felt – I'm sorry – it felt so fuck boy to me. Of like, if you want to. I'm not going to make any choice, but if you want. Like I know that's not what she was going for.
>
> Sara: Like can't you just say yes?
>
> Elif: Yeah, just say, "Yes, I want to" instead of like, "if you want to." Like, I'll do whatever.
>
> Sara: Tell me what you want me to do.
>
> Elif: Yeah, exactly.
>
> Sara: Like, no …
>
> Elif: That's how it felt.
>
> Sara: … this is a romance book.
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Sara: You have to …
>
> Elif: … chase.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 64)

Whether a hunt or a chase, these metaphors extend to the results of such activities, which are potentially capture and imprisonment. This dialogue also shows the participants' discomfort with a lack of agency and assertiveness in not being able to say directly what one wants. The notion of a lack of agency was one that irked the group, and it had come up in their discussion of the same book when the protagonists encounter one another again after fifteen years. Helen said,

> Helen: I just feel like ... she was so in that day that she was meeting up with him or whatever, she like didn't want to come inside and then they had this like whole thing, and she was going against her own sort of like boundaries. And then they fuck or whatever, and like I just makes me think of that whole like guys pursuing, pursuing, pursuing and then you finally just give in because ...
>
> Elif: No means persevering.
>
> Helen: Yeah.

Elif: Yeah.

Helen: That's kinda what I got out of it. I was like oh.

Elif: But I think that's exactly what I mean with like it just seems like a lot when she didn't even want to go into his house.

Helen: YES!

Elif: Like I know that deep down her lust …

Helen: Yes.

Elif: … like wants to, but it just seems … so extreme … this, like this sex scene I felt …

Amna: Wow, you're all making him sound like a creep. I really didn't get that. [Interjection – multiple voices – laughter.]

Elif: No, he wasn't ... I don't feel like he was a creep.

Helen: You can still be a nice person and do that. I feel like.

Gina: I didn't feel it was creepy though [indistinct]

Helen: I don't think it was creepy, but it just …

Elif: I don't think it was creepy. I just think it was …

Helen: She went against herself in a way. I dunno.

Elif: Yeah.

(RS2 transcript, pp. 44-45)

The issue around this plot point seemed to be that Eva, the protagonist in *Seven Days*, as a woman crossed her own boundaries and failed herself in a way by giving into a lustful encounter that she had initially refused.

Yet in HEA-HFN narratives, the need for boundaries or the confinement of either of the two lovers dissipates once the couple realizes they have each other and that they are no longer in pursuit or the object of pursuit. Given the possibility for multiple readings and interpretations, these reading salon discussions demonstrated how these readers worked with romance fiction as a site of negotiation. They were the ones to decide what they would accept as being *the* truth or *a* truth. They considered the ways content creators presented and represented the human condition, and then measured that against the way they understood that these features of human life are enacted,

embodied, and enforced in the real world. The group also noted that the means and mechanisms of these negotiations changed over time and reflected women's experiences in life. For example, Maureen acknowledged this and had Gina's support when she said:

> Maureen: When I was a teenager, I have to say I went through very for probably for too long a bodice ripper phase where you got a lot of that kind of like very dis-disturbing …
>
> Gina: Right.
>
> Maureen: … sort of the way sex should be, or could be, or you know and it's very like ... um ... [indistinct]. Actually, never expected that it would be like that ... like ... um ... but it was certainly a lot of fun to read [indistinct] a little bit.
>
> Gina: I think we're going back, because if this is 2000 you go back to the 1980s, with these types of books, it's ... it's all sorts of really stuff that wouldn't be acceptable today. Right?
>
> Maureen: Absolutely oh yeah oh yeah lots of lots of you oh yeah you know ... He forces himself on her until she just like submits, so then it's like just wonderful and it's like yeah happens all the time [indistinct]. That's what happens in the books.
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 26).

While the danger of violence, or the expression of threats, do not typically manifest as actual events in HEA-HFN narratives, they sometimes feature in a character's backstory. In romance fiction, it is the power of love that negates the need for violence and the efficacy of verbal threats, increases the stakes in the relationship, and the commitment to becoming a member of a perfect pair removes the danger.

4.4.1. Summary

While reading salon members were very conscious of the appeal of the enemies-to-lovers trope, they also characterized it as harmful. The dialogue, specifically in *Viscount*, where characters would use language that at its most florid implied physical assault if not murder, bothered members of the group the most. The reading salon discussion around efforts to justify or understand the appeal of the enemies-to-lovers trope, in my view is symptomatic of the rationalization that underlies much of the women's negotiation with pop culture media representations of love and romance. Women want the representation to be okay, to be good for them, because they have so

much invested in the concept of HEA-HFN and in the potential for them to realize the utopic vision in their own lives. The group's observations about implicit violence surprised me because it is not a phenomenon I had thought of or verbalized before, whether as a fervent romance fiction reader in my younger years or as an occasional dabbler in the genre now. However, having seen this issue through the eyes of the reading salon participants, I cannot unsee it when I reflect on the romance novels I have read in the past or the ones I occasionally read now. In other words, the process of dialogue raised my consciousness and awareness of this topic, just as circles of women speaking have been a key feature of consciousness-raising throughout the decades of feminist movements.

I became more aware of the violent underpinning in HEA-HFN narratives during the summer 2023 semester at SFU. I had accepted a sessional instructor position with GSWS to teach a course on gender and popular culture for the term. Given the focus of my research and my research interests more generally, I opted to organize the syllabus and the course modules around the themes of love and romance, or as Taylor Swift (2022) characterizes it, the lavender haze. I borrowed the title of Swift's song for the course, and I felt that there would be a pedagogical benefit to having the students read, discuss, and critique a romance novel. The novel I decided to assign, following the experience I had with reading salon members in RS1, was Julia Quinn's *Romancing Mister Bridgerton* (*Mister Bridgerton*) (2002/2021). *Mister Bridgerton* was the source text for the most recent Netflix Bridgerton adaptation, and it was the streaming service's third offering featuring Quinn's Regency world. It is not the immediate follow-up to *Viscount,* which was the focus for RS1, but is the fourth installment in Julia Quinn's original series. As I read the book to prepare for the work I planned to do with the students in the course, the undertone of violence that imbued the pages and accented the narrative discomfited me. I may not have remarked on this feature of the story had it not been for the reading salon discussions and the observations of the younger women in the research study.

The tinge of violence embedded in many romance novels illustrates the domination-submission paradigm that predominates stories of falling in love and finding one's true love, especially when the enemies-to-lovers trope is central to the plot. While the male protagonist may not act on his threats of violence, at least not towards his eventual mate, and the female protagonist may not experience violence from her soon-

to-be hero, many plots use external threats of violence to raise the stakes involved in the romantic pursuit and its resolution. Violence or experiences of abuse also often feature prominently in the back story of the two central characters. The existence of violence as a threat is a much more marked theme and feature of historical and Regency era romances. The question then becomes whether it is more commonplace in Regency novels because those novels are set in a time with very different understandings of physical violence in intimate relationships, or whether the gloss of the HEA-HFN storyline serves as a patina of acceptability for violent behaviour or intimations of violence. That is, by incorporating the potential for violence, even if it is just in dialogue and in words, romance fiction may make meaning out of love through its link to power, control, and a gendered hierarchy of authority. While the appeal of romance fiction and HEA-HFN narratives may be intertwined with the message of healing, circumventing violence, and gaining security, it also grants women the permission to talk about the illicit. The license to talk about sex and read about sex is another feature of its attraction for women readers. That is the topic that I will explore next.

Chapter 5.

“It’s just so taboo!” Sex, Shame, and Security

> *“Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.”*
>
> *Gloria Anzaldúa, 1983/2017, p. 78*

Given my upbringing, and the various social, cultural, and ethnic contexts that have informed my life, including Lebanese, Jamaican, and Canadian, I know that for many young people sex and physical intimacy are topics that adults and those in authority broach only in terms of fear, shame, and prohibition. This results in a disconnect between the sex education girls and boys receive, or lack thereof, and the expectation that one day they will be sexually active. For women, this process of keeping sex a secret widens the gulf between the knowledge they receive when they are young, and the roles they are meant to fulfill when they are older as lovers, wives, and the bearers of children. As a parent, I have tried my best to be open and approachable with my child, but I must admit I was also relieved that the elementary school my son attended engaged a professional sex educator to work with all the students, from those in kindergarten to those in Grade 7.

Today, I am amazed that I can stand in front of a class of people in their late teens and early twenties, representing diverse gender, sexual, and cultural identities, and say words such as penis and vagina, or to talk about sex and sexuality, without flinching or blushing. This is especially true given the dearth of knowledge I had as a girl, the modesty I was raised with, and the ignorance that persisted into my early teenage years. Even with the confidence I now have as a mature, experienced woman, when I work as a teaching assistant for GSWS 100, *Sex Talk*, a course on the discourses of sexuality, I find that I am still predisposed to avert my eyes when the professor plays explicit clips from movies, television shows, and streaming services during lectures.

Based on my own experience, I also know that reading a romance novel, especially one with explicit sexual content, viscerally engages the body. Individuals who identify as sexual beings will respond to stimuli, and a romance novel filled with explicit

sex scenes, even if it is just one, is an external stimulus. In this context, it becomes essential to consider the functions of sexual content in romance fiction narratives and the responses readers have to this feature of HEA-HFN narratives. What I had not anticipated, in the process of facilitating the reading salons for this research study, was to find that women today, especially women in their late teens, early twenties and thirties, would still regard sexual content as taboo. I had not expected, given the presumed notions of agency and liberation, that women today would find it necessary or advisable to protect themselves from perceptions that they are sexual or engaging with sexual content. It surprised me that being seen as consumers of sexual content would raise the spectre of safety or would be considered too much information in the context of families, friends, and acquaintances. The feelings around sexual content that the group members shared with one another contrasted to the generalized assumption of freedom and liberation that one might expect in an age and an environment where sex is everywhere, where pop culture is rife with sexual content, and where access to sexual content, especially with the internet and streaming services, is easy, content is endless, and availability is abundant.

Taboo, as a word, was not used often by reading salon members. However, it made a significant impact on me when it was used, the discussion around it was substantive, and I knew it would merit further investigation. In RS1 the word t*aboo* was not used and in RS2 it was used twice. As part of an extended discussion in RS3, the word *taboo* was used ten times. Its currency as a word and point of discussion, grew significantly between the second and third reading salons. In part, this increasing usage encompassed a reflective element during the last gathering because the reading salon members knew that the third meeting would be the last. With ten minutes remaining in the last session, I also asked them “to summarize, ... in a ... few sentences, what you feel you've learned over the course of these three meetings” (RS3 transcript, p. 111). This was the final remaining opportunity for reading salon members to present their views on the wider scope of the conversation, the breadth of their experience, and the more significant implications they had introduced, explored, and discussed regarding the research topic.

The title for this chapter captures an answer from Sara to another question I had posed. I had asked, “So, what is it about sex?”, and Sara’s immediate response was, “It’s just so taboo!” (RS3 transcript, p. 103). Given that the notion of *taboo* implies

shame, in addition to searching the transcripts for the word *taboo*, I also searched them for the word *shame*. The use of the word *shame* followed a pattern similar to the one for taboo. *Shame* was not used in RS1, once in RS2, albeit in a context that did not involve sex or sexual content, and twelve times in RS3. Because I wanted to explore the links between *taboo*, *shame*, and *sex*, I also searched the transcripts for the word *sex*. The word *sex* was used in all three reading salons to denote physical intimacy and intercourse, to describe a sex scene, or embedded within a word to designate a sexual identity. In RS1, the word sex was used 53 times in various forms including *heterosexual*, *sexually*, *sex*, *sexiness*, *sexy*, *sexuality*, *sexualized*, *sexism*, and *sexologists*. This roster of words was expanded in RS2 with the addition of the word *asexual*. The 30 times the word *sex* was used during RS2 included one instance where a reading salon member used the full name of GSWS at SFU to explain their affiliation with the department. Finally, during RS3, the word *sex* was used 53 times and the list of word forms expanded to include references to specific courses with titles that included *sex* or a variation of the word, and in the description of romance novel covers. I also conducted a search on the word *romance* and its variations, but this proved to be too broad a search term. Instead, to explore discussions where reading salon members used the word *romance*, whether on its own or as part of a longer word form, I relied on my reading of the transcripts to discern and interpret the meaning and implications of those conversations and discussions.

One of the interesting features that emerged over the course of the three reading salons was the participants' use of the word *smut* and variations of the word such as *smutty*, *smuttiness*. While not used in RS1, *smut* was used five times in RS2 and twenty-eight times in RS3, which aligns the use of this word with the *taboo-shame* discussions. *Smut* was used to characterize romance fiction, to designate the genre according to public perception of it, and to describe sexually explicit language. It was also used in association with discussions about pornography, erotic content, and reclaiming usage of the word. Reading salon members were also aware that the sexual content in romance novels served a desire-pleasure function. Reflecting this perspective, they used the words *erotic* and/or *erotica* twenty-two times in RS1, four times in RS2, and once in RS3. The term was used in efforts to describe the genre and reflected the group's efforts to understand what purpose romance fiction serves for women readers. Reading salon members tended to contrast *erotica* with *pornography* and to designate the former as a

genre for women and the latter as a genre for men. A search on the word *porn* showed that members of the group used the word, and variations such as *pornography* and *pornographer*, eight times in RS1, not at all in RS2, and fifteen times in RS3. Given the academic background of several participants, it is not surprising, with discussions about *erotica* and *pornography*, that the *male gaze*, as a phrase, emerged. It was used five times in RS1, once in RS2, and not at all in RS3. The prevalent use of the phrase during RS1 was due, in part, to the nature of the book we were reviewing. As historical fiction, Julia Quinn's *Viscount*, the book under discussion in RS1, reflects the older conventions of romance novels, which are much more centred around the classic trope of the alpha male. I have organized a fuller discussion of these finding into three subcategories:

- 5.1. Readers Grapple with Representations of Female Pleasure
- 5.2. Women Veil Their Romance Reading Practices
- 5.3. Romance Fiction Infantilizes Women and Their Sexuality

I explore these concepts, and investigate the features I have mentioned above, in the pages to follow.

5.1. Readers Grapple with Representations of Female Pleasure

As media consumers, reading salon members were familiar with the ubiquity of sexualized imagery in popular culture. Those who had previous experience reading romance fiction also knew that intimacy is a key element in romance novels and explicit sexual intimacy is a feature of many. Those new to the romance fiction genre, who did not realize how explicit the sex in some romance novels can be, were surprised to encounter graphic content in the books we read. For example, during RS3 when Sara and Gina described the sexual explicitness in *Chloe Brown* as tame and normal, Helen's reaction was, "What? Oh my God!" (RS3 transcript, p. 45). In connecting romance novels with other modes of obtaining access to sexual content, reading salon members mentioned social media. They also focused on television shows such as the two seasons of Bridgerton on Netflix and looked forward to the third installment, which was due to broadcast later in 2023, but did not air until May and June 2024 (RS1 transcript, p. 58). The group discussion of television sex, especially the sexual content in the Bridgerton shows, illustrated the range of views on the acceptability and acceptance of

explicit sexual content. Even among the reading salon members, there was a divide between those who thought there was too much sex in the first season of Bridgerton and too little in the second season. To Gina, less sex in the Netflix adaptation of Viscount made the show “way more sophisticated” (RS1 transcript, p. 58). On the other hand, Paola attributed much of the success of the first season to “so much sex” and in her estimation, season two was “missing the spark” (RS1 transcript, p. 59). This is a small demonstration of the complicated relationship women have in relation to media representations of sex. Sexual content in media genres targeting women, televised and other, may not be sophisticated in the estimation of some, but it is popular with many. It is an intriguing dynamic to explore.

Reading salon members did not label romance fiction as pornography, but they did label it as erotic reading or erotica. In part, this view of romance fiction as a mechanism to explore sexual desire and expression is fuelled by the constraints women have and may continue to face in exploring sexuality or in being sexual freely without stigma. Gina summarized this erotic function, within a historical context, when she said:

> So, I also think that that serves a purpose for women, too. Right? I mean in a society where you cannot ... it's not acceptable to express yourself sexually ... well back in the 1990s or 80s, to express yourself sexually ... (RS1 transcript, p. 25).

In Gina’s estimation, reading romance fiction is one way a woman can express, experience, and learn about the physical dimension of intimacy when society makes other avenues to knowledge more difficult to access or forbidden. In this framework, the erotic nature of romance fiction is linked to the pleasure of learning, or gaining knowledge, and it is also about the pleasurable feelings and responses the material elicits. It is an evolving relationship, too, especially as barriers to sexual content and information about sex are removed or mitigated. As Gina noted in RS2, “I think when we talked about erotica last time, I feel like when I was younger and less experienced of ... way young and stuff like and in the 1980s, it was erotica and now I’m different and now it’s not” (RS2 transcript, p. 100). That is, as women mature and their knowledge expands, this combination of aging and experience will have an impact on what reading and textual content means to each person.

It was in the discussion about erotica that reading salon members differentiated between the desires of women and men, and how such desires are satiated. They felt

erotica served women readers in a way that pornography serves men albeit in a nicer manner and without the implications of harm. While similar arguments might apply to readers independent of their sexual identities, in the context of the reading salons, the emphasis tended to be on women and men who identify as heterosexual. As Elif said:

> But also, because pornography like, if you want to watch it, it's just so such a male dominated industry. So, like you can't ... like I find it hard to watch it because I can ... I feel like I can see everything that's going on behind it and I'm just like I know a lot of women are here voluntarily, obviously, but like there's just so many things I'm like this is just for the male gaze. All of it. Well, I'm like this is a good way if women want erotica to have it written by a woman and a little bit more about like you know female pleasure rather than [indistinct]. (RS1 transcript, p. 25)

In providing this input, Elif was drawing on her academic knowledge and alluding to issues that surround working conditions in the pornography industry and the debate about women's voluntary participation in it. Her use of "the male gaze" also demonstrates her theoretical knowledge and the phrase was subsequently used another four times during RS1, once again in RS2 as part of my summary of the first meeting, and not at all in RS3. In response to Elif's comments, Helen said, "You gotta watch Erika Lust. It's [s*ic*] a female pornographer" (RS1 transcript, p. 25). The implication in Helen's suggestion is that the sexual content women produce will differ from what men produce, and that such differences allow for a form of pornography that is more acceptable to women. While female-produced pornography may differ from male-produced pornography, the implication of greater acceptability to women viewers elides the power dynamics that female-produced pornography may entail and the extent to which such power dynamics may still result in questionable representations. However, in debating the difference between erotica and pornography, reading salon members attested to the fact that those who identify as sexual respond to sexual stimuli and romance fiction, as erotic content intended for women consumers, is one such stimulant.

Whether sexualized media content is intended for men or for women, reading salon members, in their discussions, also situated romance fiction in a media marketplace where sex sells. In this context, Gina attributed the success of romance fiction in part to the sexual content in the books although she cautioned, "I don't think people talk about that very much" (RS1 transcript, p. 26). Whatever the reasons may be that preclude discussions about sex in romance novels, the group felt that because romance fiction is primarily written by women, the genre itself is a showcase for female

pleasure. A similar connection was also made to the Netflix Bridgerton adaptations, especially the sex scenes that featured oral sex for the female protagonist's pleasure, or as Helen said, "he went down on her, so it was better!" (RS1 transcript, p. 61). However, even though reading salon members acknowledged that the representations of sex in the novels we read centered female pleasure, they were dismayed that the intimacy the authors portrayed was still traditional and conventional with an emphasis on the primacy of heterosexual relationships and penetrative sex.

This feeling of incredulity, particularly in reference to the sexual content in *Viscount*, was captured in Elif's exclamation, "Like I don't understand how a woman could have written that to be honest" (RS1 transcript, p. 35). However, as Gina noted, "I also think ... so it's not ... Julia Quinn is part of the cycle. Like she's, you know, she's probably sexualized in the same way and so she's writing this, right?" (RS1 transcript, p. 53). That is, Julia Quinn, the author of *Viscount*, wrote the sex scenes according to her own socialization and conditioning, which reading salon members theorized meant her understanding and portrayals of sexual intimacy were based on her internalized male gaze. Rather than making the multi-orgasmic experiences of the heroine in the story laudatory, participants read the novel's sex scenes as inauthentic, inaccurate, and insufficient. Gina also noted that the interest in sex scenes varies. As she said,

> That's so interesting because I had exactly the opposite and maybe this has to do with being fifty. I don't know because I feel like the first, and this is also why I don't consume as much now because I like ... glaze over through the sex scenes now, whereas when I was twenty … it was like holy fuck [?] Like, and so. I feel like — it's true! And I feel like, with the first season ... I only watched it ... I did not watch it and I watched it because of this group, and I thought it's like I actually ... you know the plus ten seconds? And I was like really? Like, enough banging away ... like plus ten, and so ... (RS1 transcript, p. 59)

To Paola, on the other hand, "most people rewind and watch it again!" (RS1 transcript, p. 60). Over time, women readers become inured to the portrayal of physical intimacy. As Sara, who reread *Chloe Brown* for RS3, said,

> Because when I read it the first time, I was scandalized. But now I'm like, "Oh." Didn't even notice. Which I don't know if I should admit, but ... that's the truth. (RS3 transcript, p. 48)

The titillation and voyeurism of reading sexual content, for women, is also embroiled with a genuine curiosity. For example, during the first reading salon, there was a debate

about how common the practice of oral sex on women was in the nineteenth century, the era in which *Viscount* is set (RS1 transcript, p. 61). This question illustrated that romance fiction novels elicit curiosity. They describe multiple sexual practices although authors do not always provide the historical context and may not be reliable sources when it pertains to historical accuracy. However, the possibility exists for a reader to learn from sex scenes even if they are hyperbolic, exaggerated, and impossible to replicate. As Helen said about *Chloe Brown*, “Like even in the smut. It’s like swollen this, swollen that” and Elif added “Wet this, wet that” (RS3 transcript, p. 74). In its totality, the representations of physical intimacy in romance novels reflects the difficulty of ascertaining the authentic nature of female sexuality and pleasure in media representations of narratives that are still imbued with heteropatriarchal notions, imagery, and symbolism.

The disappointment certain group members felt in the representations of sex in the books also extended to the trope that sex with the right man is invariably wonderful. Elif extended her critique on this point to media representations beyond those in books when she said:

> This is what bothers me so much in like literature, films, and everything. Like ... they all ... they so often portray it as if women have orgasms every time you have penetrative sex. Which is absolutely not the case. I think it's one in four women that can. (RS1 transcript, p. 36)

In her remarks, Elif identified the ubiquity of this representation of sex in the media that women consume and the popular culture available to everyone. I asked her to say more about why she thought the genre continued to be so appealing to women readers if the representations were limited and not necessarily factual. She answered:

> Well, I think this goes so deep into how we see sexua ... like ... yeah, sexiness in society. Because I think, unfortunately ... we, as ... women often feel sexy when we are sexy to the male gaze. Because that's how like society has wrapped around ... like I feel sexy when I wear high heels. That's not, because that is nice for me to wear but, like ... ah ... for some reason that's deeply ingrained in me that society thinks that high heels is sexy. And I think a lot of these things are ... have come about in like however many years because men find it sexy. Like men find hourglass figures sexy, men find red lipstick sexy because that makes them think of whatever ... um, so I think all these things like ... I also now because it's just so ingrained in society, I also find these things sexy ... like to an ... like to an extent. Not all of it. (RS1 transcript, pp. 36-37)

Gina echoed this notion of internalization and expanded the discussion to address the power dynamic that correlates to sexual knowledge:

> I do think that the male gaze and the pornography industry and all of that has created [indistinct] I do, I think we as women have internalized those images and we find that that's sexy. We find that the man who is ... the regencies, I think, are interesting because they are about power because of their sexual knowledge of power, right? ... um ... dominance and submission, even if it's cloaked in, in other words. That's what it is, right? And so, innocence, and, you know, loss of innocence. That's what the whole thing is, and I think, I think your words are very true [Interjection – thank you (Elif)] I do. And I do [?] that for myself ... um ... And then you've got to say well can I own that? You know? Can I take pleasure in that? Because we buy it, right? We read it. (RS1 transcript, p. 37).

In addition to agreeing that the force of media consumption and societal expectations has ingrained notions of sex and sexuality in women, Gina's analysis identifies another gender difference that features in many romance novels, especially historical romances. That is, men have sexual knowledge which is forbidden to women and in romance novels an essential part of the male protagonist's story arc is to share this forbidden knowledge with the woman he learns to love.

While reading salon members acknowledged the shortcomings of sex representations in romance novels, they also acknowledged an important benefit of having access to sexual content in this way. They felt that having sexual content in romance fiction normalized it for women and opened an avenue for readers to talk about sex. As Elif said, "It is helping women to be more safe in talking about it" (RS3 transcript, p. 105). Viewed in this way, romance fiction operates as a mechanism for permission. It allows women to know about sex. In part, this framework explains why women will continually indulge in reading what is a traditional, patriarchal construct of sex and sexuality. While this genre for women by women is inextricably tied to a system in which women are accessories to power and objects for the enjoyment of those with power, the patriarchal nature in the material is disguised. In historical romances, for example, readers excuse or overlook the patriarchal nature of the material because the books are set in another time period. In the case of fantasy and paranormal, readers excuse or overlook the patriarchal nature of the material because the books are it set in other worlds or worlds that are more-than-human. However, in my view, what encourages

readers to overlook the heteropatriarchal nature of these HEA-HFN narratives is because they are concealed within stories of idealized love. As Amna noted,

> There's also that over glorification of penetrative sex like there's always these descriptions: they became one, they became whole, together, you know so of course like ... if it's ... it's trying ... like this book is trying to internalize that maybe by her like getting an orgasm but then again ... the ... she is ... the author is focusing on that glorified image of penetrative sex being the real sex or whatever, but then again she did get an orgasm so that's like ... I would say ... the best feminized version of idealized [Interjection – yeah (Elif)] like [Interjection – yeah (?)] heteronormative [sex]" (RS1 transcript, p. 39).

Gina added, "you don't have to apologize for [reading] it" (RS1 transcript, p. 38), a theme echoed by other reading salon members in reference to the struggle between enjoying a genre that is, in numerous ways, not feminist while defending one's position as a feminist. As Elif stated,

> "I think [Gina] had a super good point. In the whole ... especially when it's ... when it's ... um ... regency. It's very easy to be like oh no it was just the time. So, like we can enjoy it now, but we're feminists in real life. But like in the comfort of our [Group chuckles. Indistinct chatter.] ... I have to read this for book club. [Group chuckles. Indistinct chatter.] I, I am still a feminist" (RS1 transcript, p. 43).

Paola added, as part of the wide-ranging RS1 discussion and as we were ending the first meeting together:

> Thank you everybody ... um ... and I'm gonna go mostly like questioning ... the use or the need ... I don't really know how to express it right now, of like erotica in this kind of media and the actual media, like ... new media that we're consuming and how that's becoming like an escape for women in way? So, to me as a GSWS student it makes me think like oh so we might think we're advancing but are we really because there's still like over and over this kind of representation that it's still being consumed at this high level [Interjection – mmhmm (RMF)] ... um ... and I'm not sure if that's good or bad yet. Like I want to, like process it a little bit and see where I am. (RS1 transcript, p. 67)

In Paola's remarks, and those of others, it was evident that these women readers were willing to engage, when asked or challenged, with questions about romance fiction even if they had not tackled or thought of them on their own while reading the books.

The idea of romance fiction as a woman's genre also led to the group reflecting on the relative status of romance fiction in the literary sphere. Reading salon members explored this topic when we met for the second time to discuss *Seven Days*. In the

novel, Eva Mercy, the female protagonist, writes paranormal romance fiction. She struggles over the course of the novel to accept her own work as being of value and eventually realizes that rather than paranormal romance, she would prefer to write about her family history and the experiences of the women in her family. Reading salon members focused on the meta nature of the content and Paola introduced the topic in her remarks when she said,

> For me, what brought up in this book was the discussion we had las, last session about like erotica and female romance being seen as like second class kind of writing. Like it's not taken as serious. And they actually mention this. [Interjection – "yeah" (Elif)]. Like her writing or her kind of stuff it's not taken as serious within this book [interjection – "yeah" (Elif), "mmhmm", etc.]. Like she's always like, "Oh, I write this, but this is not what I ..." Like come on you wrote [interjection – multiple voices – "you wanna do" (Vicki), etc.] a fifteen-book series! Like own it, right? [Interjection – "own it" (Elif)]. Why is it, "Oh, I do this to pay the bills". Like constantly [interjection – "yeah" (Elif)] putting the genre down. (RS2 transcript, p. 16)

In the discussion that followed this statement, reading salon members expressed their frustration that Eva's willingness to embrace her books, which sell well and are popular with fans, only emerges after her relationship with Shane Hall is reignited and he champions her work in a public forum. Sara's observations initiated this exchange:

> Sara: I dislike that she only realized that it wasn't just smut when he said it. I hate that ... [Interjection – multiple – "yeah", "ugh", etc.] That speech at the beginning made me like want to throw the book when he was like, "It's this and it's so ..."
>
> Paola: Like it's the feminist ... [interjection – multiple voices – indistinct].
>
> Elif: Having a man tell you this. Honestly.
>
> Sara: He's mansplaining your own book. Like ...
>
> Elif: I know! [Laughs.]
>
> Sara: I don't need this. And it ... it kind of made me not want to read the rest of the book. [Group laughs.]
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 17).

This was also the first time someone in the group used the word smut to designate romance fiction and its explicit sexual content. At the time, I pursued other lines of questioning, but did not focus on the use of the word smut. However, when the word was

used twenty-eight times during the third reading salon, I felt I had to pursue the matter, and I asked:

> RMF: Do you feel that by us bandying the term smut around are we denigrating the genre ourselves? Or do ... or are ...
>
> Helen: I don't think it's always smutty though.
>
> RMF: ... are you treating smut ...
>
> Gina: It's sex.
>
> RMF: ... as more neutral?
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 91)

To me, the word smut is a derogatory term. I felt that in using the word to describe romance fiction, the group was denigrating the genre that they themselves, despite their critiques, had upheld as a vehicle for the expression of female desire and as a tool to enable women to acknowledge their own sexuality. However, the younger members of the group equated the use of the word with the connotation of spice, that smut merely indicated the sexual nature of the content and did not denote a qualitative judgement. To them, it was one way to acknowledge the awareness others, especially other women readers, may have of what a person is reading. Seen from this point of view, smut becomes a code word for sexual content and one that helps to veil the nature what a reader is perusing while simultaneously building bonds between women as readers of sexual content. This tension between concealment and revelation fascinated me and I will explore this dynamic further in the following section.

5.1.1. Summary

The reading salon discussions demonstrated what may be considered a truism: for many women, their relationship to the content they read in romance fiction changes as they age. Experience, especially if that includes being in long-term relationships, blunts the impact of HEA-HFN narratives. Women slowly learn to extricate themselves from the story and to indulge in the material as an escape. However, what remains constant is the appeal of true love stories. These are stories that enchant the young and entertain the older. The evolving relationship between women and romance fiction also pivots on the lure of the sexual content. While reading salon members distinguished

between erotica and pornography, their classification of the nature and function of sexual content illustrated a gendered understanding of women as a collective with a common identity and similar needs. Women's continued reluctance to talk about the sex in romance fiction indicates the desire for HEA-HFN narratives to transcend the physical, to be about more than the body, and to mythologize love and intimacy as part of something that is spiritual. It is a higher-lever connection that perpetuates a hierarchal relationship between understandings of the body, soul, and mind. For many, sex is still a taboo topic and a type of knowledge to conceal even as the contemporary world and its accompanying media landscape is rife with sexualization and sexualized imagery.

The role of sexual knowledge in romance fiction reflects another central tension in the genre. This tension is embodied in the role of the male protagonist who is both a giver and a taker. He gives the female protagonist sexual knowledge, and he takes her innocence. Even when the female protagonist is not a virgin and has sexual experience, the new knowledge she gains reflects a new type of learning because sex with the right man, with the love of her life, is better than it has ever been before. It becomes the true experience in contrast with the false experience of before. This narrative trope is repeated endlessly, and it is one that women readers continue to accept. Unfortunately, it supports a model that embeds sexual knowledge, a form of power, in men, and denies women sexual knowledge that is independent of men's authority, a form of powerlessness. It links women's sexuality to a pattern of submission and domination, one in which women are less informed, less knowledgeable, and less experienced. When women do gain knowledge of sex, then they take efforts to conceal it as some of the reading salon members demonstrated when they talked about concealing the nature of what they read from their families and their discomfort with the awareness others may have of them as sexual beings. It is a tight rope that women walk even as they live in a time of women's sexual agency, body positivity, and sex positivity. The continuing impression of sexual content as taboo means that for women so much of sex and sexuality remains veiled.

5.2. Women Veil Their Romance Reading Practices

The practice of hiding one's romance reading proclivities emerged from the start, during the first round of introductions at the beginning of the first reading salon. In introducing herself, Gina noted that romance, especially Regency romance, had figured

significantly in her reading habits as a young woman. She relied back then on libraries and said, “I didn’t really want to tell any people ... because this was not what people in my circle were reading” (RS1 transcript, p. 9). A tinge of defensiveness emerged again during RS3 when Gina explained:

> I wouldn't have taken it, like a bodice ripper cover on the bus, it's more like I’m sort of em ... well, sort of embarrassed about reading that. Like I should be, “Oh, I’m in ... you know ... medical school ...” (RS3 transcript, p. 86).

Sara characterized this as “internal shame” (RS3 transcript, p. 86), Paola recognized that “it’s like a female stigmatized … genre” (RS1 transcript, p. 70), and the conclusion, as Gina put it, is that “smart people shouldn’t be reading this” (RS3 transcript, p. 87). In their comments, reading salon members identified a lingering sense of discomfort about other people’s views on romance fiction and perceptions of romance readers even though Gina asserted that, “As you grow up, you don’t care what people think of you very much” (RS1 transcript, p. 9). This reluctance to admit, disclose, or reveal the nature of the content these women were reading, because of the way others label, denigrate, or dismiss the genre of romance fiction, leads to personal and public concealment. In fact, one of the reading salon members who is active on Instagram struggled with the decision of whether she should include *Viscount* on her page of book reviews and recommendations (RS1 transcript, p. 43).

This tendency to conceal also reflects the continuing understanding of female sex and desire as transgressive. In relating her experience about young people being sexually active, Elif noted,

> Like I think it’s so interesting when you're talking about where you're from because ... I am, I grew up Muslim in a white country, so there was this whole aspect of like all of it was taboo, but all my friends were doing it. Like when I was a teenager. So, like because ... there was only white people. Um, I am also white. But Muslim. So, there was just so many like ... it kept on happening, but I knew it was wrong, and I think that affected how I read it so much as well because [interjection – “oh yeah” (Sara)]. I didn't talk to anyone about it. But I would like dream about it at night, and like it would be in my thoughts all the time. Probably even more, because you have that teenage rebel and you're like, “oh, I know I’m not supposed to do this and I know I’m not supposed to want a relationship and sex before marriage.” [interjection – “yeah” (Sara)] But you do it. So, I think it's ... there's so many aspects that can change how you think about it. (RS2 transcript, pp. 100-101)

Similarly, Amna referencing the Palestinian context in which she was raised noted that even public displays of affection (PDA) are not common.

> Like where I'm from it's not really ... no one really ... like openly dates or like holds hands. Like PDA is not really a thing there. And that's fine. It's another way of living and all that. (RS2 transcript, p. 96)

Cultural contexts and cultural factors play a role in how young women view, experience, and feel about sexual transgression even if such boundary crossings of prohibitions exist only in the world of imagination. As a result, reading romance fiction is one avenue young women can use to explore their sexuality and desire especially in cultures where sex before marriage is still taboo and where marriage is still the ultimate, expected outcome of a woman's life. Amna, growing up in a culture and society that did not openly embrace women's sexuality and intimacy, turned to reading fanfiction when she was in eighth grade or approximately twelve years old (RS2 transcript, p. 101). Her access to fanfiction online shows the way the digital world and digital communities can pierce the most exclusive enclave although such access is always susceptible to state interference and other forms of censorship. Although Amna read romance fiction, she was also aware that what she read "wasn't really applied to real life I think as much" (RS2 transcript. p. 102). As a result, for both Elif and Amna, sexuality remains taboo as became clear in the following exchange that centred around the commonality of their experiences:

> Elif: Did you ... I'm just wondering in terms of like what I felt ... like because it was so taboo to want sex before marriage in my Muslim family, [interjection – yeah (Amna)] was that the same in your family?
>
> Amna: Yeah.
>
> Elif: Yeah. So, did ... so ... so did you feel any way about like the things you read in terms of like what you were supposed to feel?
>
> Amna: Yeah [with hesitancy, then starts to laugh], yeah, yeah ... [some subdued chuckles from others in the group]
>
> Elif: I'm sorry, this is like almost too much for you, like on you, but ...
>
> Amna: Yeah. It's, it's private, but it's okay. I think ... mmhmm ... like I would read, and I would feel guilty about reading all this stuff. But it's fine because what you do in your own room alone isn't really ...
>
> Elif: I know.

> Amna: ... bad because ... I don't know ... [Group laughs – some comments – indistinct.] No one's going to, like, check on me.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 103)

This segment of the discussion shows the genuine curiosity reading salon members had about each other and each other's experiences, the support they were willing to offer each other, their points of connection, and their points of departure. As a transgressive act then, this type of reading is still extricated in feelings of shame, in being the bad girl who wants, desires, and seeks knowledge.

The issue of family dynamics emerged as another theme when reading salon members discussed their relationships to romance fiction and its sexual content. Aspiring author Elif, for example, recognized the obstacles she faced when she said, "Like I don't want my family to read me writing a sex scene. But like also I don't want people to think that I am the kind of person who writes sex scenes" (RS3 transcript, p. 102). Sara added, "I always think about that because I've always wanted to be an author and I'm like, 'Oh my god, if my parents read this!' I would ... like my life would end" (RS3 transcript, p. 102). In fact, Elif, who had read romance fiction during her teenage years, had attempted to write her own as fan fiction. However, as she confessed, "And I literally like one day had to burn them because I was like I can't like first of all, what if my Muslim father finds out?" (RS1 transcript, p. 46). As Elif's and Sara's comments demonstrate, the issue is not writing. They are capable authors and would be able to write a sex scene. For the two of them, the fear was that writing sexual material entailed a disclosure and a disclosure specifically to parents. Sara further demonstrated this dilemma when she theorized what it would be like to successfully complete a novel and then have to say to family members, "This is my book, but don't read it" (RS3 transcript, p. 103). The pride of accomplishment would be at risk because of the evidence of sexual knowledge. When I pushed Sara and asked her why she forecast this content as troublesome, she answered, "I don't want to talk about that with my parents" (RS3 transcript, p. 103). Elif added, "Absolutely fucking not" (RS3 transcript, p. 103). That led to the following exchange and an explanation of the conundrum:

> Helen: I feel like they would be ... ... thinking, "Oh, you're getting ... you're putting this in from your own life experience.
>
> Elif: Oh, hundred percent.

Helen: And then they have an idea ...

Sara: Oh god!

Helen: ... of ... into your sex life ...

Sara: Yeah.

Helen: ... which is not great [?].

Elif: And they imagine you having ...

Helen: YES!

Elif: ... that sex that you're writing. You don't want that to happen.

Sara: No.

(RS3 transcript, pp. 103-104)

The issue then is not only the safety in terms of public perceptions, but also safety in imaginative spaces and the way those spaces link to the shame of parents knowing their adult children as active sexual beings. However, these concerns strike a discordant note in that none of the reading salon members judged the authors we read, in terms of the authors' morality and conduct, based on the sexual content of their novels and the sex scenes they all contained of varying explicitness.

In terms of sexual content, romance fiction as a genre unveils physical intimacy. However, for some of the reading salon members, tearing off the veil of being a romance fiction reader only occurred in private spaces or in the company of one's trusted friends and usually those friends who identify as women. This need to be in a safe space to discuss a taboo subject led to many in the group reflecting and commenting on the space we were in as being a safe space for discussion. As Amna noted,

> This felt like a safe space. I really enjoyed this and also like I don't really talk about romance novels that much unless it's Twitter, and then I don't want anyone following me there because there's this guilt around reading romance novels for women, you know we can't have a book with a shirtless, shirtless guy [someone chuckles] on the cover. Yeah, so it feels nice to talk about it here. I can maybe bring up a few shirtless men covers here. [Group laughs.] (RS1 transcript, p. 67).

For the reading salon members, guilt was also an issue when reconciling their identities as feminists with the genres of romance media. In Paola's words,

> But I still wanna enjoy it, right? Like I don't without feel guilty [Interjection – yeah (Elif)] because I feel like sometimes like this, the whole feminist movement makes me feel guilty about maybe [Interjection – how's that? (Elif)] enjoying certain things that I just want to enjoy so ... It's hard. (RS1 transcript, p. 69)

As trite as it may be to say, it is about striking a balance. As Elif said,

> Because I just knew that this would be such a good environment, and it really has been. It was so like ... healthy. And so interesting to like see like all from like we have different ages, we have like all different backgrounds. It's very interesting to see everyone's different point of view. And I think I'll definitely keep thinking about like the whole how ... how the reading affects us as readers and like exactly as you say, like how, how do I go into this being the strong balanced feminist I am. (RS1 transcript, p. 68)

Love, romance, and sex may fill the modern mediascape, but when it comes to women's relationship to the media on offer, there are still fears, constraints, and guilt regarding their media consumption and how that may be viewed by others.

The idea that women in public spaces may not feel safe when they are reading romance fiction was added to this brew of guilt, shame, and trepidation. As a result, the issue of camouflaging for acceptability emerged. As someone new to the romance fiction genre, Helen demonstrated this outlook when she said, as the group discussed *Chloe Brown*, "I didn't expect the smut to be in this book and like I was reading this in the beach in front of ... around people and I was like, 'Oh, my god!' But like, yeah, never ... like nobody else knows, right?" (RS3 transcript, p. 80). There was reassurance in the notion that nobody knows what the book contains although Elif added,

> Well, I saw a TikTok about this the other day where someone literally said this is the best thing ... this is the best kept secret women have. We can read porn everywhere. (RS3 transcript, p. 80)

This was the one time when a reading salon member described the sexual content of romance novels as porn rather than as erotica, smut, or spice. As Elif said, "You should just ignore other people. Like other women will know. [Laughter and chatter – multiple voices overlapping – indistinct.] I see you there. Have fun!" (RS3 transcript, p. 81). Rather than perceive this equation of romance fiction sex to pornography negatively, reading salon members saw the secret knowledge between and for women as a signal of shared experience and strength in a universal gender identity. They also saw it as purposeful or as Elif stated, "Porn for a story" (RS3 transcript, p. 91). In contrast, the

porn they had categorized as of interest to men because they saw that media as only concerned with the depiction of sex and not connected to the development of a story or in any way as being about love.

Salon members emphasized being selective about where and when they read romance fiction. However, as Amna had shown with her anecdote about the internet providing a transgressive space, romance fiction and its sexual content is available anywhere and everywhere nowadays. This elicited a note about generational differences. Gina recalled her youth when "we had no internet" (RS2 transcript, p. 103). She also shared that she was raised in a fundamentalist evangelical home and as a result she had to rely on the library. As she explained,

> Gina: So, when I grew up [Elif starts to laugh – others join in] we had no internet. I'm just like, you have the internet to do all this stuff, but I grew up not with the internet and so I was raised in a fundamentalist evangelical home [interjection – "oh, okay" (Maureen)] and so ... you ... I couldn't go to the internet and do anything. Like I had to ...
>
> Sara: Go to the library?
>
> Gina: ... go to the library. And there was [*sic*] no e-books. And you had covers ...
>
> Sara: The naked man.
>
> (RS2 transcript, pp. 103-104).

Given the traditional depiction of romance covers, which people often refer to in a derogatory manner as bodice rippers, Sara was able to complete the sentence with the phrase, "the naked man" (RS2 transcript, p. 104). These covers, which reveal rather than veil, made it impossible for Gina to read the library books she had selected on the bus. Gina referred to this again in RS3 when she said,

> Yeah. There's no way I'm going to go on the bus and read a bod ... like a bodice ripper. I wouldn't even do [interjection – "no" (Sara)] that when I was reading romance. That was embarrassing to me! [Lots of reaction and chatter – overlapping multiple voices – indistinct.] (RS3 transcript, p. 80)

Elif reiterated this need for camouflage when she added, "You could hide books behind other books, is what I did" (RS2 transcript, p. 104). These efforts at concealment emphasized the gendered nature of the romance fiction reading experience, but also the threats that women perceive to their individual safety. For example, Amna noted,

> And it's also like it's less harassment. Like if I was like holding a book of two, of a man and a woman kissing, I think I would get a lot of looks from other people, especially men or even comments. So, if, when ... I know like when I'm, I'm on the bus with this kind of book I would know that many women on the bus know what this is, and they don't care. Meanwhile, if it's a man, I would be a bit hesitant about him knowing these things. So, it's kind of like an open secret. It's not exactly [soft interjection – "yeah" (Sara)] like hiding the fact that ... (RS3 transcript, p. 82)

With these remarks, reading salon members showed that there were points of similarity in their experiences as romance fiction readers. It also shows the ability of women to build their gender identification and solidarity across time and geography. In sharing their diverse experiences and the range of their knowledge as well as details around family dynamics and cultural contexts, the reading salon members demonstrated that what they read influences how they see the world, reflects how they understand themselves in the world. It is a complex iterative process, circular and dynamic, even when, as with romance fiction, readers opt to hide their engagement with this media.

5.2.1. Summary

As Allen et al. (2015) note, when cultural products are aligned with the feminine and are feminized, they become "trivialised forms of cultural consumption" (p. 6). For the reading salon members, this attitude informed what they viewed as the stigmatization of romance fiction, a phenomenon that Lois and Gregson (2015) refer to as "sneers and leers" in their study of romance writers. It was also one factor they felt affected women readers of the genre and that encircled women readers in feelings of guilt. This guilt operates on many levels including guilt about gaining knowledge of a topic that those in one's relational networks might prohibit or dismiss as a waste of time or describe as an unhealthy practice. For all the success of love and romance as marketable media products, including an endless array of Hallmark HEA-HFN movies, to give just one example, popular culture often represents romance media and women's consumption of romance media in a negative fashion. As a result, the group members adopted a cautious approach to publicly discussing romance fiction reading unless they felt they were in a safe environment, one that is usually constituted of other women. The digital sphere, BookTube, Bookgram, BookTok, and so forth, also offers romance fiction readers a community where the exchange of information is acceptable and fun. To the participants, reading romance fiction in public spaces entailed risks. The perception of

the potential for threats to their personal safety or, at minimum, unwanted attention, and hurtful comments, constrained their media consumption and curbed their freedom of expression. In more personal spaces, such as at home, they exercised similar constraint albeit for different reasons.

The emphasis on feeling safe first emerged during RS1 although in that context it was about the reading salon environment constituting a safe and comfortable space for the discussion. This demonstrated that the group quickly built a sense of community with one another and that there was a mutual feeling of trust. Similarly, in RS3 these perceptions were reiterated when the word safe and its derivates were used ten times in a similar context. Designating the reading salon space as a safe space meant that the participants felt comfortable enough to talk freely about topics that in other circumstances would be taboo and necessitate concealment. As a result, the reading salons operated as a form of consciousness raising and reflect the strength women have found in circles of conversations throughout historical time. Book clubs and other forms of book culture flow between a state of being alone or on one's own and being together.

The motivation for concealing romance fiction differed among the reading salon members. While some talked about hiding the book covers or disguising the content, Gina said, "For me it wasn't the sex, it was hiding it, it was ... or feeling ... like intellectually inferior" (RS3 transcript, p. 93). In addition to this personal judgement of worth, there was also, in promulgating the notion of reading sexually explicit material as taboo, that women consuming media with sexual content is *dangerous* although that word was not used in any of the reading salons. These conversations illustrated the complex relationships women have with reading romance fiction in general and with sexually explicit content in particular. One way to negotiate this complexity is to rationalize the narrative function of sex scenes. For example, reading salon members presented the argument that women read sexually explicit content only when it is integral to a love story in contrast to men who do not consume pornography for the story. This provided a clear gendered understanding of how individuals contextualize the sexual media they consume and the conundrums they face when presenting themselves as sexual beings in the world, especially among their closest social networks.

Romance fiction offers an avenue for women to enjoy sexual content that is coded. Those who know, know, and that is usually other women. Those who are

unfamiliar with the genre may not know and that secrecy precludes judgement and unwanted intrusions. Unless a woman reader feels she can trust that she is talking to someone else who is familiar with the genre, knows its secrets, and reads the same type of books, then she will continue to conceal her reading habits and the extent of her knowledge as a sexual human being. This need to conceal is likely not merely due to the risqué nature of the material. It is also likely associated with the conventional connotations of sexual women as immoral, bad, and sinful, and the characterization of their sexual knowledge and, perhaps more significantly, their experiences as shameful. In a Christian context, it is the legacy of Eve, her temptation, and the loss of paradise. However, there are consequences when women feel the need to conceal a practice or deny part of their human identity. In the case of romance fiction, there is an unfortunate tendency, in perpetuating the foundational patriarchal nature of HEA-HFN narratives, to infantilize women and their sexuality. This may also be viewed as a process of "girlification", which reiterates ideologies of gender that are normative in a traditional sense rather than as means of celebrating women's strengths, successes, and status as autonomous, independent beings (Lazar, 2017).

5.3. Romance Fiction Infantilizes Women and Their Sexuality

As salon members indicated, women readers often feel the need to camouflage their romance reading habits. It seems likely that book publishers are aware of this desire to conceal because some book covers make it easier to read romance novels in public. These trendy stylistic approaches are frequently illustrated rather than photographic or realistic, and do not overtly pronounce the sexual nature of the content. For example, the cover of *Chloe Brown* shows two cartoon-like characters, standing together in a side-by-side embrace with a black cat at their feet, and presents the book's title in a comic-like font with design flourishes for emphasis (see Figure 5.1.). This led to a discussion among reading salon members as to when this phenomenon began starting with a question from Elif:

> Elif: Is that why they started making cartoonish [covers]?
>
> Sara: Maybe, but it did start 2018, 2019. A lot ...

RMF: I, I, I, I would, I would challenge that a little bit I, I, I because I to me when I first went to get the book, to me this looks very much like what we would call a chick lit ...

Elif: Yeah.

RMF: ... ah, cover.

Elif: I would think so.

RMF: And chick lits are very ...

Sara: Maybe they came back to that.

RMF: Yeah. So, I, um ... ah, yeah. So, that's what I ... So, I don't think the style is necessarily new, but I'm really intrigued ...

Sara: I think it's a resurgence.

RMF: ... by this idea of ...

Elif: Resurgence.

RMF: ... a resurgence ...

Elif: Okay.

RMF: ... of something.

(RS3 transcript, p. 78)

If this illustrative cover art is a resurgence as Sara speculated, then it is intriguing to think about why in this contemporary moment romance fiction is flourishing, and why it is this approach to romance fiction that is flourishing.

However, members of the group felt that this tendency to treat romance fiction as cartoonish infantilized women. Helen started this discussion when she said:

Helen: I want to say something about the cover. [Interjection – "yeah" (Gina).] That ... it is infantilizing. Look at this. She looks ...

Elif: And the fucking cat's in there.

Helen: I like ... I like ... like ... graphic novels and stuff are ... I, I enjoy stuff. But this to me is just like, I dunno. It looks like a young adult novel or something and like ...

Sara: Mmm. This is not at all ...

Elif: Also, the title did not ...

Gina: Yeah. The cartoony type thing ... yeah.

(RS3 transcript, p. 64)

Reading salon members highlighted this revised approach to marketing romance fiction. Perhaps it reflects the responsiveness of publishers to the sensitivities of their market. It may also reflect a demographic shift towards younger readers and a resurgence of the romance genre which the social media revolution has aided and abetted.

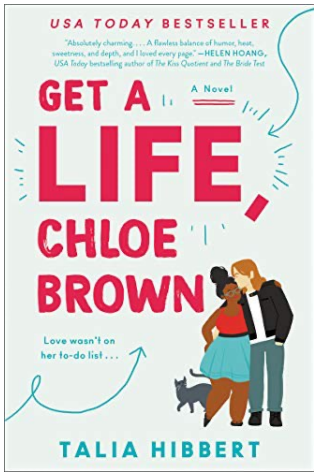

Figure 5.1. Book cover for Talia Hibbert's *Get a Life, Chloe Brown*

Sara, one of the younger salon members, is an avid romance reader with an active book life online. She described how the BookTube accounts she follows went from recommending young adult fiction to promoting books that contained sexual content. In her words,

> … a lot of them ... like it was ... they trans, transitioned from reading only YA, which usually doesn't have any smut to being like, "Oh, this is a popular book, let me give this a try." And then there'd be smut in it and enjoying that, so they try something else with smut. And then that obviously influences me. (RS3 transcript, pp. 77-78)

Sara's comments demonstrate the cycle of influence in the networked era of social media. In terms of romance fiction, her comments also show that the new covers, along with the expanding interest in the genre itself, act as a lure for younger readers. This is reflected in the analysis Sara shared with the group:

> I feel like for a while, adult romance was just like not working. Like I think it was just kind of like stuck. And then they started publishing books like this with like fun covers that are like ... they put this out and you're like, "Ooh, what's that?" [Interjection – "true, true" (Amna).] Or

> like and ... like they like they have a lot of colours, covers that are pink. And they like kind of draw the eye and I feel like it was just allowing women to be like like what they like. Like, "Oooh, a pink cover. I'm gonna ... I like that. I'm gonna look at that." And I feel like before that it was kind of like strict ... covers that were just like men with ripped shirts. (RS3 transcript, pp. 78-79)

While Sara was aware that the these covers of romance novels made the genre more palatable to this generation of reader, she was also aware that the much of the enduring appeal of the stories was ensconced between the covers. As she noted during the RS3 discussion about *Chloe Brown*,

> It also came out at a really good time. It came out ... I think it was 2019 and that was, I feel like the resurgence of this kind of romance. So, yeah, 2019. And I feel like this is the time where young people were like, "Wait, I can read these, and I can enjoy them. And I can read smut and it's not like the end of the world." So, I feel like that also attributed ... because this was like one of the options. (RS3 transcript, p. 63).

In this way, romance novel covers, now fashioned in an explicitly gendered, girlish fashion, appeal to younger women as a bright shiny object and yet the content, especially the more explicit and sensual it is, is addressed to the adult woman who is in the process of becoming, who is emerging as, a sexual being.

If romance fiction serves as an introduction to sex and sexuality, and a transition from young adult to adult fiction, then the discourses around romance fiction also figures in discourses about girls, young women, and sex education. As Gina noted during the first reading salon,

> So, like ca, ca, can I just come back? Like I've been hearing everyone and it's really interesting because I feel like ... I grew up without social media, and I feel like I lived in my mind, and we were ... I think, I think it comes down to like what is erotic fantasy in, in how we were sexual ... of sexual ... how we got our sexual education. Like this is a very small subset of people like just my experience but probably mine and my circle's experience was probably through erotic literature books. (RS1 transcript, pp. 52-53).

Gina's comments suggest that if sex education is not a formalized process, then individuals will explore alternative sources of knowledge and genre fiction is one such source of learning, principally for women. Similarly, Helen recalled being an inquisitive pre-teen and curious about sex. She said,

> I, I just think about like being like ... really young. Like twelve to whatever and like maybe the lack of sexual experience, but like being with my girlfriends and like talking about sex and like trying to get the information and like being curious [interjection – "mmhmm" (Sara) and like staying up late at night to watch like the soft porn on tv just to like see what it is and like ... I dunno. (RS3 transcript, p.107)

To this disclosure, Elif replied, "I did all of this … just by myself" (RS3 transcript, p. 107). In the information that they shared, Helen and Elif showed that women are resourceful in seeking the knowledge they need to build the foundations for their experiences in the world. This ability to access information is a sign of maturity, but it also signals the limitations and constraints society and culture place on young women when it comes to sex and sexuality, which is a form of infantilization.

Exploring these obstacles to sexual knowledge led the group to a discussion of family dynamics once more and the discomfort of presenting oneself as a fully realized sexual being in that domain. Helen said, "I think I wouldn't even want to have a wedding like for the kiss aspect in front of the family. I don't want to do that" (RS3 transcript, p. 107). Elif added, "But also, if you have a wedding ... that same night [Sara echoes "that night"] your family knows what you're doing" (RS3 transcript, p. 108). To this, Sara contributed, "I don't want to think about ... my sister's getting married next year and like ... It's going to be a dark day in my life" (RS3 transcript, p. 108). While there are valid reasons to set boundaries within a familial context and to insist on one's right to privacy, and even though there was an element of fun in what these participants were saying, their commentary shows the disconnect between the proliferation of discourses around women's sexual agency and the constrained reality of women's sexual freedom. As Amna pointed out,

> Yeah. It's weird. Like ... women, like in Muslim countries aren't expected to like date guys [interjection – "no" (Elif)]. But then they're expected to get married suddenly, and like see a man in their bed every morning! [Helen chuckles – Elif indistinct.] Like it's such a big thing. It just doesn't happen like this. That's why so many women right now, Muslim women, are just refusing to get married. There's also like the aspect of men being ... you know ... ... the way they are. (RS3 transcript, p. 111).

Amna's statement points to the challenges women face in terms of navigating their route to becoming sexually active as well as the essentializing force of gender. As with previous exchanges among reading salon members, this made the group chuckle, laugh, and chatter, with multiple speakers talking at the same time, an indication of their

identification with the experiences they were sharing with one another and their collective recognition of men as a group that embodies undesirable qualities. Extending the discussion beyond the family domain, Gina was the first to broach the idea that romance fiction is one of the cogs that perpetuates a hetero-patriarchal machine that constructs love, romance, sex, and marriage in a particular paradigm. She said,

> I just had a thought. Just like ... As you were talking ... I don't know if I can articulate it, but you know, I think, maybe it's almost marrying this notion of like ... I wonder if all this romance is just a way to keep us in the Judeo-Christian way of having monogamous, heterosexual relationships. (RS3 transcript, p.29)

In response to this observation, Elif said "Oh, probably" and Sara added, "I think so" (RS3 transcript, p. 30). Their support of Gina's observation shows that despite the transgressive potential of accessing sexual knowledge through romance fiction, the genre itself is deeply rooted in traditional and conventional understandings of sex, sexuality, and womanhood.

The issue of women's infantilization also emerged in the group's discussion about the representation of women in romance fiction. For example, during the third reading salon, members of the group agreed that Talia Hibbert's intent, as the author of *Chloe Brown*, was to present the novel as a romantic comedy. However, they felt that the author's comedic tones undermined the representation of the female protagonist. Gina outlined the issue when she asked, "Well, it's sort of a rom com, right?" (RS3 transcript, p. 56). This led to the following exchange:

> Sara: Rom com, yeah.
>
> Gina: There was [*sic*] lots of comedic, "Oh, she gets up in the tree," "Oh, she inches here." Like, I feel like ...
>
> Sara: Chloe's supposed to be funny.
>
> Gina: Yeah. Like a rom com. And I feel like, um ... she ... was written kind of ... I, I was trying to figure the word when I was coming here. Kind of infantilized I feel like ... I feel like she's supposed to be smart, she's got a computer career, she's like, you know ... I just felt like the way she was written was like she was supposed to be smart, but she was infantilized. And he was more ... smart, and intelligent ... than her.
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 56-57)

As reading salon members noted, the character of Chloe Brown, in her thirties, is older than the traditional HEA-HFN heroine, and she is a business professional. However, elements in the way the author describes her, along with certain plot points, perpetuates an illusion of her as girlish, incapable, and not self-sufficient. In this position as a subaltern, she then needs someone to look after her and that's the role Redford "Red" Morgan fulfills. Since Hibbert, the author, endows Chloe Brown with a chronic disability, this reinforces a power dynamic and relational imbalance that makes Red stronger, more capable, and in control. He is the one to rescue and Chloe is the one that needs rescuing. In the way that female characters may be infantilized, Elif also showed that readers can be infantilized when they indulge in reading romance fiction. She provided this insight when she shared the impact reading romance novels for the salons had on her. She said,

> Um, I've also ... learned, especially from you [Gina], that it's ... I need to change the way I look at romance. I need to see it more for fantasy rather than reality, which I've never thought about before coming here. I think, and I think it's a really good point. Um, I've also been confirmed in my belief that romance is probably not for me, because I am ... too vulnerable and I do let it affect how I see ... well if obviously if I, I practice it won't, but I, I do let it affect ... my, my very happy single status. Um, because I think ... I imagine all of us have quite vivid imaginations, so I just see it very... I see the whole thing, and I'm a bedtime reader, so it's just, it's, it's going straight into my dreams, which is not very healthy. I wake up like, "Oh, where's the man..." (RS3 transcript, pp. 112-113)

As Elif demonstrated in her remarks, media consumption entails a responsibility of negotiating with the material consumers listen to, view, and read. The challenge with consuming romance fiction is to learn to distinguish between the fantasy of HEA-HFN narratives and the reality of what love is and may be in a woman's life. Otherwise, women remain locked in perpetual state of dependence that entails looking for someone better, stronger, smarter, more reliable, more capable, more independent to take care of them. This tension between the imagined and the real is the next area that I will explore.

5.3.1. Summary

Young readers embroiled in the digital literary sphere and the realms of social media, as demonstrated in Sara's observations, have transitioned from young adult fiction into romance fiction. In terms of books and reading, social media influencers play

a role in shaping the reading habits of young women and the books that they will buy, borrow, and share. For romance fiction, it is a process that often starts with an influencer encouraging their followers to read into a new more adult genre and the enjoyment they experience in reading the books leads influencers and followers to read more of the same. This communality strengthens and solidifies the bonds between influencers and followers through their growing enjoyment of the same books. It also opens avenues for publishers to develop the demand for their products and to capitalize on the critical mass of romance readers that has emerged through this iterative cycle of promotion. However, while the change in reading habits correlates to growing older, the insistence on packaging the more mature content in girlish wrappings emphasizes a tension and duality in womanhood. It is a call to grow up and to stay young at the same time.

If the lure of romance fiction is to satiate the curiosity young readers have about sex and sexuality, it also reveals that young women rely on romance fiction to compensate for their limited access to informed knowledge about this subject. This state of ignorance is a form of infantilization, and it encapsulates the essence of a dilemma. Society does not want women to learn about sex, women find ways to learn about sex, and romance novels, idealized and misrepresentative as they may be in their conflation of sex with love and romance, become one way for women to access information about sex. However, when women exercise their agency to learn about this area of human experience through romance novels, they then take measures to keep their knowledge secret or invisible. It is a burden of denial that culture places on women and a form of emotional labour. In this context, women are unable to be fully themselves as sexually active beings, and yet they are expected to embark on a path to fulfill expected gender roles and gender norms that are predicated on their sexuality.

Even though women write so much of the romance fiction available, and write principally for other women, rather than seizing a liberatory opportunity the romance genre becomes inevitably complicit in maintaining the idealized status quo of the coupling imperative and, in an overwhelming manner, the gender binary. The resulting infantilization of women is not limited to the sphere of physical intimacy because the reinforcement of the gender binary tends to perpetuate the historic inequalities and injustices that arise from the enforcement of that binary. For example, in both *Seven Days* and *Chloe Brown* even though each of the female protagonist is an accomplished career professional, their lives — filled with friends, family, and success — are portrayed

as incomplete and insufficient. Their ability to fully exist in adult womanhood is dependent on the man who rescues them, who fulfills their desires, and, in some cases, explains the value of their own work to them. Furthermore, while women readers may be more willing to share romance novels with their friends, whether in-person or in the online spaces they consider safe, and to acknowledge the sexual content they contain, there is still considerable hesitation and discomfort in knowing that family members may see them as sexual beings. This drive to concealment and the need to maintain a charade of innocence, infantilizes women and their desires, whether that involves their experience in the real world or in the fantasy world of the imagination. This boundary between reality and fantasy is central to women's negotiation of HEA-HFN narratives. It is an arena of intrigue to explore and that is the next discussion I will tackle.

Chapter 6.

“Romances are not meant to be realistic”: Aspiration, Experience, and Harm

> *“We might as well capitalize the whole damn thing, it’s got such iconic status as the meta-story of what life is supposed to be all about: FIND YOUR ONE TRUE LOVE and LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER!!!”*
>
> *Catherine Roach, Happily Ever After, p. 2*

The quoted words in this chapter title are the words Gina used during the RS2 discussion about *Seven Days.* As the group debated plot weaknesses in the novel, Gina said, “I can forgive it because it’s a romance. And romances are not meant to be realistic” (RS2 transcript, p. 23). To me, this perspective reflects a standard defense of romance representations in popular culture, especially in relation to the debate about its impact on media consumers. The dialectic in this discourse positions *reality* and *fantasy* in opposition to one another with the underpinning notion that *fantasy* is harmless. However, the contrast between the experiences of reading salon members and the aspirational ideals of HEA-HFN narratives demonstrated the complexities and nuances entailed in the consumption of romance fiction media. In a way, the consequences and concerns reading salon members explored in their conversations reflected the metaphor of consumption and ingestion that social authorities, critics, and experts in various historical periods have used to theorize and analyze women and reading (Flint, 1993, p. 50). These paradigms depend on a symbolic equivalency: if food is fuel for the body’s operations, then reading text is fuel for the mind, particularly the imagination. Just as the advice is to monitor eating habits for the best health outcomes so one must manage reading habits for the best intellectual outcomes. When it comes to the historical preoccupation with women, young girls, and their reading habits, such outcomes are conflated with good moral conduct, proper behaviour, and adherence to societal norms and expectations. The secretive nature of the reader’s mental processes in absorbing text and its meaning (Jack, 2012, p. 6), even if the act of reading is visible to others, intensifies the anxiety about women readers for systems, structures, and authorities that thrive and depend on control of women as individuals, groups, or as a class. In this framework, the question is not whether media consumption affects women, but rather to what extent does it do so.

To explore this thematic grouping of *reality*, *fantasy*, *imagination*, *experience*, and *aspiration* in relation to reading HEA-HFN narratives, I conducted a search of the three salon transcripts using the root word *real*. This resulted in 107 matches for RS1 alone and I realized it was not a workable starting point. I shifted my search term and divided it into two, *reality* and *realistic*. With this refinement, I found that the word *reality* was used consistently in each reading salon, three times in the first one, four times in the second, and five times in the third. The word *realistic* had a different pattern and it was used five times during RS1, twenty-five times during RS2, and only twice during RS3. It was also often used in the negative formation of *unrealistic*. The spike in the usage of the words *realistic* and *unrealistic* during RS2 reflects in part the reaction of reading salon members to the contemporary setting of *Seven Days*, the second novel we discussed. They saw it as current and enjoyed the many real-world features the author, Tia Williams, incorporates into her story (RS2 transcript, pp. 9-10). Such elements include characters texting one another and the content of the texts, specific references to social media platforms and usage, fandoms, fashion brands, and the plight of underprivileged Black American youth, including the murder of a secondary character. However, Maureen expressed her concern with this orientation when she said, “That’s funny. I don’t like that at all ... lots of contemporary ... because I think it’s going to date the book so badly, so fast” (RS2 transcript, p. 11). Overall, the author’s intentional use of these features in the plot and the settings generated debate of the book’s *realism* rather than of the *realistic* or *fantastical* nature of the genre overall.

To contrast with the word forms of *real*, I also searched the transcript for the use of the word *fantasy* and its derivatives. *Fantasy* was used sixteen times in RS1, fifteen times in RS2, and only seven times during RS3. In several instances, the use of the word *fantasy* occurred in conjunction with the word *reality*. Since the idea of *fantasy* in romance fiction often centres on idealism and notions of an idealistic relationship, I also conducted a search on the word *perfect*. *Perfect*, along with different forms of the word such as *perfection*, *imperfect*, and *imperfection*, turned up twenty-four times in the first reading salon, twelve and eight times in RS2 and RS3 respectively. Positing a link between *perfection* and *expectation*, I also conducted a word search on the latter and found that the group used the word fourteen times when we met for RS1, only six times during RS2, and not at all during RS3, our final meeting. Occasionally *perfect* was used to indicate assent or that something was “okay” and often it was embedded in

discussions around the narratives of wholeness and change. Because I had included details of each meeting, including author biographies and reading salon logistics, on the first page of each transcript, my search using the word *perfect* also highlighted the title of another novel by Tia Williams, the author of *Seven Days*. Ironically, the title of this other Tia Williams book is *The Perfect Find*, and Netflix released an adaptation of the book on June 14, 2023. *The Perfect Find*, even simply as a book title, encapsulates what is at the heart of romance fiction and HEA-HFN narratives.

As reading salon members grappled with the question of romance fiction and *fantasy*, their discussions around this topic also led to conversations about the therapeutic, or quasi-therapeutic, value of reading in the genre. They referred to reading romance fiction as one way to escape the daily realities of living. Given this theme of eluding the real, I also conducted a search on the word *escape*. To capture different forms of the word, I simplified the root term for my search to *escap*. As a result of using this term, the search found the words *escape* or *escapist* twelve times in RS1 and in three instances these words were used in connection with the word *daydream*. Reading salon members used the word *dream* itself, whether on its own, in a phrase, or in a compound form, seven times during RS1, twice in RS2, and three times in RS3. I also felt that reading salon members used the word *escape* in a way reminiscent of when people share information about what entertains them. As a result, I also searched for the word *entertain* and its related forms and found that it was mentioned five times during RS2 and not at all during RS1. In RS3, our last meeting, reading salon members used *escape*, *escapist*, and *escapism* eight times in all and *entertainment* four times in total. Since *comfort* or feeling *comforted* and *comfortable* is a therapeutic quality, I also looked for the word and its forms in the transcripts. Members of the group used the word *comfort* or *comfortable* eleven times overall to describe the feeling of being in a *comfortable* space for the discussions and in four instances, in the RS1 discussion, to refer to the content of the books as *comfort* reading.

In contrast to the feelings of *comfort* I discuss here, in Chapter 4, I discussed the topic of *trauma*. When preparing for that exploration, I had searched the transcripts for the use of the word *vulnerable* because of the connection I saw between the word *vulnerable* and the subject of *trauma*. However, what I found was that reading salon members did not use the word *vulnerable* in that context. When they used the word *vulnerable*, they used it to discuss the impact of reading romance fiction in relation to

themselves or in relation to young readers, and not in relation to the experiences of the fictional characters and story protagonists. As a result, rather than examining the use of the world *vulnerable* in the context of *trauma*, I found it more helpful to incorporate that work into the discuss of *harm* to readers. The word *vulnerable* appeared only once in each of the first two reading salons, whereas it appeared six times in RS3. This higher frequency use of the word in our final meeting reflected the fact that RS3 served as the conclusion of the research study. In their commentary during the final session, reading salon members explored implications of reading romance fiction in a context that exceeded the confines of the books and the confines of the space we had ensconced ourselves in as a reading community.

In contrast, my search of the transcripts for the word *harm* found no use of the word in RS2 and RS3 whereas reading salon members used it fifteen times when we first met for RS1. Ironically, two instances of the word *harm* appeared in the title *Prince C**harm**ing*, and all other uses related to conversations about the impact of reading romance fiction on readers, especially young readers. As with the word *vulnerable*, the word *harm* became a feature of discussions about media consumption and not about the novels and the characters. Given these word usage patterns, I consider *vulnerability* and *harm* to be key components to consider when discussing women readers and their relationships to HEA-HFN narratives. They are also central features of the way reading salon members applied their insights, observations, and understandings to the social and cultural contexts they inhabit. For this portion of the discussion, I have constructed my review of the findings in three subcategories to explore the themes of aspiration, experience, and harm. These are:

- 6.1. Romance Fiction Builds Relationship Expectations
- 6.2. HEA-HFN Narratives Contend with Reality Checks
- 6.3. Women Readers Use Harm and Entertainment to Frame Debates About Romance Fiction

I have presented the details of these findings below.

6.1. Romance Fiction Builds Relationship Expectations

One of the ways that reading salon members expressed the tension between fantasy and reality in romance fiction was to acknowledge that even though the stories in the genre are not real, they do build real-life relationship expectations. Paola described this as "the soul mate kind of thing" (RS2 transcript, p. 90). These reflections first emerged during the group's initial meeting and the opening round of introductions. At the start of RS1, I asked each person to introduce themselves by saying:

> Okay, so here's where I'd like to start, I want you to think about the different types of reading you do and how your reading habits have changed over time and I'm wondering how you would describe yourself as a reader. (RS1, p. 2)

As a result, in addition to introducing themselves, reading salon members also offered insights into their history as readers and as readers of romance fiction. Helen said, "I think romance novels is [*sic*] nothing I really ever go towards other than being like a teen and reading like *Twilight* and stuff and like loving that but then past that it's not something I go to" (RS1 transcript, p. 2). Elif agreed and characterized her relationship to romance fiction as follows:

> I think I have a similar experience that when I was younger, I would read a lot of those like YA romance novels like *Twilight*, even *Hunger Games*, there was love. Be rooting for romance in that and, like other random little series that were like a lot about like love and teenage thirst [?] whatever. And then I grew up to be a woman, and that was so not what I wanted to read anymore, and now it's much more like contemporary fiction that's more about identity or like crime novels or whatever, but like that has so little romance in it. (RS1 transcript, pp. 2-3)

Paola also described herself as a reader of young adult fiction that incorporated romantic elements, but, she said,

> "... nowadays like, if I had to go and pick a book, this would be very like the very last thing maybe that I would choose and it's funny because, like the *Bridgerton* series. Like I … I watched that in like one day right. So, why ... like I would never have thought of like actually reading the book if it wasn't for, for this." (RS1 transcript, p. 3)

Following up on this reference to the reading salons, Paola continued and explained why joining the group had appealed to her. She said, "... like part of what called me the most towards this study, apart from reading and discussing was that it was focused on

romance because this was never an area that I had much of experience with" (RS1 transcript, p. 3). Similarly, Maureen, an avid reader, said,

> "I read a lot of historical fiction it's probably the thing I read the most. It's sort of my favorite genre, but I do read also a lot of fantasy and a lot of ... and then I also do a whole whack of comfort reading, which is when I go back and re-read my, my precious things from time past" (RS1 transcript, p. 6).

Maureen described her first romance novel purchase this way:

> I actually ... I bought the first *Bridgerton* book after watching the first series and that one I was like I have to go buy this in the romance section? I've never bought a single book in the romance section in my life! It's like ... so that was kind of fun. (RS1 transcript, p. 6)

In relating this anecdote, Maureen demonstrated the synergy in consumerism and the consumption of media forms when a televised adaptation inspires a book purchase or familiarity with a book encourages television viewing. This crossover also extends further into the broader retail market with product placements in shows and/or books that may inspire purchases along with the plethora of ancillary collateral materials that companies produce or experiences they develop for fans, new and existing, to buy and/or to savour. With the research study, Maureen was able to follow up her initial exposure to book one and season one of *Bridgerton*. As a salon member, she joined the group and took advantage of the opportunity to read and discuss *Viscount,* the second book of the Julia Quinn series and the foundation for the second season of the Netflix adaptations.

In contrast to Helen, Elif, Paola, and Maureen, Sara, Amna, Gina, and Vicki identified themselves as experienced romance readers. Sara for example noted that she was reading a lot of romance in the process of completing her undergraduate degree because "I like romance it's like you can just read it, if anything, kind of thing sometimes ... um ... so it's just kind of quick" (RS1 transcript, p. 4). Amna, whose first language is Arabic, had gravitated towards romance novels as a teenager and she had diversified her reading selections over time to include gay, lesbian, and paranormal romances (RS1 transcript, pp. 7-8). Gina has always been a voracious reader and her favourite novelist growing up was Stephen King although she also devoured romance fiction and especially Regency romances (RS1 transcript, pp. 8-9). Gina's reading pattern had changed over time, and as she explained, "As I got older, I read less generally, but now I'm back to it and I don't read much romance anymore" (RS1 transcript, p. 9). Vicki, who

was unable to attend the first reading salon, detailed her familiarity with the genre when she joined the group for RS2. It was Elif, another reading salon member, who solicited this background information when she asked:

> Elif: Can I ask Vicki just because we talked a lot about it last time. Do you, do you read a lot of romance? By like your own ...
>
> Vicki: I have done, yeah. For sure. Yeah. I'm an equal opportunity reader. [Group laughs.] And I did start obviously years and years ago. I read a lot of romance. That's what my mom read; you know. When I was thirteen. Um, so, yeah, I've had a, a wide variety [interjection – okay (Elif)] of romance for sure.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 26)

In her answer, Vicki also showed how the interest in romance fiction can result from exposure to the genre through the reading habits of older members in a household. It is an inter-generational link that underscores the collective sisterhood among women who read romance fiction, a sisterhood that spans decades if not centuries.

Among the reading salon members, Sara and Amna, both in their early twenties, were the youngest. They are both prolific readers, the most familiar with contemporary romance fiction, and active in their interactions with online book communities. They are citizens of the digital literary sphere (Murray 2015 & 2018). When the conversations about reality and fantasy first emerged, it was Sara who responded to my question about the continuing popularity of romance fiction among women and its impact on their understandings of relationships (RS1 transcript, p. 23). In referencing trends online, she offered this glimpse into her experiences and into BookTok (the book world on TikTok):

> I see a lot of BookTok people, and they always talk about this ... and how it sets up young women for incredibly unrealistic expectations of romance and of men ... So, it's interesting that, because I have been reading not like only romance like it's fantasy or whatever, but with romantic elements for like my whole ... like since I was 10 until now ... And I feel like it has impacted my real ... like expectations of what romance is in like actual life ... (RS1 transcript, p. 23)

While Sara talked about the impact of romance fiction and the expectations it fosters, Helen was the first to show that the relationships readers have to the genre, and to HEA-HFN narratives, changes with time and experience. She said, "I think before ... yeah, um ... romance was like definitely an escape. Now I have to keep telling myself like there's nobody coming for you. Like you have to do everything yourself, take care of yourself, so

..." (RS1 transcript, p. 24). Helen's remarks outlined another kind of loss, the loss of romance as a panacea for life's trials and tribulations. She distinguished between the romantic fantasy of finding the one person who will take care of you and learning that one needs to discover the wherewithal to take care of oneself.

The group's discussions over the course of the three reading salons, about the fantasy of romance fiction and the reality of life, illuminated the force of what I think of as the coupling imperative. That is, the societal expectation that individuals, no matter their gender or sexual identity, pursue a pairing, which HEA-HFN narratives position as the pursuit of one's own true love, soul mate, or other half. This hegemonic discourse of needing a partner to be complete exists in tension with the feminist concept of a strong independent single woman. The group began the process of mapping this kaleidoscope of social expectations, life experiences, and individual identity approximately forty-minutes into the RS1 discussion. Elif demonstrated the clash of these multi-directional centrifugal forces when she said:

> ... in terms of like relationships and stuff. Like I feel like I'm very happy single gal ... um ... and I like it that way. Because like I've been burned in the past, and like I've realized that I'm much better off on my own, which is great. But some ... it's so hard to not get what society is expecting of you, like you are single ... it will happen someday. Like it's so hard to get that out of my brain and I'm so good at it most of the time to be like, oh, block it out, like you are actually happy. (RS1 transcript, p. 27)

Elif elaborated her views of the impact reading *Viscount* had had on her emotions as a reader, and on the perception of herself as a woman as follows:

> So, fuck what other people are asking for you, but when I read stuff like this, like twice I cried through this book. Not because there was something sad, just because I was like I'm alone. Like when I walk around during the day, I'm like a bad ass woman I'm like I'm fine being on my own and like it's, not that I think, deep down, I do want it, I think it's just because, like it just reinforces society's pressure of like I should have a partner. So, I think [indistinct comment] yeah, I don't know if this ... I hope it doesn't happen to everyone, but I think it's just there's so many there's so many reminders, and when you get ... I think it's also because it's a book. I get hooked. And I ... I ... it was a page-turner I really thought. So, I couldn't even put it away when I felt myself getting sad. (RS1 transcript, p. 27)

As Elif outlined, one can be a "badass" and happily single but reading a romance novel elicits feelings of deficiency and insufficiency. However, she was also the one to

demonstrate a form of resistance and refusal to the potential decimation romance fiction can have on one's confidence in being solo and not part of a duo. On the one hand, in reaction to reading romance fiction, Elif's feeling was that "I'm so unhappy! I'm single" followed by the epiphany when "you wake up and you're like, 'Pfft, I love being single!'" (RS2 transcript, p. 6). She reiterated this point later when she compared her reading of *Viscount* for RS1 and her reading of *Seven Days* for RS2. She said,

> I feel like because this one was more realistic compared to like our lives than *Bridgerton* was ... there were so many, um, obstacles that were more relatable. So ... the whole, 'Oh, when I read romance, I feel so lonely about ... sad about being single,' came in this book with the same portion of, 'Oh my God I'm so happy I'm single!' which was really nice ... Because in *Bridgerton* it was, it was a lot of sadness because it was so unrealistic that I only saw, 'Oh, we love each other', 'Oh, great sex' whatever. Where this one, it was like, 'Oh, I could not for the life of me go through that.' I don't want to. (RS2 transcript, p. 91)

In part, Elif's remarks outline a grown woman's ability to revel in one's status as uncoupled and to shake off the feelings of being *less than* because of reading romance fiction. However, she also raised an interesting distinction about being able to do so relative to a novel's setting. The closer the story is to the real world of today, the one in which one has already developed and negotiated a sense of self, the easier it is to moderate or modulate one's responses to the content. The proximity of a contemporary story mitigates the force of the fantasy that gains its strength, in part, from distance and the greater difficulty of seeing oneself in another place and time.

In terms of romance fiction raising expectations about love, romance, and relationships, reading salon members tended to accept that the genre has an impact on women and especially younger women. To Elif, there was a new culprit that influenced young women's efforts to fashion their identities relative to expectations. As she explained:

> ... like not that this conversation should go into this, but I don't think like literary works are the problem anymore, I think, like social media is the problem for how girls define themselves. And like, what expectations, they think there are for them. [Sighs.] Very tragic. (RS1 transcript, p. 47)

To Elif, it is not only that social media has an impact on women's identities and expectations, but that such an impact is "very tragic". However, Amna presented an alternative facet to consider when she stated,

> I don't have a relationship ... right now. I don't even think of it, you know, but I do believe that if I ever like ... got into a relationship, I would have high expectations because of these books and I don't think that's like a bad thing necessarily. I would just stay single! ... I don't think that's a bad thing! Like I can get a dog! (RS1 transcript, p. 48)

As for her romantic aspirations, Sara noted:

> But now I think, as far as like romance goes ... romance books are just - because I'm also single - so it's just kind of like a way to you know put myself in something that hopefully maybe one day will happen to me ... um ... And I definitely have that same feeling as like I don't feel like there's something missing, but everyone tells me that there's something missing that I don't have a boyfriend so, my life, of course, is not as fulfilled, as it should be (RS1 transcript, p. 49)

With these comments, Sara reoriented the implications of romance reading away from feeling loved or search for love to feeling insufficient, incomplete, and unfulfilled.

Reading salon members had different perspectives on whether women readers interpreted HEA-HFN narratives as blueprints for romance. At various times over the course of the three meetings, they would reflect on the question in relation to their own lives and experiences. In doing so, they clarified that one's real-life relationships experiences and the duration of those relationships, altered their relationship to the material they read. The following exchange is one such demonstration of this dialectic relationship between life as lived and romance as read:

> Elif: I never thought about this until you said it. But I always vision myself in it? Like, and then I would like fall asleep at night being like oh, we're holding hands. Like whatever. Like that's how much I'd vision myself in it.
>
> Helen: I agree.
>
> Elif: I don't do that at all anymore.
>
> Helen: I never noticed that, but now that you say that. It was always me, but now I can like separate it and I, you know, read it as Kate ...
>
> Elif: Yeah ... exactly. It was Kate. It wasn't like oh, Elif and Anthony
>
> Paola: The vibe [?] lets you like be critical to like oh Kate like what ... It's not me right now. It's Kate. I can take a step back and realize that it's fiction right, so you don't get so ... your brain into it, that you want to like mimic it in your real life.

> Elif: Because I feel it, it kinda shows how far we've all come ... Like we, we don't **need** that anymore. I think that's really nice.
>
> (RS1 transcript, pp. 55-56)

Amna's reading of romance seemed to entail a greater disassociation from the content or less of a need to insert herself in the narrative. As she explained,

> When I watched *Twilight*, yeah, I did want that. But, as I said last time, I wanted that for an alternative kinda version of myself. Like when I ... like ... I'm about to sleep and then I imagine a scenario, right? It's that kind of version of myself. I imagine being in a romance and not really myself. (RS2 transcript, pp. 96-97)

Whatever Sara's views were when the reading salon group first convened, they followed an interesting trajectory. Her approach to romance fiction and the relationship expectations it establishes became more nuanced. This evolution was clear in the following exchange with Elif at the end of RS3:

> Sara: Um, I think I kind of came into this thinking that everyone would love romance. So, it was kind of like, "Oh, people don't like this?" Um, but it was interesting to see, hear your different perspectives about romance because it's always been something that like even when it's just YA and they're like kissing and nothing else, um, it's always been part of my life and it's always been something that ... I've wanted and like ... felt that I needed in life, and that I would only be fulfilled when I get that. But ...
>
> Elif: Romance or ... in ... like ...
>
> Sara: Romance.
>
> Elif: Book or in life?
>
> Sara: In my life.
>
> Elif: Okay.
>
> Sara: Yeah, so like hearing other perspectives, hearing ... like your life, where you're happy being single and like don't want to necessarily pursue romance, it's just like ... It feels so rewarding to hear that because I've always been taught that you have to find this, this has to be your efforts all the time ...
>
> Elif: From your books!

> Sara: Yeah! And like ... that's not to say that I'll stop reading them, but it's like nice to know that there's other alternatives and ... like a happily-ever after is different for everyone and it doesn't necessarily involve a man. Um, so yeah. I feel like that's a good place to end.
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 114-115)

As this exchange shows, understanding one's romantic aspirations as optional rather than destined emerges from the sharing of various perspectives based on life experience and one's orientation to alternate social models. For the group, this also raised interesting questions about role models and representations.

This conversational thread emerged during RS2, when I used a question prompt that had worked well in the first reading salon. I asked, "If you were able to converse with the [*sic*] character in the story, who would you choose to talk to, and why, and what advice would you give them?" (RS2 transcript, p. 80). Whereas Newton the dog was the first response to the question in RS1, which was greeted with laughter from the group, the responses to the same question in RS2 focused on the human characters. The character Elif said she would like to speak with was Cece. In *Seven Days*, Cece is Eva's, the female protagonist's, friend. She is also Eva's editor and the editor for Shane, the male protagonist. As a career woman, Cece is enmeshed in New York City's publishing industry and occupies an elite position in the book world there. When Elif said she would opt to speak with Cece, Paola replied, "I want Cece to be my friend!" (RS2 transcript, p. 81). Paola's admiration was, in part, based on Cece's professional success and her characterization in the novel as strong, independent, and fun. On the other hand, Cece's relationship with her husband is what drew Elif's interest and piqued her curiousity. As Elif explained,

> ... I think it's so interesting and rare and especially in a romance book to represent a couple that have no passion. But they love each other. [Interjection – "yeah" (Sara)]. It's ... I thought that one scene, where he's like fixing the table, and she was like busy with her planning or whatever, was so cute because it was so evident that there was no ... passion and in-loveness. It was just like ... a little stroke on the back because we love each other as friends, but there's no [sound effect to signify attraction]. (RS2 transcript, p. 81)

In the discussion that followed, Elif characterized Cece's relationship as "settling" (RS2 transcript, p. 81). This portrayal was one instance where opinions among reading salon

members diverged. For example, Paola's response to Elif's statement about Cece settling was as follows:

> But I don't think that's settling. I do think that like this idea of like this hot passion marriage ... Well, I haven't been married for that long, but like ... I don't think that is real. Like I think with time it does become a pat on the back and I love you … (RS2 transcript, pp. 81-82)

The fault line here was between someone who was younger and single, and someone, not much older, who was married. In reference to Cece and her husband, Paola also liked the representation of "a couple that doesn't have children" (RS2 transcript, pl. 87). Similarly, Sara appreciated,

> I feel like what .... maybe what CeCe and her husband have is like they both ... they ... maybe ... were super happy at one point, and then they became their own people again because I feel like this book ... they ... Eva and Shane become kind of one with the typical romance trope, but I feel like this relationship shows that you can have your separate lives but still be a couple. And I think that's really great because most romance books don't have anything like that and they just kind of like do everything together and they never have their separate lives. But Cece clearly does. She like watches Audre [Eva's daughter] a lot. Like she has her own life and her own career, and I feel like that's a really great thing ... that was represented. (RS2 transcript, p. 87)

Paola summarized the representation of Cece's married life as "That's like real life, right?" (RS2 transcript, p. 83) and Sara appreciated the way this relationship offered an alternate representation of an intimate relationship, one in which a woman could be her own person and yet still be part of a couple.

Another feature of romance novels that drew critical remarks from the reading salon members was the epilogue that authors often use to show the happily matched couple in the future to reiterate that the love they have found is true and destined. It never dies, it never fades away. The debate among the group expanded on this dissonance between the ever-passionate state of romance in novels and the reality of long-term relationships as women know them to be. This tension between the eternal desire that is central to HEA-HFN narratives, the reality of people's experiences, and the expectations of those searching for love unfolded in exchanges such as this one:

> Paola: ... at the same time I think it's like setting realistic expectations because I do feel like nowadays, like most people go into relationships thinking it's going to be like this endless ...

Maureen: Hot and heavy all the time.

Paola: ... Bridgerton passion …

Elif: Because we read that!

Paola: ... and it's not. And then oh then I don't feel the same for this person then let's call it quits. Right?

Vicki: Yeah. Exactly.

Amna: Then there's the other end of the spectrum. Married people are always like ... I dunno ... represented as hating each other.

(RS2 transcript, pp. 83-84)

Amna's cautionary note at the end captured one of the failings in fictional representations of love, romance, and marriage. As she discerned, representations of marriage tend to focus on a polarity of extremes and women readers continue to imbibe representations that do not fairly, nor accurately, capture the reality of relationships. Vicki summarized the impact on women readers when she said, "It puts a lot of pressure on us to, to find the love of our life," and Maureen agreed with Vicki's conclusion when she added, "The one. The one. Yes" (RS2 transcript, p. 84). As to the truth of coupledom in real-life, Maureen characterized this, based on her own experience of a long and enduring marriage, as "it's okay forever" (RS2 transcript, p. 86), and in recognition of the materiality of relationships, Gina added, "practically ever after" (RS2 transcript, p. 26).

As the various conversations between reading salon members showed, the dominant feature of HEA-HFN narratives is the fantastical notion of the heterosexual, monogamous, hot-for-life relationship. With this as the foundation for the story's arc, the result is that romance fiction promotes unrealistic representations of relationships between men and women, or couples generally. It also forecloses representations of alternative social arrangements and tends to erase from view single people who are thriving on their own. This led to another discussion during the third reading salon about polyamory, another type of intimate relationship that is not celebrated in mainstream romance media and not depicted positively in various cultural outputs. Polyamory, in the abstract, intrigued reading salon members and it was a topic that some of them knew about in more detail. Sara, for example, shared her knowledge when she referenced a university course to begin this dialogue:

> Sara: Um and like in that class we talked a lot about like biologically ... like a lot of animals have a lot of different partners, whatever. And they don't usually, don't stick to one ... animal or whatever. Um ...so I think it is Christianity related because ... or religious-related because ... [interjection – "yeah, different religions" (Gina)] they don't want you to stray from male-female. That ... like at the beginning ...
>
> Elif: God forbid!
>
> Sara: ... they certainly don't want you to be ... have multiple people that you ... are intimate with or whatever. So, it's interesting cuz ...
>
> Helen: Yeah. I took "The Psychology of Sexuality", I think. And I think they **did** say like people in polyamorous relationships are much happier than monogamous because ... they're not focused ... like ... they're not putting all of their needs on one person. They can go to each different person to meet a little bit of their needs, so it's not as ...
>
> Sara: That's interesting, yeah.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 31)

Elif elaborated that, "I think there's also um ... an aspect of if you're in a successful polyamorous relationship, you trust each other so much more than in a monogamous relationship" (RS3 transcript, p. 32). In addition to trust, Helen, emphasized being "super-communicative" and Elif emphasized "self-confidence" (RS3 transcript, p. 32) as other factors that were key to the success of polyamorous relationships. Helen also explained the concept of compersion, which she said is "when you're in a polyamorous relationship, you feel pleasure for your partner having pleasure with someone else. Like having a good time, you know. Like happy for them kind of thing" (RS3 transcript, p. 32). While reading salon members were pleased to learn about polyamory and the benefits it may entail, they also noted the obstacles to considering it as an option for themselves. Elif said, "Polyamory is a beautiful thing. ... I hate that somehow, I've been constructed into not ... liking it," to which Helen replied, with a soft laugh, "Yeah" (RS3 transcript, p. 33). This insight highlighted something that reading salon members felt was true. Women's views on intimate relationships are constructed in such a way as to preclude the appeal of and familiarity with alternate social arrangements. This stands in contrast to the reality that many women may pursue different ways of being, whether than means being on their own, adopting polyamory, or structuring yet another type of living arrangement. Despite any evidence that exists, in romance fiction, the dominant narratives are still the dominant narratives, and they have been so forever.

6.1.1. Summary

In considering the background information reading salon members shared regarding their reading habits, practices, and tastes, what women read when they are younger has an impact on their views of the world. It also became apparent in the group's discussions that romance reading may extend over a reader's lifetime and that the reaction to the content the reader absorbs shifts with time and experience. The negotiation between reader and reading material changes as a woman becomes more secure in her place in the world. Negotiating one's relationship to romance fiction and HEA-HFN narratives is an ongoing and everchanging transaction where one gives time to the reading and in return the reading feeds longings, hopes, and dreams. Romance fiction can serve as a substitute or stopgap measure as one searches for love, and it serves several purposes including the erotic. As a result, the group identified romance fiction as one of the tools in the toolkit of social construction that builds a woman's aspirations in relation to love, romance, sex, intimacy, and marriage. However, as a woman ages, she shifts her understanding of romance fiction away from being a blueprint for her future love life to accepting it as an entertaining fantasy. Being able to pull oneself out of the story, out of being the love object for the male protagonist, is evidence of a changing relationship to fiction and perhaps a more adult one. That is, if I were to use myself as an example, I would learn to read the story of *Viscount* not as the story of Reema and Anthony, as wish fulfillment, but read it as the story of Kate and Anthony as author Julia Quinn intended. Reading salon members, in their explorations and examinations of the texts and the topics, also underscored that romance fiction contributes to a context in which others may see a woman who is not partnered as not complete, and the unpartnered reader may see herself as unfulfilled.

In this context, being happily single or being the one who is not searching for true love, when measured against the drama of romance fiction, becomes a less desirable state. The challenge for women readers immersed in HEA-HFN narratives is to break the cycle of equating being single with being alone or being unloved or unlovable. It is a revelation when a woman learns to acknowledge and accept that partnering with one other person is not synonymous with being a better person or a whole person. Contributing to the continuing prominence of this dominant viewpoint is the dearth of role models for those who may choose to be single in a world designed for two, the lack of realistic relationship portrayals, and the absence of positive depictions of alternate social

arrangements and lifestyles. This perceived lack led to the interest reading salon members expressed in the character of Cece from *Seven Days* and her comfortable marriage. In this, reading salon members also highlighted the contrast between the aspirational ideal of HEA-HFN narratives, where incendiary passion lasts forever, and the reality of long-term relationships. Couples need to work at sustaining such relationships and, as the group members who were married or in long-term partnerships explained, passion occupies new spaces, characteristics, and values over time. Reading salon members also ascertained that the fantasy of romance fiction, which promises a woman that she will find a man to love, one who will take care of her, collides with the real-life learning that one needs to take care of oneself. The feminist ideals of empowerment and independence exact a cost because self-sufficiency has an isolating effect when the burden of life is seen to be one that a person carries on their own.

As Maureen noted, women learn to recognize that, in contrast to the romance-fuelled expectations of perpetual passion, the most reasonable standard for a long-term relationship is that "it's okay forever" (RS2 transcript, p. 86). Whatever the critiques and criticisms one may have of romance fiction, the appeal of the genre in part, and a large measure of its success is because, as Helen said, "It's all about the love" (RS2 transcript, p. 88). To expand on this notion, I would like to borrow from author Amanda Cross. In her mystery novel, *No Word from Winifred* (1986), the titular character writes in a journal, "Most people like to fit things into stories they already know; it makes them feel a bigger part of life than they are. … I think so many women keep diaries and journals in the hope of giving some shape to their inchoate lives" (p. 35). Amanda Cross is the pseudonym for Carolyn Heilbrun whose scholarship often addressed the social scripts for women's lives and especially those scripts that shaped women's ideas of love, romance, and identity (1993, 1997, 2003).

To Heilbrun, these social scripts constrained the potential of women's lives. When I reflect on what Winifred wrote down in her journal, I see another way to interpret the attraction of romance fiction. If romance fiction captures stories people already know, then fitting into romance fiction makes them bigger. That is, HEA-HFN narratives are aspirational and compensatory. A romance reader believes they will find love someday and in reading a romance fiction novel, they learn to see themselves as a candidate for love, which makes them part of a larger human experience. It adds purpose, significance, and meaning to their own personal journey in a world where each person

must strive to make sense of who they are, who they want to be, and what the trajectory of their life will be. However, even if romance fiction is all about the love, as well as the many fantasies that are structured around love and the pursuit of love, women readers still insist on authenticity and demand realism. As such, as I will discuss next, they frequently check the fantasy by applying healthy doses of reality.

6.2. HEA-HFN Narratives Contend with Reality Checks

Reading salon members spoke about perfection when they discussed healing and trauma, and I reviewed these conversations in Chapter 4. The same theme emerged again when the group discussed reality and fantasy, which framed fantasy as comprising ideals and capturing the idealized. In listening to the group's exchanges, it appeared that the process of reading HEA-HFN narratives involved engaging in that fantasy and yet somehow attempting to align it with reality. Not all authors satisfy this endeavour as Amna noted when she said, "some books really do balance the line between reality and fantasy" (RS2 transcript, p. 60). This highwire act of balancing the living of reality and the imagining of fantasy, for both authors and readers, was also reflected in the way reading salon members, in conversation, bounced between their observations about the content of a novel, their real-life experiences, and their knowledge about how the world operates. For example, when the group exchanged ideas about what is entailed in the notion of fixing one's partner, Helen reflected on her own relationship and shared these comments:

> Helen: ... like when you come together, you're both broken but we can be whole together. But now like in my relationships or whatever ... trying to get out of one and it's been six years ...
>
> Elif: Oh shit!
>
> Helen: So, it's dragging along. Anyways, I just constantly say to him, like you know we both have shit we need to work on, and like we need to be two wholes, so that when we do come together, we're like a superpower kind of thing.
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 24)

Elif, who offered Helen empathy with her interjection, elaborated on this sentiment when she added:

> I hate that phrase when people say my other half ... it's like what ... or like my better half even worse. What the fuck! You should be your whole half yourself. Just walking around half a person like ... it's really sad. (RS1 transcript, p. 24)

Elif's comments elicited group laughter, and in that group laughter, the women in the room indicated their support, expressed their identification with what was being said, and provided evidence of solidarity. As the conversations went on, the group's comments also displayed frustrations with the typical arc and tropes of HEA-HFN narratives and provided a perspective on readers' expectations. As Maureen noted, "Yes, this fantasy is not real life and everything, but it has to have that feeling ... of believability about it that I found missing a little bit in this one" (RS2 transcript, p. 60). Her comments were in reference to *Seven Days*, the book we discussed when we met for the second reading salon. During that session, the reading salon members applied their reality checks with more vigor, in part because the novel is a contemporary story in a contemporary setting and one that is much closer to the reality the women knew.

While reading salon members expressed their frustration with the typical story arc of HEA-HFN narratives, they also recognized, from very early on, that perfection is inherent in romance fiction. This perfection encompasses the quest for love, the successful outcome of finding that love, and the notion that the protagonists, who in themselves have flaws to overcome and traumas to address, will find love that lasts forever. Gina described this fantasy-perfection link during the first meeting when she said:

> It's really to do with selling a fantasy, which is perfection, which is that these two people form a union that is perfect, and nothing will ever tear them apart. You know that's to me is the essence I think as I'm thinking about it. It's the fantasy. It's the perfection and it's the idea that there's only one person for each of these people and they have found the one. (RS1 transcript, p. 14)

Although this characterization is a generalization about the romance fiction genre and does not consider if this attribute is inherent in other genres and media forms, Paola and Elif supported Gina's position. Paola said,

> I completely agree and the whole ... like we see a lot of books like this, of this idea of this just plain normal ordinary girl, who just happens to catch the eye of the most amazing bachelor of the time, right? Like *Twilight*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, like it happens over and over just selling this fantasy of, 'Oh yeah, you can be just the plainest woman ever and then some Prince Charming is going to come and sweep you away and that's how you get your happily ever after'. (RS1 transcript, p. 14)

Paola's comments also shift the emphasis from the typically idealized physical form of the female character to focus on the rescue element. In her view, the perfection of a love story is not beholden to the physical reality of the figures. Instead, it relies on the metaphysical power of love as salvation. Countering perfection with imperfection, as Elif noted, is one way to save the story from being so fantastical that it may not be believable. She singled out the epilogue to *Viscount* when she said:

> I wanted to add a point to your perfection idea because it made me think that I think there's a juxtaposition in in the prologue - epilogue that I read. With the perfection that makes, that actually supports the point even more because you know they put such an effort on the whole like 'Oh, mom and dad are playing these instruments and they're really bad at it, but like how cute that they do it anyway because they're so in love so it's okay'. And I thought that was very interesting with the whole perfection thing because like they made sure there was one point that wasn't perfect, which makes everything shine even more. (RS1 transcript, p. 15)

Elif's reference is to the original *Viscount* epilogue (Quinn, 2000/2015, p. 349) and not a second one that was added after author Julia Quinn responded to fan requests and composed second epilogues for all the novels in her *Bridgerton* series. As Elif pointed out in the passage quoted above, it is that scintilla of imperfection (Anthony plays the trumpet badly) in the perfect love that the protagonists have found (Anthony and Kate have overcome their personal traumas) that makes their love even more perfect (it lasts for not one, but two epilogues, and even after having four children).

As noted above, Paola used the phrase "plain normal ordinary girl" (p. 14) to summarize the underlying Cinderella-like theme she saw in stories of love and romance. While I did not pursue this line of questioning at the time, during RS1, I did seize the opportunity in RS3 to tackle the topic albeit from the other side of the gender binary. I asked about Red, the male protagonist in *Chloe Brown*:

RMF: Do you think that ... Do you think Red could have been an average looking guy ...

Sara: In this book?

RMF: Yeah.

Sara: No.

RMF: ... and it work?

Sara: I don't think so.

RMF: Why not?

Sara: I think he had to be like this shining knight, and the someone that's like ... I feel like Chloe would never imagine herself with him and that's why they had that like weird ...

Elif: Feud.

Amna: Yeah.

Sara: ... thing at the beginning. And then when she was like, "Oh wait, he's shirtless. He's kind of attractive." That's when she was like ...

Amna: Admired by everyone. Like all her sisters ...

Sara: Her sisters ...

Amna: ... do think he's hot.

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: Yeah. And you need that really like the perfect man ...

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: ... to like this girl who doesn't think anyone will ever love her, who has disabilities, who's Black, who's plus size. Like ... the ... of course the perfect man will want her. Like ... I'm saying sarcastically because [indistinct] of course in real life that is the case, but you know what I mean.

Amna: Then again if he was ugly, I think we would also find issue in that because it does sell that narrative that people who are like not skinny...

Elif: For sure.

Amna: ... who are Black, would also like settle for people who are not attractive because that's all they will find.

(RS3 transcript, pp. 70-72)

This exchange uncovers several dimensions that structure HEA-HFN narratives and the love fantasy they chronicle. In their discussion, reading salon members illustrated that even when authors present central characters who embody differences, the parameters of the story and the outcome expectations still support a status quo understanding of who is loved and who is lovable. As Sara concluded, "But I was going to add to that that they would never make an ugly main character in a romance book" (RS3 transcript, p. 72). Even in this, there are complexities to consider as Amna pinpointed when she introduced another gendered dynamic in these remarks:

> I want to mention one thing though. It's that like women are kinder ... like I don't think like any woman writer would actually write that a man is ugly and like people would consider it ... or she would consider it that, "Okay, he's ugly." We have to accept that he's ugly. No. I think women would find like the characteristics that are attractive in a certain person that isn't like conventionally attractive. Which isn't necessarily the case for men because the way they talk about women is very focused on specific like standards of beauty. But I don't think it's the same for men like ... But I do think it was repetitive the way he was ... it was stressed that he was so beautiful. (RS3 transcript, pp. 74-75)

Gina continued this thematic exploration and initiated a further exchange when she said:

> Gina: There's a whole trope in romance where there's a really bad ... not bad ... a flaw of some sort. Like so and so was in the war, the Napoleonic War and his face is gone. Or like ... not his face is gone, but do you know what I mean? Like ...
>
> Sara: Like a scar ...
>
> Gina: A big scar. Or ...
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Gina: You know ...
>
> Elif: Sexy.
>
> Sara: That's something that sets them apart.
>
> Amna: But that's a different genre.
>
> Gina: But ... it is a different genre and ... but then it becomes like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This love is soooo great ...

> Sara: That's like from *Blood and Ashes*. [Reference is to the novel *Blood and Ash* by Jennifer L. Armentrout]
>
> Gina: ... that it doesn't even matter.
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 75-76).

This echoes the Beauty and the Beast fairy tale trope, in which the mystical, healing power of love will conquer all and no matter the scarring on the physical form of a character, the part to love is what's inside a person. In an irreverent contribution, Helen wondered if any sort of physical deformity, wound, or scar was offset by the hero's personality or the substantive nature of his male genitalia (RS3 transcript, p. 76). In fact, she pointed to three compensatory factors that might serve to enhance a woman's ability to fall in love with a less idealized character: "C***, money, funny" (RS3 transcript, p. 76).

In contrast to the idea of a perfect match being a prerequisite to transformation, Amna talked about newer trends in the reading she had done. A prolific reader, and likely the one reading salon member most familiar with the diversity of contemporary romance fiction, including those written in a different language and featuring different sexual identities, Amna explained,

> I don't think like that kind of change is embedded in happily-ever-after. At least in the recent like romance books I've been reading. Like I've read *The Folk of the Air* trilogy [by Holly Black], it starts with *The Cruel Prince,* and at the end it showcases how they're both like still the same people, but they still have that happy ... happily-ever-after, at least maybe happy-for-now. Anyway, there wasn't that kind of imperfection or flaw in their character that they needed to like to overcome or something like that, or that the man had to change. I think it was actually, like them completing kind of each other. In ways, in ways that are healthy, you know because she displays like throughout the three books ... um ... masculine or traditionally masculine traits meanwhile he displays like more feminine traits so ... It was kind of refreshing in that kind of way, and I felt like that was a kind of reclamation [?] to happily-ever-after you know in ways that aren't like exactly healthy, but in ways that are realistic, even though it's like about fairies and so ... [Group chuckles] (RS1 transcript, p. 18)

While the fiction Amna described may not feature change as the desired outcome of a love match, it still predicates a process of completion. Elif was pleased to learn from Amna about these new perspectives and voiced her concerns as follows:

> I think the exact point you're making is like I think it's either or because I think the concept of like the imperfections in the character is that oh

> but when they come together, they're perfect and I think similar to like that like they're two halves, like two opposites, so not that they're imperfect, but the whole concept that when they come together, it was perfection. So, I think it's ... you're really right ... it's so refreshing that there's like new takes on it. But I think the whole romance thing's like you're only like complete and you're perfect when you're together. (RS1 transcript, pp. 18-19).

To Helen, who usually does not read romance novels, the question of reality and fantasy hinged on the quotidian nature of the characters and their lives rather than the idealized completion of self. As she explained, "... maybe because I imagine it has to ... like it's real ... Like I judge it more on it being so not realistic? Because romance is like usually, it's like people, normal, so I think that it should be realistic" (RS3 transcript, p. 17). While established romance readers may be willing to accommodate the fantasies entailed in the genre, readers such as Helen are less willing to accept the fantasy because a book about real people and their relationships ought to be life-like. She clarified this point when she added, "Maybe if it was already like a romance within a fantasy, I would be less critical of it" (RS3 transcript, p. 17). That is, if the world in a novel is other than this world, then it is easier to suspend critical judgments on the realism of its representations and the realistic nature of its plots.

Reading salon members also applied stringent reality checks to characters in the stories, their personal characteristics, and attributes. For example, during the second gathering to discuss *Seven Days*, there was a conversation about Audre, the precocious pre-teen daughter of protagonist Eva, whom Eva had named for Audre Lorde, the American feminist, author, poet, activist, and professor. At the reading salon, the group's exchange began with this observation from Sara:

> Sara: I felt like the daughter was trying to be what the author thought a young person was like, but it wasn't really what a young person is like. And it was just kind of ... I kind of cringed a couple times, and I was like this is not the youth.
>
> Elif: Because also they were trying to make her be like oh yeah like she's a standout very smart kid, but I was like it's a little bit extreme. Like she's twelve!
>
> Sara: It was just kinda too much and a little cringey, but ... it didn't like impact the story. It was just kind of like ugh, this kid again.
>
> Gina: Too precious, you know? Like ...

> Sara: Yeah. She wasn't that amazing. They're like she's the smartest person I've ever talked to and I'm like ... she's just on Snapchat. Like...
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Sara: Like. I dunno.
>
> Gina: Maybe that's why I liked it because our, my kid's like on Snapchat.
>
> (RS2 transcript, pp. 12-13)

While there were questions about the characterization of Audre, Gina indicated an avenue for identification in the practice the author had portrayed of a young person on social media and specifically as a user of the Snapchat platform.

Participants also applied reality checks to the way characters conducted themselves in the novels. For example, in *Seven Days* there is a key plot point when Shane, the male protagonist, abruptly leaves New York City and stops texting Eva even though they have been in regular communication since they reunited. Helen was first to highlight how this failed a reality check, and others supported her contention in the exchange that unfolded:

> Helen: You also can send a text while you're waiting for the airplane at the airport. [Interjection – multiple voices.]
>
> Vicki: That's what bothered me, yeah. He just disappears on her. Like come on!
>
> Gina: That was the worst part of it. That ...
>
> Vicki: So dumb.
>
> Sara: So frustrating ...
>
> Gina: ... that part really bugged me. [Interjection – multiple voices – indistinct – "so frustrating", etc.] Right there. Yeah.
>
> Elif: Especially because you've been texting so much, we know you have each other's numbers. [Interjection – multiple voices.]
>
> Paola: Yeah, and after going over and over, like I messed up, like I am here now, I am here now, I am here, and like, really? No text?
>
> (RS2 transcript, pp. 21-22)

For some in the group, there was a willingness to accommodate this behaviour as shown when Gina extended the conversation by saying:

> Gina: The reason I can forgive it is because it lasted not too long. It's like some romances the entire book …
>
> Vicki: … is that misunderstanding. [Interjection – multiple voices.] Drives me mental.
>
> Sara: So frustrating ...
>
> Elif: That's true.
>
> Gina: I read that and I'm like okay this is my pet peeve. I hate this, but luckily it lasted for like ... x number of pages and I was like, okay. [Interjection – multiple voices – indistinct.]
>
> Vicki: I agree, I agree.
>
> Elif: But also, the whole book ... the whole book was a misunderstanding. [Interjection – multiple voices – indistinct.]
>
> Vicki: And she believes him instead of it being ... [interjection – multiple voices – indistinct].
>
> Sara: On and on and on ...
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 22)

This segment of the discussion demonstrates how engaged the reading salon members were with the novels and with each other. It also highlights another feature that is central to romance fiction and that is the misunderstanding between the central pair of lovers. It opens the possibility that their love story is on the brink of failure, and resolving this crisis is often central to resolving the plot. It is the ultimate test of the relationship. This also reiterates the message that much of learning to love, in romance fiction or in women's fiction with romantic elements, is about learning to communicate. Although the drama of HEA-HFN narratives hinges on the risk that the pair's love will be thwarted, Maureen had a straightforward remedy: "Have conversation!" (RS2 transcript, p. 50). Vicki countered, to the merriment of the group, that if the characters in these stories did talk to each other, "We'd lose a whole genre" (RS2 transcript, p. 50).

At the core of the genre, which readers have not lost and which they do not seem to be in danger of losing, is the process of falling in love. This was another area where reading salon members contrasted their individual experiences, perspectives, and belief systems with the propensity of the genre to valorize and mythologize the process. In particular, the concept of love at first sight, and the predestined nature of finding one's

true love, was subject to the group's scrutiny. Elif explained her position when she spoke about *Seven Days* during the second reading salon:

> I think I kind of expected about the book, like the title, I thought it was more like ... metaphorical seven days in June? To actually see that it was oh ju ... simply seven days in June twice in fifteen years. I was a bit like okay well, maybe it didn't need to be that literal because I feel like this ... this whole idea with we need to fall in love so fast. Like very ... let's think about Romeo and Juliet like we're kids we're falling in love in like a matter of days, and we can't live without each other it's just so unrealistic. And I feel like for a very realistic book, this was just a little bit extreme of like ... we thought about each other for fifteen years even though we only knew each other at seventeen ... like seven days. (RS2 transcript, p. 13)

In referencing Shakespeare's classic, the one many students still study, as my son had to do in Grade 10, Elif's remarks point to the durability of tropes around romance and love. The echoes of *Romeo and Juliet* that she had discerned in her reading of *Seven Days* reflected authorial intent as Amna was able to explain. Amna had gleaned this from the additional material included in the e-book version she had read, and she shared this observation with the group:

> Amna: I think in the Q&A actually she [the author, Tia Williams] does say that she watched *Romeo and Juliet,* and she thought what if like they fall in love as teenagers, the couple falls in love as teenagers, but then they don't work out, but they don't die but then later as adults actually like are perfect for each other. I'm just wondering ...
>
> Elif: Did Tia say that?
>
> Amna: Yeah.
>
> Elif: Oh!
>
> Amna: Yeah. There's a Q&A at the end of, of the e-book version.
>
> Elif: Oh! [Interjection – multiple voices – "Oh really?", etc.]
>
> Amna: I was wondering if ...
>
> Sara: I didn't even read that.
>
> Amna: ... she like stuck to that idea and didn't want to change it.
>
> Elif: Okay.
>
> Amna: And that's why it didn't flow.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 62)

This dialogue also shows the curiousity readers have about the relationship between authors and the stories they write. In this case, learning about the author's intent through the question-and-answer material the publisher had provided helped the readers speculate about the impact of the authorial choices Tia Williams made and the resulting shortcomings they had identified in the narrative.

In terms of *Seven Days*, even Amna, a seasoned reader of romance fiction and someone who will accept the fantasy of a love narrative, scoffed at the gap between the time the protagonists meet as teens at high school, and their reacquaintance as adults fifteen years later. While she appreciated that the author was aiming for "a soul mate kind of thing" (RS2 transcript, p. 14), Amna could not accept that neither Eva nor Shane would have found someone else to love on a permanent basis — Eva is divorced — in the intervening time. Similarly, Helen said,

> I feel it wasn't very real, realistic in that like that passion that they would have had at the beginning, because they were high and drunk the whole time! [Helen laughs – multiple voices in the background assenting.] Like how are you supposed to remember everything? And then you don't, literally don't talk for fifteen years. Like you're going to be over it. I'm ... I'm sorry. (RS2 transcript, pp. 15-16)

Despite her reservations and her resistance to the story's structure, Amna acknowledged the lure. As she said, "It's romantic. It's romantic, but at the same time it does make you feel like it's a bit ridiculous" (RS2 transcript, p. 14). The group's criticisms also led them into a debate about the story's ending and the nature of its outcome. This exchange of ideas started when Paola remarked on her dissatisfaction with the book. She said:

> Paola: When I was reading this, I was like this makes no sense. It was just so fast at the end. Like, oh yeah. And like the set up in the restaurant, it was like so forced after all of it. [Interjection – multiple voices – "yeah", etc. – indistinct comments.] Seven days in June, [claps, washing her hands of it] it's done. Like let's keep to it, so ...
>
> Sara: The epilogue wasn't ... it didn't even seem like an epilogue. It just seemed like another chapter.
>
> Paola: Another chapter. [Interjection – multiple voices.] Why make it an epilogue if it's two weeks after, right? What's the point?
>
> Elif: And the next day. The next day ...
>
> Sara: I'm like okay, we get it.

Elif: Time has passed.

Paola: And they talk every day.

Sara: And they fell in love. Whatever. Yeah.

Amna: It was forced, yeah. It didn't feel like a real happy ending.

Elif: No.

Gina: It felt like a happily-for-now ending.

Elif: Exactly.

Gina: And then they kinda did the end ...

Elif: Yeah. [Amna in the background – "Exactly."]

Gina: ... to make it sort of ...

Vicki: Wrapped it up.

Paola: Like the ever after. Yeah.

(RS2 transcript, pp. 14-15)

For discerning readers, such as the members of the reading salon, the best efforts of authors to present HEA-HFN narratives will be insufficient if the reality checks readers apply to the story makes the fantasy world of an ideal love and a destined match seem less real or not real enough.

In addition to reality checks on the ethereality of romance, the reading salon members also applied reality checks to the representations of the physical in the novels. As I discussed in the chapter on sex, shame, and security (Chapter 5), the group critiqued the portrayal of sex in romance fiction when they considered it in relation to what they knew to be women's experiences of physical intimacy. They also addressed this issue on the conceptual level, and they were quite indignant at the way this genre valorizes and mythologizes heterosexual. Elif, for example, said:

> Elif: I think it's just ... it's such a male poi-per ... it's such a male point of view that, 'Oh, sex is always great for a woman'. Like, oh, and the fact ... didn't she ... didn't she have an orgasm the first time they had sex? Like ...
>
> Sara: Every time.

> Elif: Who the fuck? I'm sorry, I'm really apolo ... I don't know if we're allowed to swear here. [Group laughs]
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 36).

The imagery of perfect sex also provides a foundation for the fantasy of the perfect union. It is another way that the genre reiterates and reinforces the message of wholeness and completeness through coupling. Perhaps, though, Amna administered the ultimate reader reality check when she said, "I don't believe in happily-ever-after in real life either" (RS3 transcript, p. 29). In a similar vein, Elif asserted, "I also think everyone breaks up at some point. I'm sorry" (RS3 transcript, p. 25). Although the group chuckled in response, Elif felt the need to include an apology at the end of her statement to mitigate the impact of what she had said. She knew that introducing this reality into her analysis undermined the fantasy that the others may have wanted to keep in their world of possibilities. This awareness underscores the powerful hold HEA-HFN narratives have on the real lives of women and on the lives of their imaginations. It is this longing for the promise of everlasting love that Sara captured when she declared, "I want to believe!" (RS3 transcript, p. 29).

6.2.1. Summary

Readers of romance fiction will have parameters of realism that they apply to the novels they read, whether as ardent fans (as Amna, Vicki, Sara, and Gina are and/or were) or as new consumers (as Paola, Helen, Elif, and Maureen were). These reality checks demonstrate that while women readers may get lost in the fantasy of everlasting love, the maps they use to find their way through the narrative is based on what they know or perceive to be true about life. Amna, in the contributions she made during the reading salons, demonstrated the sophistication of readers as they toggle between fantasy and reality, and the multiple worlds and interpretations that result from interweaving the two. However, within that acceptance of multiplicities, the reading salon members showed that there must be an internal logic to the world-building that authors do. As such, when Amna talked about another series of books that she had read about fairies, she still talked about ways that the narratives were real or realistic even though these were stories of supernatural beings in supernatural settings.

The discussions among the reading salon members also reflected the immersive experience of fiction reading. As such, reading a novel is like living alongside another person, and watching other lives unfold all from an omniscient perspective. Even though readers may occupy an imaginative space, it is from this space that they assess every element of the story, from the characters to the plot, to the setting, to the conduct of the characters, and so on according to the criteria that is most real to them — their own experience and knowledge. Thus, if characters in a contemporary novel text one another, then a reader will apply the texting protocols they are familiar with, as reading salon members did, to the texting experiences the author includes in the story. This is a way readers test the narrative logic and if it satisfies the rubric they have created, then they will overlook other shortcomings in the tale.

Another feature that members of the group valued and used to forgive or overlook the flaws in characterization, plot, and/or other narrative shortcomings is the quality of the writing. Good writing is always a reward, and it becomes a bargaining chip in the reader's negotiation of what they have read and how they feel about what they have read. In romance fiction, the other key satisfier is the fantasy of the everlasting love that one finds, fights for, and secures. As a result, the most significant resistance reading salon members expressed in relation to the HEA-HFN narratives they read were their own real-life experiences of and beliefs in the impermanence of love. Perhaps in this, the group's discussion also revealed why so many women continue to read romance fiction. Despite the experience and knowledge of the ephemeral nature of love, it is the magic of believing in the potential of permanence that is enthralling. It is this promise and projection that gives writing the power to shape and influence views and perspectives on what is a paramount expectation in women's lives. Reading romance fiction is a conditioned act: one that is conditioned on accepting fantasy and letting go, the greatest extent possible, the hold on reality. The question that arises then is how much does accepting the fantasy of HEA-HFN change one's perspective on what to expect from reality and whether this trade off poses risks to women readers.

6.3. Women Readers Use Harm and Entertainment to Frame Debates About Romance Fiction

Reading salon members, from the start, identified hierarchies in reading material, distinguishing between genres, and delineating various uses that the activity and the

content served. Paola, for example, introduced herself to the group and addressed several of these points as follows:

> Paola: And thinking about like reading patterns and something that I have noticed that has happened to me lately is that when it comes to novels, I have relied more into audio books and, if I have to read, I will actually choose to read nonfiction like for actual physical copies because also like I live in Vancouver and the apartments are very small, so I have to choose like what actual physical books I want in my space. So, I tend to like prioritize that space with nonfiction because those to me are the kind of books that I might go back to, and you know I read them and highlight them and it's kind of like a learning process to me and novels is more of enjoyment when I'm in the bus I can like just have my Audible. That's how it's been going on for the last [indistinct].
>
> RMF: So, you, so Paola just to follow up on one thing there. So, for you nonfiction you feel is your path to learning and fiction is your path to enjoyment …
>
> Paola: Relax.
>
> RMF: Relax.
>
> Paola: Yes, I don't have to take it so serious it's just if I'm not really paying attention, it's not like it's not as … I don't want to say important, but it's not as riveting as nonfiction that I can get something out of nothing you can't get that from, from a novel.
>
> RMF: Right.
>
> Paola: Yes, it's just something in my mind that maybe I had never even put into words until this [research study]. It is what it is.
>
> (RS1 transcript, pp. 3-4)

In her remarks, Paola separated the uses and functions of fiction versus nonfiction, and demonstrated the way her context influenced her reading habits. The reality of a small apartment dictated whether she opted for a physical copy of a book, and technology facilitated her reading because she could read through listening in the different spaces and places she occupied daily.

Paola presented nonfiction reading as a way to learn and fiction reading as a way to relax and reading salon members also discussed hierarchies within fiction itself. In terms of romance fiction, the group members identified that the relative status of the genre within the hierarchies of fiction was based on its perceived value in addition to its recognized function as providing enjoyment. In doing so, they contended and grappled

with the stigmatization of romance fiction. As Sara explained, “Because I feel like there’s nothing of, nothing of worth in books like this. It’s what people think” (RS3 transcript, p. 88). Her comments were met with a supportive “yeah” from both Elif and Gina even before she had finished her sentence (RS3 transcript, p. 88). Gina concurred that others often dismissed the genre because, in her words, “Because it’s escapism and like if you’re ... you know ... you know ... if you’re ... if you’re in my circle you should be reading ... feminist fiction” (RS3 transcript, p. 88). Gina used the phrase feminist fiction to contrast romance fiction with other novels and to capture the *lesser than* value others may place on romance fiction. As Elif noted, “But it’s the exact same as what Eve [*sic*] said in the, in *Seven Days in June*. Because she didn’t ... like ... she felt embarrassed writing it. So, I think it’s the same, it’s the exact same for the reader” (RS3 transcript, p. 88). In *Seven Days*, Eva, the main character, writes paranormal romance novels for the mass market and is embarrassed to do so even though that creative output has been the foundation for her publishing success. As Elif observed, the characterization of what the fictional author felt in the story about her own work mirrored the way real-life readers feel — or are made to feel — about reading the romance fiction that they enjoy.

To reading salon members, this stigmatization of romance fiction was nested in a historical reality that devalues women’s interests, inclinations, and inspirations. Amna, an English major with a minor in GSWS, offered these comments, receiving vocal support from Sara, a double major in English and GSWS:

> Amna: And like historically like women’s interests are considered inferior.
>
> Sara: And worthless. Yeah.
>
> Amna: Yeah. And I think romance books fall into that. Like I read so many romance books that are so well written like even, I don’t know, better than the classics and people like wouldn’t believe that.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Amna: Because they don’t have that idea. Because ... it’s something that women like that they read for fun so, it must be that it’s inferior.
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 88-89)

Reading salon members also noted the otherness and othering of romance fiction even between the three books we had read and discussed. As Sara noted, “I think it [*Seven Days*] also technically is fiction because I got it in the fiction section versus the romance

section. ... Which is where this book [*Chloe Brown*] is and the Bridgerton book [*Viscount*]. Yeah" (RS3, p. 18). This in one way that the boundaries between fiction, women's fiction, and romance fiction are reinforced, monitored, and potentially policed in public because even in bookstores, romance novels are shelved in their own section.

Despite the negative public perceptions of romance fiction, reading salon members were clear that reading in this genre, or in fiction more broadly, is something they enjoy. At one point during the second reading salon, there was a ripple reaction of solidarity following this contribution from Vicki:

> Vicki: It's entertainment.
>
> Gina: It is entertainment.
>
> Vicki: Sheer entertainment. That's why I ...
>
> Maureen: It's like feel-good stuff, right?
>
> Gina: It's like a good sci-fi instead of romance.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 95)

Gina's last comment was to clarify that romance novels portray relationships not as they are, but as fantasy, which here she equates to science fiction. The group's consensus during the second reading salon was that reading romance fiction was entertainment. Later, during the third reading salon, Amna reiterated a similar sentiment when she said, "Like, when I read, I really want to read something that I enj-, enjoy that's like ... the main goal for me" (RS3 transcript, p. 11). Gina emphasized this point again as the discussion about *Chloe Brown* progressed:

> Gina: Like there's a role for entertainment. I sit and watch Netflix and I don't always watch some sort of arthouse film, right? Like I think there's a role for entertainment.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Elif: Escapism as well.
>
> Gina: And there's nothing wrong with that. Absolutely not.
>
> Sara: And you can still critique it. Yeah.
>
> Gina: Exactly! And you can still critique it and you can still escape into it. And so, I think ... there's a lot of people in the world, there's a lot of social media, there's a lot of content and when something ... and we

> have lots of stress in our lives, and I feel like ... Escapist might be, might be a different genre. Like we, I might escape also into sci-fi or something, right? But that's why I think it's popular. I think it's easy to read, I think it's compelling ... it's sort of page turn-ery. And we ... we all need that. There's certainly nothing wrong with it.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 63)

In these remarks there is also a sense of defensiveness, of having to justify why enjoying this genre of reading is permissible. Echoes of this need to assert the acceptability of romance fiction emerged, too, when Elif reiterated:

> Elif: And it probably feeds a little bit into like the whole housewife thing of like, 'Oh, you have so much time on your hands to sat at home reading your romance novels.' Because like that's all you can imagine happiness is. Like I think a lot of that plays into like an old fashioned ... and like because we're all like ... badass feminists now, we're like, 'Oh well, we should be better than this.' Which is like ... obviously not ...
>
> Sara: You like what you like.
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Elif: You like what you like, and it doesn't mean we're any less intellectual just because we read this. It doesn't mean we have, don't have ambition just because we read this.
>
> Helen: Exactly.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 89)

In this exchange, reading salon members demonstrated a desire to emphasize that women can enjoy romance fiction and do not need to suspend their critical faculties to do so. Nor does reading romance imply a lack of ambition. However, Elif, in highlighting the imagined self-talk of "being better than this," shows how women internalize standards of taste.

In their conversations, reading salon members also associated reading romance fiction with comfort. To Gina, that comfort stemmed in part from the repetitive nature of the stories. As she said,

> So, I've read them all, but so long ago, but yeah, they're all the same. They're all comfort. [Group laughter.] There's no ... It's comfort reading because there's absolutely nothing that goes wrong in these books, right? (RS1 transcript, p. 9)

Here, Gina named the ultimate fantasy embodied in romance fiction. The fantasy where nothing goes wrong, and the outcome is guaranteed. This fantasy also links to the idea of escape, an escape from reality, which the group felt was a key element that appealed to readers. In RS1, Amna was the first to use the word escape when she remarked:

> But then again people do read for these unreachable fantasies. They want to escape the reality so of course they're going to you know find or look for these romances that do not relate at all to their own lives yeah, so I will understand why someone would read a happily ever after. (RS1 transcript, p. 20)

In this Amna made clear that readers lose themselves in the fantasy of romance fiction precisely because they understand that the narratives capture the "unreachable". In questioning the unreal nature of this often-repeated escapist fantasy, Maureen said,

> Whereas when I first read happily-ever-after the first thing I think of is ... is Disney. Beauty and Cinderella and Snow White, and like not even the cool Princesses but the like ... the like you know Cinderella meets the Prince, and then they live ... and there are no flaws like they're run down [?] but there's no development of the character at all it's like it's like you meet and then you live happily ever after. (RS1 transcript, pp. 19-20)

In her comments, Maureen points to the fairy-tale origins of HEA-HFN narratives and to the corporate investment in promulgating these fantasies. However, as much as Disney may be a target of disapprobation, Elif credited the company with some modicum of a change effort when she added:

> But even Disney in the last few years have started making ... they got less [indistinct] characters and started to make it more about like finding yourself and being like loving yourself and stuff like that, and I think ... you can say a lot of shit about Disney, but I think they're actually doing quite a good job. (RS1 transcript, p. 20)

Although Elif commented on the shift away from a coupling imperative in this popular culture realm, another thread that the group explored was the link between reading the fantasy and how that shaped their living in reality.

During the first reading salon, when the group was still in the process of building their familiarity with one another, there was an emphasis on the individual nature of feelings, thoughts, and observations. For example, in talking about romance fiction as escape, Gina, who had read a lot of romance fiction when she was younger, said:

> Well, yeah, I dunno, exactly, and I don't feel harmed by it. I feel that it's escape. I don't think I ever thought .... and this is just me. Obviously, this is going to interact with each of us in a totally different way, but for me, I feel like it didn't really alter my expectations. You know, it's an escapist fantasy. (RS1 transcript, p. 25)

While Gina characterized romance as escapism, she also engaged in a reflective process that was about moving back in time, ruminating in the present, and forecasting into the future. She captured this temporal movement in her comments about media representations and social scripts when she said:

> But I've been thinking about this a lot with my daughter, who is not going to follow in my footsteps which was you are good, you, you do a [?] at school, you are a good girl, you get a boyfriend, you get married, you have kids, you buy a house, you get a job. This is what my life was, and this is what this [taps book] is showing us, right? This is what sometimes these romances are showing us, the traditional ones. So yeah, probably has had an effect. On the other hand, I also maintain that I'm probably pretty savvy in the world and I've had a long relationship since I was 16. Like I'm ... I ... I have had a contented relationship and I'm pretty realistic about the relationship? In that it's not perfect, and it's like takes so much work and all this kinda stuff, and it's not like in the romance novels, but I'm happy with that. But I'm also happy to read romance. So, I think that there is a divide, and we can ... I ... I can understand the difference between fantasy and reality. So, I don't think it's harmed me in that way. So, those are my thoughts. (RS1 transcript, pp. 53-54)

Gina was clear about her ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Her remarks also demonstrate that there are connections between romance fiction, life expectations, and theorizing harm. In exploring the impact of romance fiction on life expectations, an initial building block to review is the expectation readers have about the stories they read. Sara illustrated this when she spoke about a young adult fiction book she had read, Nicola Yoon's (2016) *The Sun is Also a Star*, and which she found unsatisfactory. Her comments led to this exchange:

> Sara: I read a book ... oops sorry ... I read a book once, I can't remember the name right now, but it's by Nicola Yoon and the book is a 24-hour romance or something and then it ends with them not being together, and I definitely did not like it as much [Group chuckles] because I was like what is the point? ... of reading this?
>
> Elif: But you go into it expecting a happily ever after.
>
> Sara: And then they just like never see each other again. I think there is an epilogue where they like find each other 10 years later.

> Elif: My goodness!
>
> Sara: Of course. But before the epilogue I was like frustrated because I spent all this time reading it, and then they don't even end up together, and I was like okay ... And it was just kind of sad but, like other romance books it's just like nice yeah, it's like an escape like I don't necessarily read it for like oh yeah this was literally the most realistic thing ever. But it's just to go off into a little cute, the fantasy moment of ...
>
> Elif: It's not like it's literary stardust.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Maureen: I hate those ones with the unresolved endings [indistinct]. It just doesn't do much for me.
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 22)

Reviewing the conversation between Sara, Elif, and Maureen, it is evident that romance fiction readers expect a HEA-HFN ending because the redemptive arc of the story is incomplete unless the protagonists become a couple.

In romance fiction, the women at the heart of the narrative are portrayed as victorious in their quest for love. However, Amna identified an issue with the representation of female characters in these HEA-HFN stories. During the first reading salon, she shared this observation with the group:

> But in recent years, I haven't been reading really heterosexual romance I was reading mostly gay, mostly male ... male ... because I was concentrating on how the women are portrayed in these novels. I realize that it was taking away the enjoyment part because I was just getting pissed off at how women are being treated or portrayed. (RS1 transcript, pp. 7-8)

As discussed in section 5.3, there is an infantilizing effect of the genre's approach to female sexuality, and Amna's concerns introduced another issue to consider: that of the competition between women for love and a man's attention. She clarified her perspective when she added:

> I imagine myself in a different world, like in a fantasy world like ... **with** a fantasy dream, that kind of thing. But not in real life, not this ... Yeah, I think ... it's all so different. ... When I read romance novels, I don't always project myself or imagine myself in that ... like situation. But when I was younger, I did that a lot. That's why it was frustrating to me because I was thinking about in terms of like women and gender and how they're treated and I didn't like, you know, how women especially like there are so many female main characters that would demean other

> women or call them sluts or bimbos and all other women are like ... not like me, but I'm better, you know. All these, you know, kind of tropes, kind of just ... stopped ... me from enjoying these kinds of books, so I was going into male-male love, because I can't ... I can't see myself or gender in that, but then again, there are also problems, and then I was starting to question my own gender [nervous chuckle] ... and so yeah ... (RS1 transcript, pp. 54-55)

Amna's musings demonstrate the personal nature of the reactions to this form of entertainment and escape. Even as fantasy though, and her ability to enjoy the fantasy, Amna's response to the negative representations of women — the diminishment of the sisterhood — was enough for her to seek the pleasure of the genre in non-heterosexual, non-heteronormative contexts.

Participants first linked trauma and healing in RS1, where the word heal and its derivates was raised 13 times. They did so to discuss whether reading romance fiction was a healthy practice as when Elif said, "To put love up on a pedestal, I don't think it's very healthy" (RS1 transcript, p. 51). Gina, as an avid reader of Regency romances in her youth, was the first to use the discourse of harm when she said:

> I think I was trying to think of this when I when I was coming ... when I was reading this [*Viscount*] in this last couple of weeks. Like I've consumed a ton of rom ... I'm the person who bought the rom ... well at the library, but you know got the romance. And I don't think it ... [indistinct] what's the right word? ... I don't think it ... um ... harmed me. I don't think so. But then I don't know because I read it [Group chuckles] (RS1 transcript, p. 24)

When I transcribed the audio recording, and particularly this section, I wanted to capture the hesitancy and the reflective tone of this contribution from Gina. In using the ellipses and the partial sentences, I have tried to present how Gina, even though she indicated that she had been thinking through the question of the impact of reading romance fiction prior to the meeting, was thoughtfully engaging with the question in real time as part of the gathering. This was a topic the group revisited again during the third reading salon. For example, Gina, who was very self-reflective throughout the process and each meeting, said during RS3:

> And it's really been interesting like you said about age, because I, I feel like this has made me reflect on ... because truly I think I was more immersed in romance when I was a teenager and in my twenties. Then, when I ... now in my forties, for example, and there was a time where I just kind of stopped reading it as much. Like I think I've said I was a big regency romance reader. Like for years. Like all romance, but that

> was my favorite. And maybe ... I can't even put my finger ... like forty, forty-two, I can't remember it. Like it just kind of tailed off, right? And I'm not as interested. But then when I read *Seven Days in June,* I was like, this is ... I liked it. So, I did like it, right? But I won't go to it as much anymore. And I feel like there is an age thing. Then I'm trying to think back to my old self because I'm like, "Oh it's escapist blah blah blah." Then I'm thinking, "Was it?" Like, what was it selling me when I was a teenager? Why did I read it so much? (RS3 transcript, p. 14)

In acknowledging her own trajectory as a romance fiction reader, Gina had mentioned that in her forties she stopped reading romance as much. When asked by Elif what had changed, Gina replied, "Not much. [Group laughs.] I was, like ... I, I think that I was working super hard. And parenting. Like ..." (RS3 transcript, p. 14). Gina later elaborated her position and connected her answer to vulnerability:

> Yeah. I think reading in general though, for a while, took a backseat. But, ah ... yeah. But it's interesting right because I was k- ... reflecting on ... what was different with ... about my life trajectory? And I had a partner by age — my current partner — when I was sixteen. And that was it, right? So, it's interesting like I didn't have to be super vulnerable in life. (RS3 transcript, p. 15)

Gina identified less of a need to read romance as she became more settled in life. Her experience indicated the potential for differing interactions with romance fiction between those in long-term relationships, and those who may even be parents, and those whose experiences do not encompass either positionality.

> Elif: But you also ... like I think you and I are just the opposite in terms of what ... like you know so much about romance novels, and you can tell me all of them, and like .... I don't ... I ... I .... pfft ... I've read like two and these are the ones for this class [the reading salon; group chuckles in response].
>
> Gina: That's so interesting! Like I wonder if it'll convert you to reading more romance.
>
> Elif: Oh, a hundred percent not.
>
> Gina: Not?
>
> Elif: No.
>
> Gina: That's so interesting.
>
> Elif: Because I get upset.
>
> Helen: I agree.

Elif: So, I, I really want to know more about like how ... like how these books affect you. Because it affects me so much, I don't understand how it doesn't affect you.

Gina: I think it affected me more like ... because I read most of it, again like I said last time, way back ...

Elif: Yeah.

Gina: ... a long time ago. And I don't read much like this ... too much like this anymore. Um ... so ... it doesn't affect me much ... now.

Elif: Maybe you've grown like a little bit in, um, like, um, what's that word? Like ... indifferent to it? Because you've read so much of it?

Gina: Yeah, yeah. Or ... I don't know.

Vicki: I think it depends, your own situation and everything that's ... is how you're going to react to a romance novel, for sure. I mean you could say ... you could see this and ... and ... and be happy because there is a soulmate out there for all of us, somewhere, if they're to be believed. Or you could read this and go, "This sucks. I'm never going to need anyone like this." So, it depends on how you come up to this book.

(RS2 transcript, pp. 93-94)

As the diversity of reactions became evident, Elif pressed those in relationships about the impact reading in the genre had on their relationships. She asked:

Elif: Can I ask a stu ... maybe a really personal question that no one has to answer? [Vicki softly chuckles.] The people who are in relationships, when you read these things, what does that **do** to how you feel in that relationship? Like ... because it makes me feel something being single. What ... like does it ... I can imagine if I was in a relationship and I read this spicy stuff I'd be like, "Oh, okay..." I don't know. I don't know. [Vicki & Paola laugh.] Like what does it do? No just sexually. Like does it do anything ... to you in your relationships?

Maureen: I would say no.

Elif: No?

Maureen: Um ... you know, like it's just like it's so, so completely unrelated to my relationship. [Laughs.]

Elif: Okay, fair.

Maureen: It's sort of really ... Like you never look at them and go, "Love should be like this." Because it's never going to be like that, right, you know, so ... And I would never actually want like most of my relationship to be like the things like we read in the books. Like they're so, um, you know ... I, I would say no. Yeah, yeah, I don't ...

> Gina: I agree. I don't think it affects my relationship at all. It's very separate.
>
> (RS2 transcript, p. 94)

In addition to time, as one grows, gains experience, and develops coping mechanisms to deal with the consumption of cultural artefacts, participants attributed this moderating effect to maturity (Paola, RS2 transcript, p. 95) and security (Helen, RS2 transcript, p. 95). As participants grappled with what inured a reader to the impact of reading romance fiction, the discussion veered from grown women in long-term relationships to young women who may yet enter them.

With this shift in focus to younger women, the theme of vulnerability emerged in the group's discussions. When I started the third reading salon, and in reflecting on the conversations from the previous two, I posited a link between the reaction to reading romance fiction and vulnerability. I presented my thoughts as follows:

> RMF: Um, ah, and then we talked a lot about the impact of one's cultural context, and how that has an impact on what we read or how we read it. And, um, I'm also picking up ... a connection between vulnerability and reading romance? So, again that one's response to romance fiction is kind of affected by how vulnerable one feels?
>
> Elif: I'd say that's very accurate.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p. 9)

Later, this theme meandered back into the conversations and led to this exchange between Elif and Sara:

> Elif: Yeah, I think [small sigh] it probably just ties into a lot of the things that I have already stated about how romance make me feel and that's why like when you say how it affects people that are vulnerable ... I think ... I am probably just pretty vulnerable. So, when I read this stuff, I'm like ... I don't know I can ... Looking back on the last few months, those two weeks per every month, where I've been reading? I've been much more like vulnerable in my everyday life as well. Because normally I do not give a second thought to romance in my everyday life. But when I read it every single evening, it's always on my mind. [Murmurs of assent.] And then I'm like, "Oh, but I'm single." Like, is that fun? No, it's not. Like, wah. But like the rest of the time, I'm like, "Pfft, who needs it?"
>
> Sara: I'm the exact same. But I read romance like all the time, so I'm just always ...

Elif: Why do you do this to yourself? [Group laughs.]

Sara: I don't know. [Chuckles.]

Elif: I think that's, I don't know. It's a, it's a weird form of self-torture. [Chuckles.]

Sara: It's really weird. Yeah. But [faintly – "huh" (Gina)] ... I guess they're good.

(RS3 transcript, pp. 12-13)

The dialogue between Elif and Sara demonstrates that choice is embedded in reading, both in terms of finding time to read and choosing what one reads. Their comments also reflected how readers negotiate between their reading habits and their reactions. For example, in this case, Sara recognized her own vulnerabilities and yet continued to choose to read in this genre that preys upon them. Elif characterized this as "a weird form of self-torture" and while Sara agreed, she searched around for another reason for her reading selections and settled on "they're good".

Beyond preying on one's vulnerabilities, reading salon members were also cognizant that romance fiction can wreak havoc on one's insecurities. While the group only read *Chloe Brown*, Sara had read all three books in Talia Hibbert's series about the Brown sisters and tried to explain its popularity. She initiated the following exchange in this way:

Sara: I also think that the series is popular because it's not straight-sized people. That she's ...

Gina: Yup.

Sara: ... like ...

Amna: Yeah.

Sara: ... plus size.

Elif: This bothered me. This was one of the, my biggest issues because in the beginning when we, she made a comment about like, "I'm definitely not light" or something ...

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: ... like that and I was like, "Okay, my people. Ready to read this." Romance that I can really like relate to because ... it causes a lot of insecurities.

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: And ... it was not followed through ...

Sara: Never, yeah.

Elif: ... whatsoever. The amount of times he like picked her up, threw her on top of him and I was like, "Well, you're not that big then, are you?"

(RS3 transcript, p. 65)

On the one hand, the participants agreed that Hibbert's descriptions of Chloe Brown were an asset because they provided a positive representation of a larger woman. However, they also perceived them as a liability in two ways: the readers read the representation as inauthentic, and the limitations of the representation amplified rather than mollified the reader's insecurities. For example, here, as Amna pointed out, for the logistics of the physical interactions between Chloe Brown, as a plus-size character, and her lover Red to work, "he has to be huger than her" (RS3 transcript, p. 65). That is, to fit the quintessential ideal of a heterosexual ideal, if the woman is big, then the man must be bigger because he needs to pick her up in the throes of passion, a feat that made this group of readers incredulous.

This conversation, in delineating the parameters of physical insecurities, also illustrated the impact romance fiction has on understandings of femininity, masculinity, and the nature of romantic relationships. In fact, the focus on size led to an extended exchange of rapid-fire contributions as follows:

Elif: Like even if he's like more muscular or like taller or whatever, if she is ... a proper [Elif chuckles] plus size girl, he doesn't just lift her up ...

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: ... and like...

Amna: So many like ...

Elif: ... whoo!

Amna: So many ... like ... It's constructed in our society that we equate femininity to thinness.

Elif: Yeah.

Sara: And small. Yeah.

> Amna: And I think femininity like in picking her up he's being masculine, and he's being romantic and stuff like that.
>
> Elif: Which is what ... I hope that that wouldn't be a part of it because...
>
> Sara: Same.
>
> Elif: ... like that's ... something that I think about a lot ...
>
> Amna: You know it ...
>
> Elif: ... with my partners. Like no ...
>
> Amna: They never mention ... the word fat or heavy either.
>
> Elif: No.
>
> Sara: No.
>
> Amna: And I feel like ...
>
> Helen: Soft.
>
> Amna: ... you could. You could like ...
>
> Elif: Soft is [indistinct]. It's so [indistinct].
>
> Amna: ... ... imagine her being curvy. Like not thin, but she's also like not fat. And I feel like a lot of romance novels do this. Like they would sell it, or you know promote it as if she's plus size, she's not like thin, she's not you know a big girl, but then when you look at the book there are no mentions ...
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Amna: ... of her actually being fat or heavy or anything like that. She's just curvy!
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 66-67)

The net result of this inconsistency in the logic of representation was apparent to reading salon members who were alternatively dismissive, frustrated, and irritated. The dialogue on this topic continued as Elif corroborated Amna's observations and added her own as follows:

> Elif: I think you have a really good point about that because I think a lot of that is about ... like ... well ... first of all, obviously the entire world is so focused on being thin. Like we're sold this beauty standard and whatsoever, but I think that so delves into like romance and what we expect. Of like our partners and stuff. Because like I ... I have so many

> insecurities because I know that a man will never be able to pick me up no matter how big he is. Like he won't be able to do that.
>
> Amna: Why is that a condition in the first place?
>
> Elif: And why is that a condition? [Group laughs.] Do you know what I mean? [Interjection – multiple voices overlapping – indistinct.]
>
> Gina: I'm going to go home and make him pick me up and throw me on the bed. [Laughter all around.]
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 67-68)

Gina's interjection lifted the mood, broke the intensity of the moment, and, in eliciting laughter from the group, showed how the group had cohered as a community, one that identified and supported each other's observations and feelings.

Overall, Elif saw that the author's attempts to represent Chloe Brown differently reflected "internalized beauty standards that society is teaching that she's [Chloe Brown] not good enough" (RS3 transcript, p. 70). Sara extended this observation to real-life experiences when she added, "And like stress about someone carrying you and them knowing your weight" (RS3 transcript, p. 70). In linking representations to insecurities, reading salon members themselves destabilized their earlier claims that the romance genre and reading romance fiction is only entertainment. In these exchanges, for example, they illuminated how the genre reinforces conventional understandings of gender roles, gender norms, and intimate relationships as women express and embody them in their lives. Despite the awareness they shared and the resistance they manifested, as Helen presciently pointed out, "I know that I'm getting sucked into these messages" (RS3 transcript, p. 68) and Elif affirmed, "I appreciate your honesty. I'm the same" (RS3 transcript, p. 68). With these comments, Helen and Elif, two of the non-romance reading participants and adult women, showed the inexorable power of romance fiction to impale readers on the hook of HEA-HFN narratives and the fantasy of love they portray.

In their discussions, the group tackled the impact of reading romance fiction on older women with more established life patterns and they also used their vantage point to look at the impact on younger readers. While it was Gina who had introduced the language of harm during the first salon, it was Sara who expanded this concept from a personal context — the impact on me — to a collective context — the impact on others.

The dialogue started when reading salon participants were discussing the common enemies-to-lovers trope and Helen initiated this conversational pathway when she said:

> Helen: That just makes me think of when you're little and you're told like oh if a boy's mean to you it means he likes you.
>
> Sara: Yeah, exactly.
>
> Helen: That's just what I get out of it.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> RMF: So, what do we think of that message?
>
> Sara: I think if you read it in the right way, then it's fine because, like, I read it all the time and I just love it but I'm also like aware and I ... you know I took gender studies, whatever, but I feel like if you're [Group laughs] so, like I know what I'm reading ... it's not just like ... I feel like for younger readers it might be more harmful ... like ...
>
> Elif: Complete difference.
>
> Sara: ... just go find some guy you hate, and they actually secretly love you. Like that's not ...
>
> (RS1 transcript, p. 30)

When Sara said, "read it in the right way", she was relying on the contention that romance fiction is a fantasy, should be read as such, and is removed from the realities of the world. In supporting Sara's position, Elif emphasized how this escapist, entertaining genre has material consequences, especially for younger women. As she stated:

> Elif: It's also just sends the wrong signs of consent because of the fact [?] he really likes me I'm gonna keep like trying whatever like ...
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Elif: I just think it's very harmful to kids.
>
> Sara: Yeah.
>
> Elif: Like young impressionable women whatever.
>
> Sara: Yeah, I think ...
>
> Elif: But I think we're grown enough, like we're in gender studies, like we know a thing or two we're not gonna get affected by ...
>
> Sara: Exactly!

Elif: ... he's pulling your pigtail because he likes you.

(RS1 transcript, pp. 30-31)

The emphasis throughout was on women readers, whether younger or older, and in emphasizing not only their age, but their academic backgrounds, both Elif and Sara demonstrated the importance of media and popular culture literacy. However, Elif's attempts to distinguish the impact on herself as a more mature reader versus someone who might be younger contradicted her other disclosure of the impact the reading of romance fiction had had on her.

The contradiction I saw in Elif's remarks reiterated a disconnect I saw in the group's discussion, one where they agreed that this reading practice and this reading material could have a negative outcome on impressionable young people and yet not recognizing that they had been young and impressionable once, too. Because this discrepancy intrigued me, I asked reading salon members to reflect on their experiences more closely and found myself restating questions a few times to explore this line of inquiry. For example, approximately one hour into the first reading salon, this exchange occurred in response to a question I had posed:

> RMF: So, as I said earlier, when you talked about the impact of it [romance fiction], you went [discussed the impact in relation] to elementary school. And, and that is, I would suggest, you know, that's when awareness of boys, girls, that dynamic and I think you mentioned the ... the oh he's mean to you, that means he likes you phenomenon, and that tends to pop up in elementary school. ... and young women are very vulnerable in high school as you embark on the search for love. But I'm just kind of interested if you, if you reflect back ... now some of you say you still read romance quite actively today ... But what about the impact on you? So, Gina shared that nowadays she doesn't feel it has an impact on her as much, and I'm challenging her to think about back ... but what about others?
>
> Paola: To me, I feel like it made me daydream ... a little bit. It was like an escape from like actual high school and having to deal with boys and hormones and everything. So, I could escape into these books and like oh my Prince Charming or whatever, right, is eventually going to come and eventually everything like I'm going to get to have this fairy-tale romance ... whatever. So ... um ... the few times that I did read these kinds of books back then that's like that that was it for me like daydreaming and hoping ... And ... nowadays [laughs] I am very cynical when I read these kinds of things. Like, oh no ... after ten years they're playing together? No, go take care of the kids like or something. It's, no. But looking back, back then, it was like fluttery and butterflies and ... daydreamy ...

Elif: Yeah.

Paola: ... and hoping and wishing and ...

(RS1 transcript, pp. 45-46)

Paola had earlier identified herself as primarily a non-fiction reader, and her answer here showed that, upon reflection, her reading as a teenager included young adult fiction with romantic elements or novels that showcased HEA-HFN narratives. Elif, who also had previously identified herself as not a romance reader, had a similar response. This is the information she shared with the group:

> I think I had a good ... I made my ... myself my own control group because I didn't read finance ... finance ... never been finance ... [Group chuckles] didn't read romance for like ten years ... um ... but before that ... I ... I was so hooked on the genre that I started writing my own ... not even fanfiction just like writing these scenarios that I wanted to happen into fiction. So, I wrote short stories about like boys I liked. Like how they were like Oh, finally, like ... literally classic romance ... like, finally they're going to notice a little chubby girl like ... he's three years older who cares like whatever. All these things. And I literally like one day had to burn them because I was like I can't like first of all, what if my Muslim father finds out ... um ... But also like it was so harmful to have them because I kept on reading through them ... because that was literally like the epitome of the perfect romance because it was your, it was your life. I'm not that good a writer! [Chuckles.] But like you know. It, it, it, it ... I don't think it was very helpful to live in the real world. I think it was very daydreamy ... um ... Because I think we're just as teenagers, we're so ... we haven't learned to be critical of society yet. (RS1 transcript, pp. 46-47)

Reading salon members were willing to engage with the question of the impact of romance fiction on them when prompted, but it did not appear to be an issue they had thought about a lot previously. The idea of being able to question society and to cast a critical gaze on the world was reiterated in Gina's remarks, too. She said:

> You know what's interesting? Like, I'd be curious to what people think, because I, on one hand, it goes back to the Disney princess and it goes back to everything, right? Which is, is it harming us? Like I don't really feel personally harmed by it but again I don't know ... how it would be having not read it. Was I coerced into reading it by society because of these things we've been talking about? Maybe? But I also feel like ... so on one hand is it harming our kids is it harming us? But on the other hand, also ... I feel like we're smart enough, in some ways, to realize this is escapist reading. Maybe it's a bit of erotica, it's a bit escape ... it's totally escapist. None of us – no thanks [to offer of water] - none of us, I mean I personally don't feel like it's damaged me. I feel like, I feel like I've thought about a lot of things you've said, you know, because

> we're intel ... you know, we're all smart women and people. I don't feel like ... (RS1 transcript, p. 43)

Gina's remarks echo the fear the group had expressed at other times that women readers, no matter their age, are concerned with being stigmatized and accused of a lack of intelligence simply for enjoying a form of fiction that transports them out of reality, for simply savouring something that makes them feel good. Reconciling all these threads in an ongoing process as Paola noted during the closing round of the first reading salon. During her summary of the evening Paola noted:

> That's why I like so much book clubs because it forces you to go out of what I would usually pick. So, it makes me discover this whole new thing that I would have never, you know, like [indistinct] just by myself, so ... um ... I really enjoyed that. I had so much fun, I think I could stay here for another couple of hours. [Group chuckles.] So, thank you Reema. Thank you everybody ... um ... and I'm gonna go mostly like questioning ... the use or the need ... I don't really know how to express it right now, of like erotica in this kind of media and the actual media, like ... new media that we're consuming and how that's becoming like an escape for women in way? So, to me as a GSWS student it makes me think like oh so we might think we're advancing but are we really because there's still like over and over this kind of representation that it's still being consumed at this high level ... um ... and I'm not sure if that's good or bad yet. Like I want to, like process it a little bit and see where I am. (RS1 transcript, p. 68)

As Paola had indicated, the opportunity to read and discuss books in community had inspired her to reflect more deeply on the ramification of reading in this genre. In terms of the questions the evening had raised, Amna contributed another factor for everyone to consider. In terms of younger readers, her point initiated this exchange of ideas:

> Amna: "But then again are we really ... like when we talk about teenagers, we kinda remove their agency. Are they really that naïve that they would think that they ..."
>
> Elif: Yes. [Group laughs.]
>
> Paola: I don't know about teenagers nowadays ...
>
> Sara: I don't think I was.
>
> Paola: ... but I remember me being a teenager and reading ... I think we talked about the last time like ... reading *Twilight* and ...
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Paola: ... I'm like, "Ooh, I want this kind of love." Like I ...

Vicki: Yes! [Amna laughs].

Paola: ... want to feel like this! Like when is this happening? And nowadays it's like ... pfft! [Vicki laughs.]

(RS2 transcript, pp. 95-96)

As a result of this conversation, reading salon members identified that an essential element to consider is the agency of teenage readers, especially those who identify as female, and whether they have the means to negotiate the portrayals and representations of romance fiction. As Paola was to identify later, "But I do feel like there is like this ... need from like teenagers to have or experience or, or like get these feelings from somewhere" (RS2 transcript, p. 97).

The ruminations of and interactions between reading salon members demonstrated the contradictory, conflicting, and complex questions under consideration. However, if love, romance, and sex, in all its diversities and manifestations is a part of the human experience, then ultimately, as with other aspects of life, it becomes a question of where and how individuals learn about these facets of being in the world. Ultimately, since reading salon members discerned the potential for harm in reading romance fiction, they also grappled with the question of what functions it served for readers beyond enjoyment, entertainment, and the access to transgressive knowledge about sex. It was Amna again, who introduced a different way to evaluate the genre, when she started off another conversation with this observation:

Amna: Like ... like in my country, there is no such thing as polyamory. Like ... we're just ... like ... you just have one partner and that's it. And I've been always thinking ... you know especially now since it was sparked. I've been growing up reading all these romance novels from people from Saudia Arabia or the other world like. And they always romanticize the kind of arranged marriage kind of relationship. [Restless murmuring – multiple voices.]

Elif: Which is [indistinct] the exact same thing.

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: They want to keep you on the straight and narrow ...

Sara: Yeah.

Elif: ... from that religion.

> Amna: Yeah, true, but I think that it's a form of escapism. Like if you romanticize your own life, I think you can be able to like like it.
>
> (RS3 transcript, pp. 33-34)

Following Amna's line of argument, fiction, especially romance fiction, makes a practice, whatever that practice maybe, a norm and romanticizes the reality of that practice even if it is inherently about social control. In removing the sting of practices that may constrain individual choice and recasting them as fantasy, the impulse to strive for different, and possibly better, is lost. Institutions, traditions, and conventions retain their strength when they idealize the reality that exists and fashion it as aspirational fantasy. Gina summarized this phenomenon when she said, "I wonder if it's just basically no matter what culture you're in, it's reinforcing your culture" (RS3 transcript, p. 36).

In other words, this process of idealization, as exemplified in romance fiction, makes love and falling in love a natural, universal, never-changing desire and want no matter which era, society, or cultural context an author chooses for their HEA-HFN story. The proliferation of these narratives obscures the fact, as Elif noted, "Romance is not for everyone" (RS3 transcript, p. 37). In fact, that is exactly the way it is represented — it is for everyone. As reading salon members expressed their concerns, they also talked about the sluggish nature of change in terms of this hegemonic discourse, these normative behaviours, and idealized standards. I was curious about their perception regarding this dilemma, and to pursue it further I asked the following question:

> RMF: Can you say a little bit more, um, about why you think it's slow to change?
>
> Sara: Hmmm.
>
> Helen: Because the purpose of those relationships probably wouldn't be to have kids necessarily.
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Helen: So, it's not serving that, which is like such a thing ...
>
> Elif: Not serving capitalism.
>
> Helen: Right, exactly! [Chuckles quietly.] So, yeah.
>
> Sara: And I feel like people in power are also very strict-minded. Like ... I don't know ... necessarily ... like Justin Trudeau, but like each municipality I feel like has someone that's kind of rigid-minded and I

> feel like ... They don't necessarily have control over it, but I feel like their judgment passes down. Especially in America and ...
>
> Elif: Yeah.
>
> Sara: I just ... I feel like ... This is such an awful thing to say, but I feel like ... when the older people aren't here anymore, it'll be easier ...
>
> Elif: Good riddance.
>
> (RS3 transcript, p.39)

These younger members of the group, recognizing that some in the room were older, were quick to establish that they were referring only to those over eighty, which exempted their colleagues who accepted their disclaimer with laughter (RS3 transcript, p. 40). However, in averring that change only happens once power shifts away from an older generation, these participants failed, initially, to recognize that younger people also uphold conservative values and may also carry a closed mind-set into their adult and senior years. Elif eventually did clarify this when she stated, "... we'll be the old people that don't understand the new things" (RS3 transcript, p. 41). Ultimately, the slow pace of change cannot be ascribed to a generational divide only although this is a comforting thought, as much as HEA-HFN narratives are comforting ideals because it allows for the potential of change with the passage of time.

6.3.1. Summary

Over the course of the three reading salons, the participants' conversations indicated the potential for media to serve as a blueprint for what romance and love ought to be in a woman's life. As such, romance fiction, as a form of media, inspires a reader to measure her life against the narratives she consumes. For example, it encourages a single woman to revel in her solitary status (in the sense of being thankful that she is free of relationship drama) at the same time it discourages that same person when the comparison to the idealized fantasy makes her reality appear lacking (in the sense of having no one to love her). Beyond the impact on an individual, reading salon members also delved into the question of the shame and stigma of being a romance fiction reader in the context of the societal devaluation of women's enjoyment and pleasure. This genre that is an avenue of escape, comfort, relaxation, enjoyment, and fun becomes a shameful, secretive activity unless it is shared with a collective of similar-minded folk. There is an irony though in that this personal desire for concealment is countered by a

public insistence on visibility. Not only do stories of love and romance saturate the pages of books and fill the airwaves of broadcast media, in bookstores romance novels are shelved separately in a section earmarked as romance. Women readers of romance fiction are marked as *other* and *separate* when they walk into a bookstore and make their way to peruse what is on offer in the romance section. As a result, and despite the genre's success within the publishing world, women book buyers, in making themselves, their tastes, and their desires visible, invite presumptions, dismissal, and judgement.

Given the group's acknowledgment that the writing scripts on the page shape the social scripts in life, they were concerned that reading romance fiction retains the power to be a harmful influence on girls and young woman who conflate the fantasy of a love story with the reality they might expect to face before they reach an age where their experience and knowledge offers them a vantage point to critique and resist the normative expectations of the coupling imperative. The genre of romance fiction and the activity of reading may both be escapes, but there is one force that is inescapable and that's the societal insistence on the HEA-HFN outcome of finding one's match. Reading salon members acknowledged that corporations heavily invested in perpetuating the HEA-HFN love affair, such as Disney, are attempting to broaden their horizons of what self-actualization means for girls and young women. However, the issue remains whether the incremental changes in popular culture around love and romance are substantive enough to shift public perception, discourse, and practices, in terms of the reading content itself, the influence that reading has on women readers, women's understandings of social scripts, and the decisions they make on how they choose to live their lives. HEA-HFN narratives perpetuate an aspirational focus on the fantasy of love, as a singular, life-long duet, and they do not prepare women for the reality that their love may not compare favourably with the magic, wonder, and perpetuity of what is promised on the pages of a novel.

Overall, evidence of complex and contradictory perspectives, positions, and viewpoints are dotted throughout the transcripts of the three reading salons. For example, the discourse among reading salon members shifted as they considered the impact of romance fiction on young readers in general and on their specific individual experiences. Instead of framing the discussion in terms of whether romance fiction *harmed* readers, the different perspectives participants presented and debated led them to question and reflect on the ways reading romance *influenced* readers, including

themselves over time. This was a more generative and productive line of inquiry because the answer to whether something causes harm is too easily, “No, it doesn’t harm me” whereas the discernment of influence constitutes a more involved deliberation. Even with this shift, the dialogue among the women during the reading salons demonstrated that the appeal of romance fiction remains strong and persistent. It also reflected the complicated and conflicted relationships women have with social scripts around love, romance, and sex as they are presented in media and experienced in life.

Romance fiction provides women of all ages and backgrounds comfort, entertainment, and escape, and shapes their understandings of physical intimacy and relationships. They continue to enjoy the genre in all its media forms because absorbing the media of romance, especially in fiction, is still largely a gendered practice when considered in terms of the traditional binary of female-male. This remains true even as notions of gender continue to develop and evolve in the public jousting arenas of politics, education, culture, society, and media amidst increasingly reactionary responses. These paradoxes, among others, raise many multi-faceted questions about the extent to which indulging in the escapist fantasies of romance fiction traps women in feelings of insufficiency and patterns of longing, searching, and desiring. The reverence for requited love, although reverence is not the only way women respond to HEA-HFN narratives, disguises how these narratives reiterate the inequities and systems of domination in a heteronormative, heterosexist patriarchy. It would be reductive to think the complexity of women readers and their responses to HEA-HFN stories was only a question of love and the search of love. The key is to decipher the complicated negotiations they embark on when indulging in the consumption of this media genre, and to strive to understand the many purposes HEA-HFN stories serve as they mirror and obscure women’s wants, needs, desires, aspirations, and sense of self-worth.

Chapter 7.

Final Reflection

> *"But who is the person you 'were meant to be'? Is who you are what you make of yourself, the self you fashion into being, or is it determined by your inheritance and all its fateful forces, genetic, familial, ethnic, religious, cultural, historical? In other words: is identity what you choose, or what you can't escape?"*
>
> *Susan Faludi, In the Darkroom, p. 57*

When I submitted my PhD application to the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in 2016, I wrote, "I propose to use Guy Debord's (1967/1995) theory of *The Society of the Spectacle* as a starting point from which to investigate the impact of external cultural factors on female perceptions of feminism." In the intervening years, I have not engaged with Debord's theory in the way that I had envisioned. The path I have taken has introduced me to feminist scholars, researchers, theorists, activists, and advocates that have had a more direct influence on my thinking. Despite the many diversions, distractions, and detours along the way, and the depth of learning I have been privileged to acquire, the heart of my interest today is as it was in 2016. That is, the question of what and how external cultural factors influence women's understandings of themselves, their place in the world, and the way they want to be in the world. The discourse I was seeing at the time of my original application, that feminism was dead (Hill, 2015), sparked my curiousity. It also aroused my disbelief. An assertion that the fight for women's rights was over suggested that women have achieved full, equal, and equitable participation in society. Meanwhile, I was struggling to understand, when gender-based inequalities were so evident to me, why many people in North America, particularly women and especially young women, eschewed the feminist label and disavowed feminism.

As my academic journey progressed through the years, I wrestled with the way persistent female marginalization was camouflaged in popular culture messaging about female empowerment, agency, and autonomy. I found myself returning time and again to representations of romance, love, sex, marriage, and womanhood that appeared to support a singular social script for women's happiness, fulfillment, and purpose in life. Given my status as a single, never-married woman, and the contrast to the younger me,

who was obsessed with finding my prince someday, as well as my observation of women's experiences, I started to focus on happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA/HFN) narratives, particularly as they were promulgated in romance fiction, a genre I knew intimately. This led me, as I prepared to conduct this study, to construct this research question:

> **In what ways does the engagement of women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with HEA-HFN narratives?**

This question guided my investigation into the power of HEA-HFN narratives; stories that document the route to women's self-actualization through romance, courtship, and love. The ubiquity of this story form, the resonance women expressed whenever I described my research — women of different ages and from different parts of my social networks — encouraged my exploration into the relationships and links between reading, an activity that serves a liberatory function, and the cis-hetero-patriarchal construction of society and culture that continues to function as an oppressive force.

Reading is a complex undertaking (Rehberg Sedo, 2017) rife with the potential for conflict, confrontation, and contestation as well as the possibility of building community, consensus, and collegiality. The combination of these qualities makes reading dangerous or perceived as dangerous. No matter the genre or form, reading is about seeing beyond the words: different people, places, things, contexts, and worlds (Coady, 2016; see also Driscoll & Squires, 2020; Flint, 1993; Twomey, 2007). In providing this window into and unto the different, reading invites comparison between one's current position and those of real and/or imagined others. If the reader perceives the alternatives as better, then that raises questions as to why things are the way they are and why they cannot be different. These questions of why stand as challenges, if not threats, to the status quo. The process of reading is also an embodied one. It is a physical act that engages the senses.

The notion of reading as an intellectual endeavour evolved as observers recognized that the central process of the act of reading was in fact engagement with the text (Jack, 2012, p. 51). This perception changed the understanding of reading from the acts of seeing and/or hearing a text to ingesting and thinking about a text. Rather than absorbing words to engage in spiritual contemplation, when reading material was of a

religious nature, readers digested words to contemplate the world. This manner of engagement was revolutionary and the impact of it was heightened because it was also enmeshed with new notions of the individual and the self (p. 52). A sense of danger arises from reading's "private, solitary, and ephemeral nature" (Murray, 2018, p. 377; see also Radway, 1984/1991, p. 92). While the activity is visible, the inner process is not and information as to the effect of the content on the reader is a mystery. The perceived danger is intensified by the democratization of reading, which threatens existing power structures, generates fear not only of the activity, reading, but of those participating in it, the readers (Sandwith et al., 2020). As a result, reading can be used as a disciplinary mechanism and one of surveillance, especially with discourses that focus on the correct ways and materials to read with proper behaviour and conduct rather than critical thinking as the goals of the activity (Flint, 1993).

If there are societal desires and cultural efforts to control reading, such forces are contingent on the relegation of individuals and groups, such as women, to defined and confined places, spaces, and social hierarchies. As a result of these subaltern positions, such groups, and their constituent members, are not able to contribute to meaning making unless there are substantive changes to social, cultural, and political contexts (Jack, 2012, p. 51). The fear of reading is warranted given the connection of literacy with the dissemination of ideas that historically have contributed to insurgency, revolution, and social change. However, ideas are not only found in print; they can be disseminated orally, too. The fear then is not the fear of reading, but the fear of destabilization, disturbance, and disruption. As such, analyses that neglect the contexts, conjunctures, and confluences (Murray, 2015 & 2018) of the reader within the larger framework of society and culture are incomplete. It is these connections between reading, society, and culture that make me curious, specifically in terms of women readers and the power of HEA-HFN narratives.

In HEA-HFN narratives, love is the mechanism that allows a person to change, to self-transform, and to prepare to face life as one half of a pair that has found their niche in the world. The outcome is always for the better. It is a relentlessly optimistic result, and it is the story of love's triumph that conquers even the most dark and dire circumstances. Other genres serve a similar function even those that are identified as largely masculine and male, such as action adventure and superhero movies. While each of these genres also have a large base of female fans, they appeal largely to boys

and men. In these good versus evil sagas, there is resolution arc where a crisis is averted for now and presumably for the better since the bad guys or worse guys are vanquished as are the threats to society and social order. Whereas the redemptive arc in HEA-HFN narratives is accomplished through love, in these other genres it is accomplished through fighting, strength, and power. The goal is also different in these other genres in that it is not necessarily about changing the protagonist. It is about defeating the antagonist. It's an outer journey and an external victory although the protagonist invariably learns lessons along the way and may change to a certain degree. It reinforces the message that the hero is morally good, and this even extends to the nuanced complication of the antihero on occasion.

In romance the focus is on the inner journey and self-transformation, or as Gina summarized it during the third reading salon, "It's mostly their shared fixing of each other's trauma" (RS3 transcript, p. 76). My efforts with this research study have been to explore the conjuncture of women's lives, through their reading practices, to traverse from individual understandings to understandings of how and if HEA-HFN narratives fit into systems and structures of othering and oppression. As such, my work is part of a disciplinary endeavour to make women's concerns audible and visible as a route to addressing inequities and inequalities. It is also an attempt to understand the ways in which micropolitical and intersubjective change can be a form of political power (Chabot Davis, 2004, p. 400; see also Polleck & Epstein, 2015) recognizing that culture is instrumental in an individual's self-transformation and countering the tendency to undervalue its effects, especially for women, as mere sentimentality or emotionality (p. 414). This research study is my contribution to complicating public discourse because as Brook J. Sadler (2018) states, "Popular feminist discourse, as well as mainstream political thought, would be enriched by adding historical and cultural depth; without it, women's legitimate demands for justice may only sound like impotent yelping" (p. 22). By investigating the gendered dimensions of popular culture, I am adding potency to the effort to advocate against patriarchal systems, structures, and social organizations that reify the dominance of conventional norms, roles, and expectations and impose downward pressures on a liberatory feminist horizon.

7.1. Unravelling Women's Negotiations of HEA-HFN Narratives

Sharing what one reads with others is central to women's reading practices, and the context for such *book talk*, has been in book clubs, reading groups, and literary societies (Brown, 2018; Carroll, 2019; Long, 2003; Rehberg Sedo, 2004; Twomey, 2007). Through the process of discussion, readers display the extent of their interaction with texts and the impact texts have on their knowledge, understandings, and ways of being. For some readers, reading is a communion. It functions not as a religious sacrament, but as an intense and intimate connection, sometimes with spiritual overtones, that enables them to challenge the constraints of the private domestic sphere and to make incursions into the public sphere of action and agency that society has historically deemed fit only for men. At a functional level, reading for some women is about the ability to connect to a literate environment to survive, especially when the criteria for success and social mobility have been tied not only to the ability to read and write, but the ability to master those functions. Beyond literacy, reading offers women, such as the reading salon participants, connections to their own desires, pleasures, imagination, leisure, networks, and communities. A key reward for the investment in reading, and the communal experience that *book talk* entails, is that readers can identify their experiences as like that of others, a bonding function, or different from others, a differentiating function (Carroll, 2019). It is a material, sensory experience and allows women to connect in a virtual and disembodied world (Murray, 2018, pp. 387-388).

As I listened and transcribed the audio recordings from the three reading salons, I realized that group members talked about the books we had read as they would talk about real-life experiences. Their discussions traversed the poles of bonding and differentiation and slipped between the worlds of material existence and imaginative conjecture continually, projecting themselves into the world via reading and internalizing the worlds represented in the stories within themselves. To overhear the reading salon conversations without knowing that the participants were talking about a book, one would think they were talking about a friend or a couple they knew. This was true even for *Viscount*, the Regency era romance novel we read and the book most distant from the group in historical time. This demonstrates the power of fiction, including genre fiction, to simultaneously create a world that readers see themselves living in alongside the characters, and to capture the world they live in as if the characters inhabit it, too. In

the world-building of fiction authors make imagined worlds seem real. As a result, the environments and the experiences they create must make sense to readers. The reading salon members were quick to pounce on things that did not make sense to them or that moved too fast because speed within a narrative seemed to indicate a lack of logic. For example, when a character who was a serial texter suddenly forgot to send a text at a crucial point in the plot of *Seven Days*, the readers picked up on the dissonance. With *Chloe Brown*, a novel where the protagonist was described as a plus size female, but the action did not support the description of her as a plus size female, the readers were annoyed and critical. Perhaps this ability to maintain an internal logic is the mark of the more successful romance authors. They structure a rational world filled with emotion that is available to readers who insert themselves in the stories to share in the experiences of the characters' lives.

Similarly, in the world of romance fiction, with language around the self as whole or lacking, sufficient or deficient, the trauma characters experience must also read as authentic. For example, reading salon members were very critical of the trauma that served as an obstacle for Anthony Bridgerton to find love in *Viscount* and their frustration was evident. Paola said, "I couldn't enjoy it as much because ... I just want to like shake him, like snap out of it" and Elif said, "it got boring" (RS1 transcript, p. 57). When happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives invest one individual with all the power to heal another, it too counters the real-life logic of what is entailed in recovering from traumatic and traumatizing events. As Maureen explained, drawing on her professional experience and in reference to the character of Shane in *Seven Days*, who commits to always being there for a vulnerable youth with whom he was working, "This is what really drove me crazy about the book ... I work in a counselling organization, and I talk to counsellors all the time. And it's like you never tell somebody that you will always be there for them. … Well, you can never always be there for them. … So, that drove me nuts …" (RS2 transcript, pp. 51-52). Although Shane's commitment is expressed as part of a secondary plot, this sensibility also translates to the central love story.

After the second reading salon and reflecting on the group's discussion of *Seven Days*, I wrote this in my researcher's journal:

> I think, however, the idea of negotiating HEA/HFN based on cultural context is key. … That is, [it's] not just categories of readers who prefer/choose romance. <u>But</u> negotiating one's relationship to romance/love is

> constrained/determined by multiple factors. It's a situated response to social constructs and to societal expectations. (*RJ*, June 20, 2022)

My notes go on to say that I felt like I had an idea that required further deliberation and development. In this initial attempt to capture my thoughts, I listed the following factors that I felt influenced a woman's negotiation of HEA-HFN narratives: "Ideological orientations. Access to material. Control over assets & resources. Women may share values, but responses will vary based on these other factors" (*RJ*, June 20, 2022). Immediately following this list, I also cautioned myself, "That's not quite it" (*RJ*, June 20, 2022). Upon reflection, I was reacting to the highly gendered, highly essentialist experience of reading romance fiction that I saw unfolding during the reading salons. The participants exchanged views based on their shared identification as women and contrasted their experiences as a group to that of men as a group. This was the primary lens through which they analysed the material they had read, despite whatever other identity markers each member of the group held. There was also the sense that women shared common views of men, their behaviours, characteristics, conduct, bearing, and attributes. This universalization of gender occurred even though the reading salon members comprised different ethnicities and different sexual identities, and all of whom in their own lives are champions for the recognition of diverse gender identities.

The porous boundary between the real and the imaginary, which I initially noted after the first reading salon, exists as a liminal space where readers traverse "the thresholds of being, performing, knowing" (Geiseler, 2018, p. 663). in my view, this means whatever women read will always have an impact on them although that impact may straddle a spectrum from negligible to critical and be both or neither at the same time. After the first reading salon, I wrote in my researcher's journal that one of the emerging themes was "fantasy vs. reality". I described this as an "impression" and wrote, "The younger we are, before we understand we can critique society, the more we are unable to separate fantasy/reality the more potential for romance novels & literature of any sort to influence our understandings and world views. This is a skill we develop as we get older" (RJ, May 30, 2022). Women also read to escape, but to assign escape as the only reason women read, or as the most important function and feature of women's reading, denies complexity and privileges the fictive over the real. The stigmatization of feminine interests was another topic reading salon members addressed, and they pointed to the fear of other women's judgements as a factor that compelled concealment

and secrecy when it came to indulging in this form of escape. This reflects a more pronounced trend where feminine interests are devalued relative to masculine interests as a form of policing the boundaries of acceptable performances of normative femininity and masculinity (Allen, Harvey, & Mendick, 2015).

Women read fiction to demonstrate their belonging. They read fiction as therapy (Murray, 2018, p. 386; see also Chabot Davis, 2004), in pursuit of wholeness, purpose, relevance, recognition, and more. Theories that focus on reading as escapism tend to de-emphasize the action and interest that imbue the real lives of women and tend to overemphasize the appeal of feminized values (Flint, 1993, p. 32). Women's reading as escape is about understanding and negotiating the reality of their material existence, and in the context of increased literacy across markers of difference, often serves as a precursor to change. To emphasize escape as getting away limits research into the social context and practice of reading because it focuses on interiority and individual responses rather than understanding that no matter the motivation of a women reader, "the contemporary reader is always enmeshed in a demonstrably social web" (Murray, 2018, p. 376; see also Sandwith et al., 2020). Although I could tell from the start that the information reading salon members shared with me seemed to indicate that romance fiction had a measure of impact on them, there is always the need for researchers to explore how this mechanism works in various aspects of human experience, and to investigate how it shapes our understandings of ourselves, the world around us, and the way we exist in larger relational networks.

In addition to the portrayal of romantic relationships, romance fiction is about sex (Allan, 2023). There's a tendency in the study of popular romance to emphasize the merits of the genre and the value of critical analysis in the vein of literary studies. On occasion, these disciplinary-bounded analyses minimize the role of explicit sex in romance fiction. Sex in romance fiction serves a function for its readers and any analysis that does not grapple with the meaning of sex in these narratives does not represent, in my view, a multi-disciplinary understanding of the romance reading experience in the crucible of society and culture. The HEA-HFN resolution of the couple's relationship may be the cake, the sex is the icing. For the members of the reading salon, there were many questions about the way the authors portrayed sex and the unrealistic presentation of easy, every-time, and always female orgasms. One of the most animated exchanges that took place in the first reading salon centred on the history of oral sex and whether

men of bygone eras knew how to orally pleasure a woman. There was also a sense among the reading salon members that the sex in these novels served the same function for women that traditional pornography serves for men.

As such, there are similarities in the associated discourses. That means that the guilt and shame that is often associated with reading romance fiction is not so much about reading a lesser, denigrated literary form as it is about visibly consuming a genre of storytelling that is explicitly about women's sexuality, desire, and pleasure. A corollary to this was the group's observations that the authors wrote sex in a way that exemplified the male gaze although it centred women's sexual fulfillment. This raises the spectre and challenge of identifying what readers see as authentic representations of female desire. That is, what does female desire, female sex look like from a woman's point of view, and can it be separated from the tradition of the male gaze? This is not about romance novels being sex manuals although depending on a reader's social and cultural context, they can be an introduction to sexual intimacy. Perhaps this is one reason why older members of the group read less romance over time. As they learned what sex is in their own lives and built their own portfolio of sexual experiences, there may have been a greater recognition of the gap between what sex is for women and the idealized portrayals in romance novels. The idea of age as a factor that influences women's relationships to and negotiations of the genre, indicated an avenue of inquiry that merits further consideration, and I would have enjoyed exploring this further with the reading salon participants. While there might be less tolerance for reading about what is more clearly fantastical as one gets older, it also helps to explain the enduring power of romance fiction. Good for now or okay forever will never be as appealing, as fun, as magical for always.

The notion of mutual healing and transformation also explains, in part, why HEA-HFN narratives appeal to women readers. The individuals in romance novels, who are emotionally wounded, can love — fully, completely, and forever — and establish successful intimate relationships in a way that is not evidenced in actual human experience. It is a powerful message and allows the reader to believe in or aspire to the possibility and the potential promised on the page. That promise overwhelms the evidence that these conventional and traditional understandings about love and romance operate in a world that is marked by inequity, injustice, the incremental erasure of rights for women, minorities, and those whose gender and sexual identification is non-

normative. In other words, when romance is cast as the healing of trauma, of redressing old wounds through a coupling imperative, it is a framework that may change people and give them the tools to forge ahead with life, but it does not change systems and structures that hold people in place. It runs the risk of becoming a mechanism that contributes to maintaining the status quo.

In this vein, romantic love is an ideology, one that continues to exert its force as a world view no matter what evidence is provided to refute its claims. As Susan Griffin (1982) argues, theories of liberation are created in recognition of oppression and are expressed as ideologies that portend different (p. 648). Essentially, it is a process of naming oppression and in naming oppression, an ideology helps to coalesce and identify the parameters of the path to liberation. However, in Griffin's estimation once theory is transformed into ideology, the ideology "begins to destroy the self and self-knowledge" (p. 648). As she explains,

> Experience ceases to surprise it, inform it, transform it. It is annoyed by any detail which does not fit into its world view. Begun as a cry against the denial of truth, now it denies any truth which does not fit into its scheme. Begun as a way to restore one's sense of reality, now it attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image. All that it fails to explain it records as dangerous. All that makes it question, it regards as its enemy. Begun as a theory of liberation, it is threatened by new theories of liberation; slowly, it builds a prison for the mind. (p. 648)

HEA-HFN narratives continue to rely on and valorize the commitment to always be there for that one other person and to represent the redemptive arc of romantic love as a liberation from trauma, loneliness, and singularity. If viewed as an ideology that upholds a singular, dominant social organization, romantic love, following Griffin, incarcerates hearts and minds. It becomes a carceral system. With romance fiction, readers enter an implied contract with the author for a HEA-HFN resolution to the story. It is in fact a multi-party contract because it is also a contract with the genre in general and with the social understandings the genre underscores in particular.

The ultimate fantasy in romance fiction is that men repudiate patriarchy as they find, accept, and commit to a loving life-long relationship with their other half. This is an illusion. Even on the pages of a romance novel, men do not repudiate patriarchy. They grow and mature, and part of that growth and maturity is to find love, settle down, and prepare to run the world from a perch of unassailable moral goodness. They are now the

patriarchs in power, responsible for the next generation, with a good woman by their side and in their bed. In romance novels, men find their way to love, but strengthen their own position of dominance by socially acceptable mating. In fulfilling the mandate of the coupling imperative on these storybook pages, women realize material changes in their lives, which may include improving their social and economic standing. However, this happiness does not represent substantive and meaningful change. The men of these stories learn to love, a net benefit to their own individual being. They do not learn to smash the patriarchy. According to the notes I made after the third and final reading salon was done, “A lot came up about the conditioning of women through these cultural scripts and a realization of how the normative pattern is about keeping people on track to fulfill a particular vision of society. We also talked about change, the slow pace of change, and the resistance to alternative visions such as polyamory” (RJ, July 24, 2022). The ubiquity of representations of relationships as a romantic pairing erases other forms of social connection and it mostly erases single women from the popular imagination. One area that would have merited further discussion was the willingness of some reading salon members to explore alternative social arrangements, such as polyamory, and what they perceived as the limits on their ability to do so.

While individual reading salon members identified that a complete, happy, productive, fulfilled, dynamic life for a woman does not depend on a relationship with a man, that learning evolved from hearing other women’s perspectives. That paradigm shift occurred from hearing other women talk about these books from the vantage of their experiences, and who challenged the HEA-HFN arc as the only cultural script available to women, which is a persistent illusory shorthand for limiting a woman’s access to the adventure of life beyond love, romance, and marriage or long-term commitment. As bell hooks (2000/2018) writes,

> While much cultural attention is given to domestic violence and practically everyone agrees it is wrong for men to hit women as a way of subordinating us, most men use psychological terrorism as a way to subordinate women. This is a socially acceptable form of coercion. And lying is one of the most powerful weapons in this arsenal. When men lie to women, presenting a false self, the terrible price they pay to maintain ‘power over’ us is the loss of their capacity to give and receive love. Trust is the foundation of intimacy. When lies erode trust, genuine connection cannot take place. While men who dominate others can and do experience ongoing care, they place a barrier between themselves and the experience of love. (p. 41)

The key to changing culture and society is not in promising that the path to justice lies through men's discovery of love. Such change will only arise when men repudiate the will to dominate, and women learn to ask for nothing less.

7.2. Limitations of The Study

This work, in concert with other scholarship in this field of inquiry, examines the social and relational construction of women's reading to understand how women use reading to negotiate their sense of self, their place in the world, and their multiple and multifaceted relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Being able to talk, share, and discuss what is read has proven to be a key component of women's literacy lives and has played an integral role in reading as identity formation (Jack, 2012; Long, 2003). Without the views, opinions, and perspectives of others to consider, women readers are left to their own interpretations, which may be complex, nuanced, and deep but remain limited and singular. The group that gathered for these reading salons was diverse in some measures and yet underrepresented in some respects given the breadth of possibilities in gathering women together. For example, the group included recent master's graduates and those who were approaching the end of their graduate and/or undergraduate degrees as well as married women in established as well as new careers. This configuration of educated women at different stages of life flavoured the group's explorations with a consensus around progressive values and embedded understandings of identity factors such as gender and sexuality. This restricts my ability to extend the insights we shared and the knowledge we co-produced in a general way although the partial perspective I offer here opens avenues for further research with different groupings of women.

The benefit of talk and discussion, as captured in these reading salons, must be balanced against the risk that the input and feedback from others can shape and mould, if not dictate interpretation and understanding, particularly from those with higher status, power, and authority or those with an ideological agenda. There is also the challenge that social gatherings can dissuade or discourage the participation of individual women readers. In the case of in-person book clubs, for example, despite members' depiction of them as egalitarian and diverse spaces, they, too, manifest hierarchies and power dynamics that can be exclusionary (Long, 2003). This disproves or at least challenges the discursive notion that women's groups are always unifying communities. While no

one complained to me about any aspect of the reading salons or expressed any discomfort with the proceedings, I may have been insensitive to the impact my views had on the discussions, unaware of power dynamics within the group, and oblivious to anyone feeling unheard given the assurances several group members made about feeling safe. The variability in attendance meant that none of the reading salons had all confirmed participants in attendance at the same time, which resulted in showcasing a few voices over the plurality. Similarly, the research study did not extend into understanding the broader perspective of each participant's experiences beyond what each person was willing to share when we met. Given the structure of the study and with only three meetings, the compressed nature of the data collection period intensified the group's collegiality. The reading salon members were aware of the limited time they had to build community, and that may have constrained the insights they offered, the dialogue they shared, and the books they chose to read.

In terms of book selection, I had decided to choose the book for the first reading salon. Subsequently, in addition to my own recommendations, I gathered suggestions from participants, created book ballots (Appendix E), asked each person to cast their vote, and then selected the next text based on the results. My goal was to allow for a democratic process in selecting the books I was asking participants to take the time to read. However, in doing so the personal to-be-read aspirations of some, as communicated during the informal conversations the participants had after each evening's discussion and while they were voting, may have swayed the process. If I had chosen a text for the second and third reading salons from the suggestions I gathered, I may have been able to work with the group to explore a more diverse set of love stories or benefited from a more focused approach on one sub-genre. Furthermore, my research design relied on written narratives, which raises the question of whether I am embracing the messiness of future-oriented research or if I am stuck in the past. That is, I conducted a language-oriented project at a time of disillusionment with the intense language orientation of paradigms, theories, and investigations (Lather, 2016, p. 125). If the conjuncture of this time is as a post-word era, then my valorization of reading, as well as my reliance on what the transcripts said and what I heard as I transcribed the audio recordings, may have undermined the relevance, transferability, and social utility of my research. However, data from 2022 shows resilience in the print book format for romance fiction titles while e-book romance sales have declined by 16% (NPD, 2022). I

find comfort knowing that if the practice of reading is of decreased importance in understanding the world today, then my work will stand as a historical artefact of a time when the written word held sway as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988). Of a time when society and individuals construed books as a path to knowing in addition to reading being fun, providing a key to understanding, and offering transcendence.

7.3. What about? Areas for Future Research

My interest in the continuing power of happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives to function as social scripts that shape women's aspirations in life served as an impetus for my research project. I was and remain intrigued in the ways these narratives, which are featured in many different cultural texts, appear to restrict the horizon of the feminist imagination and perpetuate a continuing public discourse of insufficiency and/or deficiency unless a woman's life also includes a romantic coupling. The objective of reading may be "to enrich the imagination," but unless there is a "sign of a lurking prince, a ball dress, or a nicely decorated palace with the mortgage all paid off" then the dreams in stories are not "conventionally tagged as female" (Kress, 1997, p. 1). Romance fiction is the genre that is most closely associated and affiliated with HEA-HFN narratives. It is a feminised form of fiction that women mostly write and women mostly read, and its popularity is long-standing, continuing, and growing.

In her first memoir Helen Knott (2019) calls upon Grandmother Moon, as "the constant light with the darkness" and all "the grandmothers who came before us" as a source of "wisdom and knowledge" (pp. 148-149). This invocation echoes the importance of women's stories for women readers who use their reading to negotiate the realities of heteronormative patriarchy. This applies across reading material that women readers absorb in diverse formats, various genres, and different geographical locations. Inea Bushnaq (2018), in her translation of Arab folktales, points to a similar phenomenon. The oral stories she metamorphosizes into print immortalize a tradition where women shared for-women-only variations of well-known tales with one another. In these tales, the main characters are often young women who are brave, witty, and resilient. No matter the circumstances the protagonists find themselves at the start "whether poverty or oppression", they prevail; "they are the heroines in the end" (Bushnaq, 2018, p. 15). In such folk tales, as with romance fiction, it is the search of women through time and history for ways to be victors in a man's world. The continuity

of HEA-HFN narratives through, across, and between generations is one that merits further exploration. Investigating the relationship women 65 and older have had with such social scripts would enrich the feminist discourse and provide valuable insight into the ways women have not only negotiated the narratives, but how they have experienced the narratives in their lives.

As I have discussed, I chose to focus on recruiting research participants who self-identified as women. This reflected my decision to emphasize continuity with the epistemological tradition of feminist cultural studies that sought to validate, legitimize, and value *woman* and women's activities as categories of study. My intent, as I have stated previously, was not to be exclusionary and I relied on an ontological shorthand to help me structure this one research study. However, I espouse more expansive ways of understanding gender, such as the one captured in this suggestion from writer, performer, and trans activist Julia Serano (2010):

> Instead of saying that all gender is this or all gender is that, let's recognize that the word gender has scores of meanings built into it. It's an amalgamation of bodies, identities, and life experiences, subconscious urges, sensations, and behaviors, some of which develop organically, and others which are shaped by language and culture. Instead of saying that gender is any one single thing, let's start describing it as a holistic experience. (p. 87)

If I adopted this holistic perspective as the basis for a future study, then I would eliminate gender categorization in the recruitment process to convene reading salons of diverse gender representations. This would also be useful in understanding how gender diversity shapes the reception of and reaction to HEA-HFN narratives. Similarly, I would endeavour to vary the proposed reading selections in the hope that participants would choose to read romance novels featuring protagonists of differing gender and sexual identities. Insofar as this research study has supported, if not confirmed, some of the ways that HEA-HFN narratives influence women's views of themselves and the role of romantic love in their lives, it would be interesting to talk to individuals who never read romance fiction – how do they withstand the lure? – and to those who read romance novels and yet resist the coupling imperative and/or espouse lifestyles that emphasize alternate social arrangements to the ones valorized in tales of finding one's true love.

Finally, the range of topics the reading salon members explored was expansive and provided insight into the lives of women readers today. To share the content of

these discussions here, I have presented, organized, and analyzed the findings in the three broad categories: trauma, diversity, and violence; sex, shame, and security; and aspiration, experience, and harm. However, one of the most intriguing ideas the reading salon members explored with me over the course of the three meetings, and to me one of the most troubling, was the infantilization of women and the perceived need to camouflage women's desires and sexual agency as represented and portrayed in romance fiction. The participants saw this reflected in the cover design of *Chloe Brown* and a visit to the romance section of any major bookstore verifies this trend. Similarly, A recent online article from *The New York Times* recommending "four saucy January [2024] releases" (Waite, 2024), featured an illustrated design accompanying the article that was cartoonish and the four book covers, two of which feature same-sex relationships, were presented in a similar fashion.

This paradox of "hot stories" in girl-like packaging illustrates a double standard that Lee Maracle (2008) mentions in her essay, "First Wives Club. Salish Style." In sharing this Salish legend of women and female sexuality, and as part of the preamble to the fable, Maracle (2008) writes, "Western society's values have always confused me. On the one hand, sexiness and young women is desired, but on the other hand, for a very long time the sexy woman engaging in sex was considered immoral" (p. 171). If modern society's solution to the perceived immorality of sexually active women is to conceal the reality of such activity, then society is not addressing the paradox of expecting women to be sexual without appearing to be sexual. This continues to stigmatize women's agentic sexuality while perpetuating the hegemony of the coupling imperative in HEA-HFN narratives. I believe it is critical to understand this phenomenon beyond the narrow scope of romance fiction and to research the infantilization of women beyond the covers. In my view, the paradox between celebrating female agency, subjectivity, and independence in a world that continues to camouflage what it means to be a woman is a recipe for asserting and maintaining patriarchal control and sexist oppression (hooks, 2000/2015).

7.4. "I Also Saw Different Perspectives": Conclusion

Literacy is at its most powerful when it is being exercised and experienced in the present. In the context of reading, engagement in the present brings a text to life with purpose and intention. The agentic act is in the reanimation and reimagining of the

words, the characters, the people, the worlds, the places, the plots, and the stories, whether fiction or non-fiction. The gendered nature of reading, and the way in which it reflects the gendered nature of society, is an impetus for studying women readers because when women use reading to understand their *now*, they reveal the reality of the material conditions that impact their lives. In doing so, women can counter discourses that focus on self-improvement, fixing the self, and blaming the individual rather than investigating and interrogating the systems, structures, and historical legacies with which women grapple. The narrative of women readers is a narrative of challenging boundaries, constraints, and limitations to claim the right to be in the public realm, to debate as a peer, and to engage in discourses (Flint, 1993; Jack, 2012; Long, 2003).

In earlier eras, measures to control what women read were justified as a need to protect the vulnerable, impressionable, passive, uncritical female reader from the immorality of the writer (Flint, 1993, p. 88). The reader was Eve and the writer the snake in the Garden of Eden. Books, particularly novels, were the apple. This understanding was reflected in the alarm around the sensation fiction of the 1860s that expressed sexual desire and sexual energy. When a woman was the author of one of these texts, anxiety intensified because the writers "exhibited extremely unladylike familiarity with the scenes about which they wrote" (Flint, 1993, p. 275). In their knowledge of sexual intimacy and their willingness to share their knowledge, these novelists were transgressors. They represented a threat to propriety and to the innocence of their readers, but publishers were happy to publish the scandalous material and to profit accordingly. If sexual knowledge is construed as a realm of power, then women need to read, speak, and talk about sex and sexual content, because, as Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1979/1993) argues,

> Resistance to genuine dialogue is one of the chief signs of power. Women must continue to invade the domains of power in order to change institutions as we know them, in order to offer places to other women, in order to offer all children the possibility of testing their abilities, and, finally, in order to do justice to themselves. (p. 208)

If reading is a base for challenging "the domains of power", then it is a mechanism for women to learn from one another although this raises the question of who bears the burden for teaching.

Reading, no matter the form, is about knowing and knowledge. As such it is always in conversation with power, those who have it, wield it, benefit from it, and those who do not. The shifting boundaries between spheres, genres, and forms do not presage the end of reading, nor a diminution in its potentialities. Rather, it is the story of everchanging boundaries in the intersections of and points of connection between art, society, and culture, as expressed through books and all that surrounds books (Driscoll & Squires, 2020). Reading bonds women as co-voyagers in life, as culture meaning makers, and social change agents. It is a shared experience woman enjoy and use to acknowledge the human condition, wonder at the world's beauty, build solidarity, and fight for change to the material conditions that limit their participation as agentic subjects and citizens. In addition to the act of reading, it is the power of shared dialogue that presages the potential for change. Amna summarized the potentiality when she said, "And I also saw different perspectives on romance and happily-ever-afters or, you know, even relationships in general" (RS3 transcript, p. 114). Despite the potential for dialogue to unmask the power of heteronormativity, even when the topic of discussion is romance fiction, the genre perpetuates an understanding that obfuscates the patriarchal privilege and hierarchy embedded in coupledom.

When I finished reading *Death in a Tenured Position*, an Amanda Cross (1981) mystery novel, I used Facebook to say how much I had enjoyed the book as much as I had enjoyed others in the series. Elizabeth (2023), a pseudonym for one of my friends on the platform, commented on my post. She wrote, "I'll have to check these out. I love mysteries and romance because they usually have a nice resolved ending, unlike real life." I asked Elizabeth if I could quote her in my dissertation, and she replied, "Certainly. I think people underestimate the fun and lightness a good romance or mystery can do for you. Life can be hard." In this way, Elizabeth summarized the central paradox of romance fiction and other genres that provide a way to escape life's realities. People acknowledge these forms as fantasies, and in the case of romance fiction it is a fantasy where love triumphs and two people find their life-long match in one another. The question is whether this escapist fantasy of love is harmful. In and of itself, it is not and Elizabeth is right. Life is hard and why should the things that provide people pleasure or lighten their load be critiqued? If such things were to be disembodied and disentangled from the world, then there is no problem. However, cultural forms cannot be considered in a decontextualized manner. To me, literature, including genre fiction, has implications

for living and scholars must continue to investigate the influence and consequences of written work (Kress, 1997, p. 53). When a cultural form, such as happily-ever-after and happy-for-now (HEA-HFN) narratives, persist and are replicated endlessly while systems, structures, and institutions, that continue to disadvantage many, do not change, then I believe the discourse of *no harm caused* is dangerous. In my view, such a discourse is a deflection that obscures the material realities of social inequities.

In “Chronicle of a Rape Foretold: Holding Queer Community to Account”, Kai Cheng Thom (2019) cautions the queer community about a similar phenomenon. Thom references the queer community’s dreams of a space that is “safe for our bodies, safe for our souls, safe for an infinite rainbow of diverse gender and sexual expression” (p. 53). She dubs this homeland with no borders Queerlandia, a space where everyone is free, included, valued, paid attention to, and not exploited. Thom explains she was only able to understand Queerlandia as utopian when she found her queer community because she found violence and harm there, too. She also found a tendency to deny her existence. In recounting an instant of assault, Thom explains that the bystanders, even those who identified as queer scholars, academics, and activists, chose to say nothing. Thom’s conclusion is that Queerlandia, the place she “longed to live in … is only the shell of perfection, the illusion of safety painted over the surface of a more desperate reality” (p. 66). She concludes that she has learned or come to realize that where she wants to live is in the real world. A place she deems as uglier, but a more honest one.

I see an echo of Queerlandia in Romancelandia. In HEA-HFN narratives, the protagonists find each other and together will live in the shimmering illusion of love as a space of freedom, equality, harmony, contentment, and comfort. The appeal is undeniable. Yet, if we understand that love is a path towards building a better, more just world, then by centring a coupling imperative as the default option — the best, most readily socially sanctioned option — for intimacies and relationships, the outcome itself becomes sufficient and negates the requirement for critical diligence or diligent criticality, advocacy, and change. No matter which components of romance fiction are altered, it remains a script that women have followed. As Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1988/2008) writes,

> We women have lived too much with closure: ‘If he notices me, if I marry him, if I get into college, if I get this work accepted, if I get that job’ — there always seems to loom the possibility of something being over, settled, sweeping, clear the way for contentment. This is the delusion of a passive

> life. When the hope for closure is abandoned, when there is an end to fantasy, adventure for women will begin. Endings — the kind [Jane] Austen tacked onto her novels — are for romance or for daydreams, but not for life. (p. 130)

The challenge is "how to look at each other through the lenses of love and justice at the same time" (Thom, 2019, p. 53) and not to confuse justice with love or accept love as a substitute for justice. As independent scholar Laura Vivanco (2016) notes, "American pop culture is 'big business'" (p. 13), and "romance readers cannot escape politics" (p. 14) because they are surrounded by it and romance fiction has its own politics.

On June 20, 2022, during the second reading salon, Elif noted that she had only read two romance novels and those were the two she had read to prepare for the reading salons. In response, Gina said, "I wonder if it'll convert you to reading more romance?" to which Elif replied, "Oh, a hundred percent not" (RS2 transcript, p. 93). And she was right. Elif is now the principal organizer of a book club with a feminist orientation. The idea for such a book club had occurred to her three years earlier and due to a variety of circumstances, she was not able to establish it then (RS2 transcript, p. 111). As she told me after the last reading salon on July 25, 2022,

> So, after we started this, I went back in my notes and in March two thousand nineteen, I made a note in my phone saying, "Feminist Book Club." And like I lived in the UK at the time, so I was like writing all these feminists down that I should find, the concept. But then my dad got sick, so it never happened because I moved away. He's fine, but now it's like this is full circle because now it's starting to happen. (RS3 transcript, p. 122)

Her engagement with this research study on HEA-HFN narratives led her back to the original idea and during the group's second meeting she mentioned that she had not "thought about anything else for the last month" (RS2 transcript, p. 111). The book club is still running, and participants suggest books, provide brief descriptions of the content, and list trigger warnings. Everyone votes on the proposed selections, and the book with the most votes is the book the group reads.

Since first convening Elif's book club has read only one romance novel, *You Made a Fool of Death With Your Beauty* by Nigerian novelist Akwaeke Emezi (2022). In initially declining to explore romance fiction on a more regular basis, the book club was stratifying the hierarchy of fiction and contributing to the dismissal of a genre that flourishes, adapts, and satisfies the needs of many women in a multifaceted manner.

The reading salon members did not lose or compromise their feminist perspective because they read romance fiction. The experience of dissecting *Viscount*, *Seven Days*, and *Chloe Brown*, discussing these books in community, and evaluating the place of HEA-HFN narratives in the conjuncture of these times, strengthened their feminist resolve to enjoy the pleasure of reading the stories while demanding better representations and undermining the hegemony of the coupling imperative. Over the course of the three meetings, this group of women tackled substantive subjects that were of material significance to them and to all women, in meaningful and purposeful dialogue. The discussions reinforced their notion of the necessity for women's independence in face of the overwhelming preponderance of the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham, 2020). The genre may be linked to the patriarchal, but the paradox is that reading in the genre has the potential to be a decidedly feminist act. Perhaps the realization of this seemingly paradoxical relationship between feminism and the romance genre moved the book club to select a romance novel although interestingly one from an author not typically represented in the majority demographic of romance fiction writers.

The act of taking time to read what one wants to read, or prioritizing one's desires as a woman, is subversive and empowering as Janice Radway (1984/1991) found in her foundational study of women readers of romance fiction. Claiming this time and with the power of stories to shape visions of alternative ways of being, also allows space for refusal. In these three reading salons, as with the consciousness raising groups of the Women's Liberation Movement, the circle created the spark for feminist discourse to flourish. To read and discuss romance fiction is not just about studying a text and the objective of research should not merely be to judge whether this fits an idealized notion of feminism or to prescribe women's reading choices as appropriate or not. Reading romance fiction and indulging in the intoxicating magic of HEA-HFN narratives, is to engage in a negotiation with social relations, cultural structures, and the network of dictates that govern women's lives. In using this genre as a vehicle for dialogue, readers can embrace the diversity of women's self-expression and celebrate the choices women make in a world designed to constrain their choices. Joining together, women readers of romance fiction can leverage their critiques to reclaim the agency and autonomy to be fully human in mind, body, and soul with the option to resist, refuse, rebel; to transform self, community, and the world into realities that celebrate love and relationships in a much more visionary and expansive manner.

As a theoretical orientation, feminism offers a standpoint to critique culture and society. It is more difficult to identify alternatives because feminism recognizes the value of multiplicities, embraces paradoxes, and argues for complexities rather than one-size-fits-all solutions. In terms of HEA-HFN narratives, an alternative feminist vision is not about removing romance from the lives of people or disavowing the beneficent aspects of love. It is not even about abandoning marriage. It is about constructing environments that allow for more flexibility in how people, and particularly women, organize their personal lives. That is, it is about disrupting the hegemonic coupling imperative as the ideal form of intimate entanglement and altering discourses that see individuals as incomplete or deficient unless they are part of a pair that establishes a nuclear family including children. It is about allowing women to be happily single, or happily polyamorous, or happily asexual without such happiness entailing a loss of rights, social standing, or material well-being. It is a big ask because many social, cultural, political, economic, and legal institutions are organized, implemented, and enforced based on the heterosexual coupling imperative. The challenge is to promote alternatives without sinking into a heteropessimism that inspires drastic proposals including ones such as Shulamith Firestone's (1970/2015) vision of technological reproduction.

If discussions, discourses, and academic endeavours extend beyond exploring whether "it's okay to read romance", then imaginations can encompass many ways of forming relationships and organizing social arrangements. This is the radical revolutionary hope of a feminist understanding that elevates the feminist horizon beyond the love imaginary where romantic love is entrenched as the ideal, as the pinnacle of one's emotional life. Reading and discussing romance fiction, as well as other cultural texts that embody HEA-HFN narratives, is a path that can successfully help readers delineate the parameters of social and cultural challenges, but those challenges will remain unresolved if communities are satisfied with winning on the page. The fantasy of romantic love wields incredible power. Viewing it through a critical lens is not about discounting women's pleasures and desires. But if women continue to get caught up in the magic and promise of this one type of narrative, the result will be that instead of reaping the reward of happiness, they will end up experiencing the erosion of their autonomy, agency, and authority in the lives they lead and the spaces they inhabit. I believe we must devote less energy, time, and resources on our individual hearts, and reallocate them to the betterment of our world's collective soul.

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Appendix A.

Recruitment Poster

Let's Talk About
Happily Ever After Stories

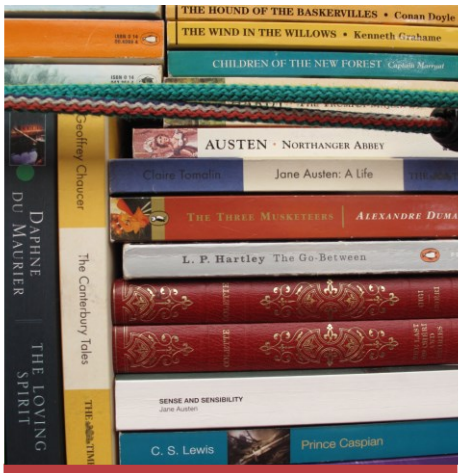


Photo Credit: Reema Faris

For more information, contact:

Reema Faris
PhD Candidate

Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
Simon Fraser University

Do you read for fun? Like to discuss novels? Want to join this group?

To participate in this research study, you will:

- Read three novels
- Attend 3 or 4 group meetings
- Respond to email correspondence

Each meeting will last a minimum of 90 minutes and no more than 2 hours.

Interested?

To apply, visit:
https://www.surveymonkey.ca/r/DG92LJ5

Link will close on May 10, 2022

Study # 30000831
11 April 2022 (V. 1)

SFU SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

The recruitment poster appeared in social media posts on Instagram and Facebook, with contact information, and the GSWS Department shared it via email to distribution lists.

Appendix B.

Online Questionnaire

Reading Women: Negotiating the Intoxicating Morass of "Happily Ever After" and "Happy For Now" (Research Ethics #30000831)

1. Do you have a passion for reading?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. What type of work do you enjoy reading? Check all that apply.

☐ Fiction

☐ Non-Fiction

☐ Women's Fiction

☐ Biography, Autobiography, & Memoir

☐ Society, Culture, & Current Events

☐ Literature

☐ Romance

☐ Erotica

☐ Mystery & Suspense

☐ Erotica

☐ Food, Drink, & Travel

☐ Other (please specify) _____

3. Participants in this study must be 19 years or older. If you are over 19, which age group do you fall into?

☐ 19-29

☐ 30-49

☐ 50-69

☐ 70-79

☐ 80+

4. How do you describe your gender identity?

5. Are you interested in exploring “happily ever after” stories?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. Can you commit to three meetings, one per month, from May to July 2022?

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. Are you fully vaccinated (3 shots) against Covid-19?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Prefer not to disclose

8. What are the best ways to reach you? Check all that apply.

☐ Email

☐ Text/SMS

☐ WhatsApp

☐ Social Media Direct Messaging - Instagram

☐ Social Media Direct Messaging - Facebook Messenger

☐ Social Media Direct Messaging - Twitter

☐ Telephone

☐ Other (please specify) _____

9. The contact information you provide below will not be shared. Please note that if you are confirmed as a study participant, the information you provide will be kept for the duration of the research study. If you are not confirmed as a study participant, the information you provide here will be deleted once the recruitment process for study participants has been completed.

First Name _____

Last Name _____

Preferred Name _____

Email _____

Telephone _____

Mobile Telephone _____

Appendix C.

Discussion Protocol

Reading Women: Negotiating the Intoxicating Morass of “Happily Ever After” and “Happy For Now” (Research Ethics #30000831)

Pre-Arrival Check
Review room set-up Create a circle, table in centre with chairs around the perimeter, which will provide a working surface for participants to use Ensure that refreshments are in the room Provide pens and notepads for the personal use of participants Check audio-visual recording equipment is in place and working Audio recorder on the table Video recorder adjacent to the discussion area Turn on audio/visual recording equipment only after all consent forms are reviewed, signed, and collected (as indicated below in the opening section of each reading salon meeting) Ensure consent forms are ready for review and signing Distribute consent forms to participants as they arrive. Ask them to review the form before signing it and answer any questions they may have Be sure to confirm contact information, obtain permission to quote in published study findings, and verify pseudonyms with each participant as they submit their signed copy of the consent form Invite participants to create name cards Provide copies of signed consent forms to participants at the second salon meeting Distribute gift bags to participants as they arrive
Reading Salon – Meeting 1 of 3 – 90 minutes to 2 hours

Comfort Breaks	Coffee, tea, and light refreshments will be available in the room Participants may help themselves to the refreshments at any time If necessary, participants may leave the room at any time to use washroom facilities, take a phone call, etc.
Thesis Proposal Research Question	In what ways does the engagement of women readers with written fiction inform their negotiation of and relationship with "happily ever after" and "happy for now" narratives?
Opening – Salon 1	Welcome and Land Acknowledgement I respectfully acknowledge that Simon Fraser University's (SFU's) three campuses reside on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úx̱wumixw (Squamish), səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), qʼíc̓əy̓ (Katzie), kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, and Tsawwassen Peoples. I recognize my status as an uninvited guest and settler on the Land these Peoples have been stewards of for longer than can be remembered. I invite you to consider your relationship to these spaces and places, and to the legacies of the history that brings us to this moment in time. Review logistics: upcoming meeting dates and times the plan for the day any other pertinent details Ask for electronic devices to be on silent, that phone calls are answered outside the room, etc. Agree on general guidelines for discussion and participation, and emphasize measures to ensure confidentiality Activate audio/visual equipment Round of introductions Invite participants to introduce themselves Participants will decide what information they feel comfortable sharing with the group Provide a brief overview of the study, explain positionality, and highlight study themes

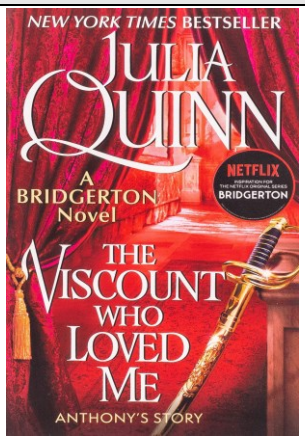
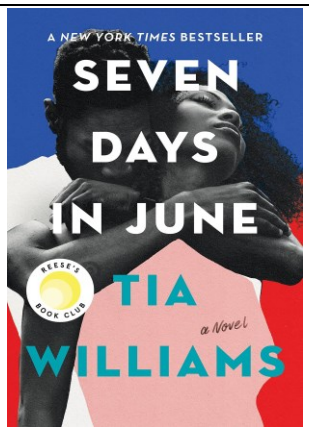
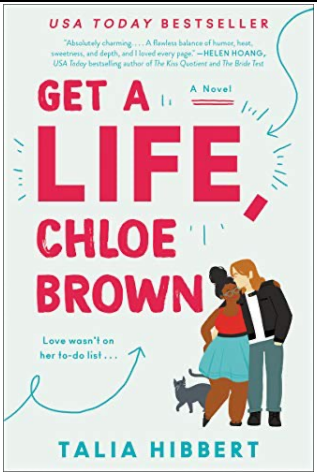
	Include a brief explanation of what the difference is between a "happily ever after" and "happy for now" story Ask participants for any questions they may have. One way of inviting questions is to say, "I would like someone to ask me a question before we move on."
Discussion Questions	Discussion questions listed below are topic guidelines rather than a script. Questions are variable and will be adapted in response to participant input. The emphasis is on flexibility so that the flow of conversation directs the ways in which the researcher-moderator reframes, eliminates, combines, and/or changes questions.
Discussion - Salon 1	Introductory questions Thinking about the different types of reading you do, and how your reading habits may have changed over time how would you describe yourself as a reader? What is one of your favourite books that tells a happily ever after/happy for now story? Conversation about *The Viscount Who Loved Me* by Julia Quinn, the second book in the Bridgerton Series. Prompts will include, but are not limited to: By a show of hands, how many of you thought this was a "happily ever after" story? A "happy for now" story? What story elements helped you decide to categorize the novel as you did? If you were to describe this story to someone else, what would you say are its key themes and messages? What impact do you think these themes and messages have on women readers? If you were able to converse with a character in the story, who would you choose to talk to and why? What advice would you give them? The second season of Bridgerton on Netflix is based on this novel. For those of you who have watched the show, which of the themes and messages we've discussed today were prioritized in the adaptation? Wrap up the conversation about *The Viscount Who Loved Me* by Julia Quinn Distribute book ballots. Ask if anyone wants to speak to a particular novel before having participants fill out their preferences.
Closing – Salon 1	Ask each participant to share their thoughts on that day's salon experience and discussion

	Ask participants for any questions they may have and if they have any suggestions for the next salon Wrap up salon meeting and extend thanks Let participants know that they are welcome to talk to the moderator directly after the meeting has wrapped up. They may also be in touch via email between meetings, too. Deactivate audio/visual equipment once all participants have left

*The discussion protocol was adapted for each subsequent meeting.

Appendix D.

Reading Salon Books

Book Covers	Book Jacket Author Biographies
	Avon Books, 2015 (originally published 2000) With tens of millions of copies of her books in print, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Julia Quinn has been called "Smart, funny" by *TIME* Magazine. Her novels have been translated into 36 languages and are beloved the world over. A graduate of Harvard and Radcliffe Colleges, she lives with her family in the Pacific Northwest. Look for BRIDGERTON, based on her popular series of novels about the Bridgerton family, on Netflix.
	Grand Central Publishing, Hachette Book Group, 2021 Tia Williams had a fifteen-year career as a beauty editor for magazines including *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Lucky*, *Teen People*, and *Essence*. In 2004, she pioneered the beauty-blog industry with her award-winning site, Shake Your Beauty. She wrote the bestselling debut novel *The Accidental Diva* and penned two young adult novels, *It Chicks* and *Sixteen Candles*. Her most recent novel, the award-winning *The Perfect Find*, is being adapted by Netflix for a film starring Gabrielle Union. Tia is currently an editorial director at Estée Lauder Companies and lives with her daughter and husband in Brooklyn
	Avon Books, 2019 Talia Hibbert is a Black British author who lives in a bedroom full of books. Supposedly, there is a world beyond that room, but she has yet to drum up enough interest to investigate. She writes sexy, diverse romance because she believes that people of marginalized identities need honest and positive representation. Her interests include beauty, junk food, and unnecessary sarcasm.

Appendix E.

Book Ballots

Reading Salon 2: Book Choices

Salon members have recommended the following novels for our next meeting. Please indicate your top three selections in order of preference.

Preferences (1, 2, and 3)	Author (in alphabetical order)	Title & Genre*
	Monica Ali	*Love Marriage* (Literary Fiction)
	Auriane Desombre	*I Think I Love You* (Queer Romance)
	Ali Hazelwood	*The Love Hypothesis* (Contemporary Romance)
	Talia Hibbert	*Get a Life, Chloe Brown* (Contemporary Romance)
	Marian Keyes	*Again, Rachel* (Humour, Fiction)
	Casey McQuiston	*One Last Stop* (LGBT Romance)
	Madeline Miller	*Circe* (Literary Fantasy)
	Nita Prose	*The Maid* (Mystery, Literary Fiction)
	Tia Williams	*Seven Days in June* (Contemporary Romance)

* I've used the genre categories from a preliminary online search.

Reading Salon 3: Book Choices

Salon members have recommended the following novels for our next meeting. Please indicate your top three selections in order of preference.

Preferences (1, 2, and 3)	Author (in alphabetical order)	Title & Genre*
	Monica Ali	*Love Marriage* (Literary Fiction)
	Auriane Desombre	*I Think I Love You* (Queer Romance)
	Ali Hazelwood	*The Love Hypothesis* (Contemporary Romance)
	Emily Henry	*Book Lovers* (Contemporary Romance)
	Colleen Hoover	*It Ends With Us* (Contemporary Romance)
	Talia Hibbert	*Get a Life, Chloe Brown* (Contemporary Romance)
	Marian Keyes	*Again, Rachel* (Humour, Fiction)
	Casey McQuiston	*One Last Stop* (LGBT Romance)
	Madeline Miller	*Circe* (Literary Fantasy)
	Nita Prose	*The Maid* (Mystery, Literary Fiction)

* I've used the genre categories from a preliminary online search.