

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1. The Paradox of the Literary Romance Reader

I am a romance reader and have been for a long time. During a boring summer day when I was about twelve I snuck one of those little, brightly colored books, its cover promisingly boasting a passionately embracing half-naked couple, out of my mom's book case and curled up with it on a couch. Little did I know it was the beginning of a love affair, perhaps as torrid as those described over and over again in the pages of the brightly colored, passion-covered books I began to devour, that fifteen years later continues unabated. I am also a scholar of literature. Over the course of an education that has lasted almost ten years I have been trained in the study, analysis and critical discussion of literature and have developed a love for its methods, theories and concepts that is a genuine as my more naively formed love for romance novels. While my passion for the study of literature rivals my passion for the popular romance novel, I soon came to understand that these two objects of my affection move in very different circles. I learned that while no one seems to really know what literature is, many literary scholars do seem to have an idea of what it is not. Popular romance novels are one of the things that literature is, apparently, not. Though I was never told outright, I learned nonetheless that while in recent decades popular romance novels might have been deemed worthy of the attention of scholars in fields such as Cultural Studies, Communication Studies and, unavoidable given the subject matter, Women's Studies, no self-respecting scholar of literature lets loose their analytical skills on this most popular of genres. I learned, in other words, that a *literary* analysis of popular romance novels – a study of these texts not as pop culture phenomena, iconic commodities in a profit-driven culture industry or women's entertainment, but as literature – is generally not deemed legitimate. I respectfully disagree. This dissertation is born out of that respectful disagreement and is a reflection of my intensive pursuit as a trained literary scholar of the study of popular romance novels as literature.

The tacit assumptions that inform the opposition between literature and popular romance hold that literature revolves around such notions as innovation, unique performance by individual artists and avant-garde authors, literariness, sophisticated literary techniques, alienation, multiplicity, complexity and evolution, whereas the popular romance is seen as the epitome of repetition, formula, patterns, similarity, simplicity, superficiality, mechanical writing and conventionality. In the same vein the "author" as a literary concept discussed for

example by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes is always already seen as belonging to the realm of “literature” whereas the writers of romance novels are not perceived as belonging to the same category. Instead, their writings are seen as mainly informed by “genre” (as in “genre fiction”) which is then often implicitly interpreted as an always already existing formula of conventions which seems antithetical to the literary idea of authorship.

This tension between literature and romance thus informs the main research question this study focuses on, which concerns the relation between genre and authorship in the formation of textual identity in a corpus of romance novels written by a single author. More precisely, this study focuses on the oeuvre of contemporary American popular romance author Nora Roberts, who has written over two hundred novels and is one of the most popular and successful authors in the popular romance genre today. This study traces the relation between genre and authorship in Roberts’ massive oeuvre and analyzes how in the course of a career that spans nearly three decades Roberts develops from a semi-anonymous romance author into a superstar whose every novel turns into an instant bestseller, yet who is still not considered to be writing literature. In discussing the complex processes which constitute this transformation, I rely on understandings of the concepts of genre and authorship that have emerged in literary theory. Instead of applying these literary concepts in the study and analysis of the high-brow, critically respected literature with which they are always already associated and usually illustrated and for which these concepts are then not in principle but in practice mainly devised, I deliberately break with this long-standing tradition of Literary Studies and use these literary concepts and methodologies to study a corpus of popular romance novels and thus a body of work that is, in this same tradition, implicitly seen as the opposite of literature, indeed the icon of non-literature.

This dissertation is thus on the one hand situated in what is coming to be known as the field of “popular romance studies” – the scholarly study of the representation of romantic love in popular culture, a field that so far consists predominantly of studies of the popular romance novel – and uses, on the other hand, concepts and methodologies that stem from the broad field of literary theory. In the rest of this introductory chapter the relation of this work to both these scholarly frames that surround it is further discussed.

## 2. Concepts and Methodologies

This study as a whole relies on concepts and methods of analysis that are common in the study of literature; it uses, for example, several narratological concepts in the narrative analyses of the corpus and its central concern with the paratext stems from well-established literary theories. While I believe it is unnecessary to introduce and define each of the literary concepts and analytical techniques that are thus used in this study, I do consider it methodologically prudent to briefly elaborate upon the precise definitions and conceptualisations adopted in this study of two of its most central concepts: genre and authorship. These conceptualisations of authorship and genre namely provide much of the core methodological principles according to which this study is carried out and are as such central to its conceptual set-up and execution.

### 2.1 The Author

The conceptualization of the author adopted in this study makes, first of all, a fundamental distinction between the person of the author and the literary concept “author”. It is the second kind of “author” – the author as a literary construct – that is discussed in this study. While this author is never completely separate from the person of the author, neither does this notion ever fully coincide with this person. The author concept that is adopted in this study also fundamentally refutes the (Romantic) conceptualization of the author as the creative genius who is both the origin and the master of the meanings of and in the text. This kind of author was famously declared dead by Roland Barthes in his short but seminal text “The Death of the Author” (1968) that is often considered central to Postmodernism and Post-structuralism. In this same overall poststructuralist vein this dissertation conceives of the author as a discursive construction which enables the assumption of coherence of meaning both within one text and within a group of texts that are attributed to one and the same entity that is called the “author”. This conceptualization of authorship is clearly in line with and indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, who introduces this understanding of authorship in his famous text “What is an Author?” (1969). In this seminal text, which is often considered a reaction to Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” that was published a year earlier, Foucault argues that “we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers” (105). While Barthes argues that the death of the author implies the fundamental birth of the reader as the entity in which the text’s meanings are actualized– an observation that is part of the forces that prompt

the plethora of reader-oriented studies and theories that come about in the following decades – Foucault then holds that the disappearance of the author uncovers lacunae that need to be examined more carefully.

The author construction as conceptualized by Foucault is located in and comes into being, the theorist argues, in the “scission itself” that exists between the “real writer” of the text – i.e. the person who (mechanically) writes the text – and the “speaker” who is talking in the text (112). This kind of author, Foucault argues, is essentially a *function* of the text. It is an entity or a construction that is, as it were, created by the text and that functions as the entity or principle that fundamentally ensures or enables the possibility of the coherence of meaning in and of the text. Although the construction of this kind of author varies throughout history and cultures, there are what Foucault calls “certain constants in the rules of author-construction” (110). These include for example the conceptualization of the author as “a constant level of value”, “a field of conceptual and theoretical coherence”, “a stylistic unity” and “a historical figure at the crossroads of a certain number of events” (111). Although Foucault remains rather vague about this, I find that these “rules of author-construction” imply that there are elements or traces in the text on the basis of which the Foucauldian author is constructed. There are, in other words, textual elements that *perform* authorship, even though this author, as Foucault points out, is never simply present in the text but is “the result of a complex operation which constructs a certain rational being we call ‘author’” (110). It is, however, on the basis of these elements and the (historically and culturally specific) “rules of author-construction” that we are able to “attribute several discourses to one and the same author” (*idem*). To construct, in other words, an authorial oeuvre. The analyses in this dissertation focus precisely on these textual elements that perform authorship in the oeuvre of a single contemporary popular romance author.

Not every text everywhere automatically has this kind of author function, Foucault points out. In our culture, for example, the novel has an author function, but the shopping list does not. Texts with an author function then have a special cultural status; indeed, argues Foucault, the author function is an element that precisely indicates the special “mode of being” (107) of its text in the cultural and historical context in which it figures. It indicates that the text “must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, [it] must receive a certain status” (*idem*). Since Foucault’s discussion, like Barthes’ earlier one, is interspersed with examples of canonical, highbrow authors and works to illustrate his ideas – references include among others Flaubert, Proust and Kafka – the implicit impression might be created in “What is an Author?” that Foucault’s notions apply first and foremost to such highbrow

literature. While Foucault never explicitly makes this claim, the intertext to which his text as a whole refers strongly associates his notions with canonical literature and not with what we would now call lowbrow or popular literature. In this dissertation I will make this connection and consistently use Foucault's conceptualization of authorship to analyze a body of texts and an oeuvre that is decidedly lowbrow. In doing this I illustrate the relevance of this sophisticated literary concept to a kind of literature with which it is not conventionally associated.

That a text has an author function is, according to "What is an Author?", conventionally indicated in our culture by what Foucault calls the "author's name" (105); that is, texts with an author function are attributed to an author who – or in fact actually which – is referred to by a proper name. Although this proper name often appears to function as a normal proper name and refer to a particular individual, Foucault poses that it in fact does not. The author's name signifies, first and foremost, that the text to which it is attributed has an author function and is thus a discourse with a special status. The author name is the signifier that refers to the complex signified that is the author function as conceptualized by Foucault. The author's name furthermore also functions to indicate the existence of a certain link between different texts:

it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition it establishes a relationship among the texts. ... the fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some text by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization. (107)

In other words via the author's name the notion of an authorial *oeuvre* can be developed, since a shared author's name implies not simply that two or more texts are written by the same writer, but that they function according to the same principle that allows for the possible existence of coherence of meaning within and between the different texts.

In this dissertation the textual performance of authorship in such an oeuvre – a group of texts that via a shared author's name are attributed to one and the same author – is analyzed. In these analyses the notion of the "text" is conceived of in a broad manner. "Text" is thus not simply taken to refer to the linguistic text – a collection of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs – but to also include all the elements that conventionally surround the material manifestation of the linguistic text. It is namely in these elements surrounding the

narrative text – a disparate group of elements that is often referred with term “paratext” – that the attribution of authorship via the author’s name in part takes place in our contemporary culture. The text of a novel is attributed to an author – the author’s name is connected to this text – in part by the fact that, for example, the author’s name appears on the cover and the title page of the book in which the text is printed. In my analysis of the performance of authorship I will then systematically compare the narrative performance of authorship – the textual elements that provide the material on the basis of which via the rules of author construction the author as principle of coherence of meaning can be constructed – to the paratextual attribution of authorship that takes place in, mainly, connecting the text to the author’s name.

## 2.2 Genre

“Genre” is the second concept in this study that, like the conceptualization of “author”, is not only central to this study but also determines part of its methodological set-up. Unlike the concept of authorship, however, which is conceptualized here mainly on the basis of the seminal text by Michel Foucault, the conceptualization of genre that is adopted in this study is not based on one particular theory, but emerges as a kind of amalgam of several different (poststructuralist) interpretations of genre that are articulated in literary theory today.<sup>1</sup>

Genre is often considered a system of classification that categorizes texts on the basis of shared features. A naïve but intuitively very attractive interpretation of the concept conceives of genre as an ontological entity that exists outside of the texts it orders and that denotes categories to which texts can either belong or not. In such a conceptualization a text belongs to, for example, the category of popular romance if and when it has the features that determine this genre – e.g. a love story with a happy ending. In such conceptualizations genre is often implicitly considered to be static – it is always and everywhere the same – and to function as a discrete principle of classification – that is, a text either belongs to a genre or it does not. While such conceptualizations of genre are intuitively attractive and pose few problems in day-to-day dealings with texts, in literary theory these conceptualizations have long been refuted for being too simplistic and static. Drawing on the one hand on some of these more modern, poststructuralist theories and on the other hand on my own knowledge and experience of (the popular romance) genre – which, I have long observed, is for example not static and un-evolving – I develop my own interpretation of the concept of genre.

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<sup>1</sup> I mainly base my own conceptualisation of genre on the articulations and overviews of these theories in John Frow’s insightful and complete *Genre* (2006), which gives an overview of both the history of genre theory and the main contemporary developments in this area.

While my conceptualization of genre thus emerges in dialogue with the corpus on which this study is based, it also developed as a triangulation between three concepts that John Frow's overview of genre theory indicates are central in current theoretic conceptualizations of the notion: performance, use and institutions. Contemporary (poststructuralist) genre theories quite consistently conceive of genre as a performative entity; that is, as something that is performed in and by texts (Frow 17-29). This interpretation almost automatically puts an end to the implicit notion that genres are static, unchanging entities, since each performance potentially entails not only consistency but also change. Genre is also quite often connected to the notion of use and use value. Scholars such as Thomas Beebee suggest that the use of a text performatively expresses its genre; this implies that use is an element that constitutes genre (Frow, 134). In such a conceptualization genre is thus not only an element that is intrinsic to the text, but also extrinsic to it and that is related to the ways in which the text functions in the world in which it figures. The connection between genre and institutions has, according to Frow's overview, most clearly been formulated in the work of film scholars such as Rick Altman, whose work on Hollywood films (1999) essentially argues that institutions play a central role in the constitution, development and preservation of genres (Frow, 137-39). While Altman focuses on film, it seems likely that similar principles apply to literature and that consequently categorization of literary texts as situated in specific genres is co-produced by institutional inscriptions that surround these texts.

While the methodological interest for use and institutions might lead to the study of genre through reception – via e.g. reader interviews, economic analyses of publishing houses, etc. – my background as a literary scholar leads me in another direction in my dealings with genre. My fundamental interest is not so much in the *actual* reception itself, but in the literary and material realities this reception is based on and prompted by. These realities namely provide a kind of “program” for the use of the text that each individual user of the text is likely to (at least in part) encounter. This “program” is also influenced by institutional aspects. For example, a book published by the publisher Harlequin/Silhouette is implicitly programmed to be used as a popular romance novel because of its publisher. To systematically analyze and trace this program of use, I turn to the notion of the “paratext”. Originally coined by the French theorist Gerard Genette (1997), the term “paratext” generally refers to the various elements that “enable a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1). In this dissertation I interpret the notion of the “paratext” predominantly as a series of institutional inscriptions that perform genre and other aspects of the text's identity.

This conceptualization of the paratext is narrower than Genette's, but in other ways relies very much on the scholar's observations. Like Genette, I make a distinction between two paratextual zones or two types of paratextual elements. On the one hand there are the paratextual elements that are part of the text as a material object in the world. This is what Genette refers to as the "peritext"; it includes such elements as the book cover, the title page, the title, the colophon, the foreword and the advertisements printed in the back of the book. On the other hand my conceptualization of paratext includes a number of the elements of what Genette calls the "epitext", which are paratextual elements that are not materially connected to the publication of the text. In my analyses the focus lies on the epitextual elements that are connected to literary institutions, such reviews, literary prizes and bestseller lists.

Overall, the conceptualization of genre that is used in this dissertation then conceives of genre as a performative entity that is constituted by elements that are located in, at the edge of and outside of the text. While in all of these zones the performance of genre in part relies on conventions – features that are generally considered characteristic of the genre and that thus perform it – genre is also conceptualized as an inherently dynamic entity that always and necessarily evolves and changes. The conceptualization of genre as a performative entity finally also implies that genre membership is not an absolute but a gradual matter; genre can be performed more or less strongly.

### **2.3 Genre and Authorship in the Textual Identity of Popular Romance Novels**

As I remarked earlier, popular romance novels are a kind of literature that is often exclusively associated with notions such as formula, repetition, similarity and mechanical writing. This conceptualization of the popular romance novel is, I argue, based on a perception that is dominated by an incorrect understanding of genre. In this perception the romance novel is stereotypically conceived of as a kind of text completely dominated by the genre to which it belongs and this genre is subsequently conceived of as a static, un-evolving, ontological category. This is one of the elements that give rise to the incorrect but widespread notion that romance novels are essentially all the same. In such a perception romance novels are considered as lacking qualities such as uniqueness, evolution, complexity and multiplicity – qualities that, I have pointed out earlier, are traditionally associated with the author. In the stereotypical perception of romance novels these texts are then written by writers, but never by authors.

This dissertation fundamentally challenges this stereotypical perception of the contemporary popular romance novel in two ways. On the one hand it maps and analyzes a



corpus of romance novels in which the dominantly performed textual identity quite clearly shifts from genre to authorship. This evolution fundamentally problematizes the notion, inherent in the term “genre fiction” with which popular literature is often designated in American culture, that genre is always already the dominant element in popular literature and illustrates that the notions of individuality, uniqueness, creativity, innovation and renewal conventionally associated with individual authorship are also fundamentally at work in a body of text perceived mainly in generic terms. It establishes, in other words, that popular fiction in general and the popular romance novel in particular does not simply have writers, but also authors. On the other hand this dissertation maps and traces a number of the evolutions that the popular romance genre undergoes in the three decades that are covered by the corpus of this dissertation. While this work does not offer an exhaustive and complete overview of all evolutions that have taken place in this genre since the early 1980s, in uncovering even only a limited number of these evolutions it undeniably establishes the principle dynamic of evolution that is at work in this genre. As such, this dissertation fundamentally refutes the notion that all romance novels are the same since the elements that constitute the generic notion “popular romance” are demonstrated to evolve themselves.

The analyses in this dissertation systematically map the performance of genre and authorship in its corpus. Given the conceptualizations of authorship and genre that are adopted in this study, these analyses consequently consider and compare the performance of these two entities on both the narrative and the paratextual level of the text. In tracing the tensions and similarities that exist between the identity performances on these two levels of the text, this dissertation demonstrates that the production of textual identity – of the notion of what the text is – is always a highly complex matter, even in texts which are in many ways not intrinsically complex. This demonstrates that complicated and sophisticated literary processes and concepts – which are often part of the study of literature and which are, almost equally often, implicitly taken to apply first and foremost to canonical, highbrow or critically respected literature – are also at work in ostensibly simple and simplistic texts. All literature is complex, even literature that is not Literature.

### 3. Corpus: Nora Roberts and the Contemporary Popular Romance Novel

This dissertation deals with the contemporary popular romance genre in the United States.<sup>2</sup> While this is a genre that receives little attention in academia (cf. below), popular romance is a massively read genre in America. There are, according to the latest statistics, nearly 80 million people in the United States – or about one in four Americans – who read at least one romance novel a year; 29 million of these are regular romance readers.<sup>3</sup> In 2009 and 2010 the genre had an estimated turnover of about \$1.36 billion. There is quite simply no other genre in America that can boast the same figures – the ones that come closest are inspirational fiction (\$770 million), mystery (\$674 million) and science fiction/fantasy (\$554 million). At \$462 million, classic literary fiction has an annual turnover that is about a third of popular romance. Harlequin, one of the most important publishers of popular romance novels in the United States and the rest of the world, sold 130 million books in 2008 and about 6.05 billion since it was founded in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In 2009 a little over 9.000 new romance novels were released in the United States alone. Every month Harlequin publishes about 110 different popular romance novels, which are translated into thirty-one languages and released in 111 international markets.<sup>5</sup> These recent figures are in line with earlier numbers that consistently indicate popular romance is, and has been for quite some time, simply the most popular kind of literature in the United States and possibly the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Besides being a very popular and massively read genre, popular romance is also an exceptionally feminine genre. Almost all romance authors and editors are women; the few men writing popular romance novels publish these under a feminine pseudonym.<sup>7</sup> According to the latest statistics a little over ninety percent of romance readers are women. Although this is of course the vast majority, this still implies that there are seven to eight million American

<sup>2</sup> The term “contemporary” is here taken to refer to the last quarter of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

<sup>3</sup> These figures, like all others in this section unless explicitly stated otherwise, are based on statistical information provided by Romance Writers of America on their website: [http://www.rwa.org/cs/the\\_romance\\_genre/romance\\_literature\\_statistics](http://www.rwa.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics)

<sup>4</sup> The 130 million sales figure for Harlequin in 2008 was quoted on its website in the section “about us”, when I consulted it on November 21 2010. By October 2011 this section had been updated to include the 6.05 billion sales figure for the company overall; the yearly figure had disappeared by this time. Source: <http://www.eharlequin.com./articlepage.html?articleId=36&chapter=0>

<sup>5</sup> These figures are based on the information in the “about us” section on Harlequin’s website as it appeared on October 2 2011. <http://www.eharlequin.com./articlepage.html?articleId=36&chapter=0>

<sup>6</sup> These earlier statistic by Romance Writers are available on their website: [http://www.rwa.org/cs/the\\_romance\\_genre/romance\\_literature\\_statistics/industry\\_statistics](http://www.rwa.org/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics/industry_statistics)

<sup>7</sup> Two examples of men who are successful romance writers publishing under a feminine pseudonym are Harold Lowry, who publishes as Leigh Greenwood, and Tom Huff, whose books carry the author’s name Jennifer Wilde.

men who read at least one romance novel a year. While the cultural stereotypes surrounding the romance reader are as strong and negative as those surrounding the books themselves – a frequent stereotype makes out the romance reader as a single, possibly unemployed, likely slightly overweight, secretly sexually frustrated woman without an education who sits on the couch all day devouring romance novels and bonbons with equal fervor – actual statistics indicate the American romance reader is the average American woman. Women of all ages read romance novels, though the biggest group of readers is aged between 31 and 49. While many romance readers are single, as a group they are slightly more likely than the general population to be married or in a committed romantic relationship. The romance reader is also relatively highly-educated: 42% of romance readers have at least a bachelor's degree. In short, “the” romance reader does not exist since statistics consistently indicate that all kinds of women from all walks of life read popular romance novels. While this contradicts the strong cultural stereotypes that surround the figure of the romance reader, given the genre's massive popularity this actually makes sense. Such exceptional popularity can only be achieved if the genre does not appeal to a particular niche audience, but to a large and diversified group of readers.

In this highly popular genre, American romance writer Nora Roberts (°1950) – the author whose oeuvre is the focus of this study – stands out as the most popular of all. Since 1981, when her very first novel was published, Roberts has penned about two hundred popular romance novels. While all of her novels qualify as popular romance (much more on this claim later in this dissertation, of course) Roberts is a versatile author who has written in many of the genre's various subgenres, most prominently probably in romantic suspense and paranormal romance. Also publishing under the pseudonym J.D. Robb, Roberts is known for her prolific output; she writes an average of five to seven new novels a year. While this makes for a massive oeuvre – an output of about two hundred novels in less than thirty years is remarkable – the prolific nature of Roberts' writing is eclipsed by its astounding popularity and popular success. According to her website, there are currently over 400 million copies of Roberts' novels in print.<sup>8</sup> She has 173 *New York Times* bestsellers to her name and has spent 879 weeks (or 16.5 years) on this list since her first appearance in 1991 – 173 of these weeks she occupied the list's coveted top spot. Since 1999, every new book by Roberts has hit the

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<sup>8</sup> All figures in this section, unless explicitly stated otherwise, are based on information provided on Nora Roberts' official website ([www.noraroberts.com](http://www.noraroberts.com)) under the section entitled “Did You Know?” as it appeared on October 2 2011. Source: <http://www.noraroberts.com/aboutnora/funfacts.html>

*NYT* bestseller list; 49 of her books have debuted on the number one position. Over the last thirty years on average twenty-seven Nora Roberts books were sold every minute. In 2011 Roberts became only the third author ever to sell more than one million Kindle – i.e. the e-reader developed by internet giant Amazon – books. Nora Roberts is, in short, a publishing phenomenon whose popularity is, both within and outside of the popular romance genre, unprecedented.

Indeed, while Roberts is generally known in the States as a popular romance author (again, much more on this observation later in this dissertation), her commercial success puts her squarely beyond the constraints of the genre and straight at the top of America's mainstream popular culture. She is a fixture on various national and international bestseller lists, has recently been named "America's favorite author" (Collins, 60) by the prestigious magazine *The New Yorker*, and appeared as one of only two authors on *Time* magazine's 2007 list of the one hundred most influential celebrities – the other author was powerhouse J.K. Rowling (Sachs). Nora Roberts is, in short, one of the most popular – that is, most read – authors in the world. Scholar Ken Gelder (2004), who names Roberts as "one of the biggest sellers in the world" (3), notes for example that in 2003 there were "only about a half dozen novels [that] sold more than 2 million hardcover copies: they included ... four novels by romance writer Nora Roberts" (104). In a recent book on Roberts, Mary Ellen Snodgrass (2010) even introduces the author as "the world's [single] best-selling novelist since 2000" (1). It is clear then that in terms of reader popularity Nora Roberts is, quite literally, at the top of the world. Yet her name is not. While today Nora Roberts is hardly an obscure figure, neither is she as universally well-known as other contemporary popular authors such as J.K. Rowling, Stephen King, John Grisham or Dan Brown (many of whom she nonetheless easily outsells). While there are, according to the impressive numbers quoted above, few authors alive today who sell more books than Nora Roberts does, there are many who are far more famous. In the conclusion to this dissertation I come back to this odd observation and will suggest that Roberts' relative lack of name recognition – a lack that is significant to the development of her authorship - is related not only to her gender, but also to her genre.

This relative lack of attention for Roberts in mainstream culture translates to the academic field as well, where Roberts is a downright obscure figure. While a plethora of dissertations, scholarly articles and academic books appear that highlight, analyze and attempt to fathom the works of the most obscure, mysterious, unread or unknown writers and artists, the scholarly community has consistently turned a cold shoulder to one of the world's most massively read authors. The academic work that has been done on Nora Roberts is limited to

literally a handful of published papers.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this dissertation, there is no scholarly work that provides a comprehensive overview of Roberts' oeuvre, career or significance to contemporary popular culture. In scholarly terms Roberts' oeuvre is then, quite literally, unexplored terrain, a dark and mysterious wasteland that millions of readers have read, but that only a handful of academics have deemed worthy of their attention. This lack of scholarly attention for Roberts is, I find, astounding. One could argue it is due to, precisely, Roberts' massive popularity – that rightly or wrongly academics, and particularly scholars of literature, have a tendency to look not at that which is popular (and therefore probably simplistic, easy, superficial) but at that which is the opposite, the not-popular (and therefore probably complex, difficult, deep). Yet this observation does not ring entirely true today. A quick scan of, for example, the academic database JSTOR indicates that a plethora of academic studies appear on such contemporary popular authors as J.K. Rowling, Stephen King and John Grisham – authors whom Nora Roberts quite consistently appears to outsell but who, for some reason, have managed to catch the scholarly gaze whereas Roberts has not.<sup>10</sup> The reason for academia's almost universal disregard for Roberts is then not, I argue, the author's impressive and near-unprecedented popularity, but, again, her genre.

#### 4. Popular Romance Studies

The field to which this dissertation makes the most direct contribution and that functions as its most immediate scholarly frame is a relatively new and still quite small field that is coming to be known as “Popular Romance Studies.” This is, in very broad terms, the study of the representation of romantic love in popular culture.<sup>11</sup> The study of the contemporary popular romance novel in English – which is the kind of representation of romantic love in popular

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<sup>9</sup> The most important of these are by Pamela Regis (“Complicating Romances” and *Natural History* 183-204), John Lennard (2007), Séverine Olivier (2008), Whylene Rholetter (2008) and my own published work on Roberts (2012).

<sup>10</sup> A comparison between the results provided by the search terms “J.K. Rowling,” “Stephen King,” “John Grisham” and “Nora Roberts” in JSTOR reveals the significant differences that exist in the amount of scholarly work that is being done on these contemporary popular authors. Several sample searches of JSTOR in May 2010, September 2010 and October 2011 resulted in 609/599/748 hits for the search term “Rowling” (interestingly the term “J.K. Rowling” resulted in only 93 hits, while the search term “Harry Potter” gave 607), 1135/1158/1392 for “Stephen King”, 213/213/246 for “John Grisham”, but barely 11/11/16 for “Nora Roberts” (three of these articles are about a different Nora (Ruth) Roberts and none of them are actual studies of the romance author). A similar picture emerges from Worldcat, the online worldwide library catalogue in which book-length academic studies can be traced; in May 2010 Worldcat had 224 results for “J.K. Rowling – interpretation and criticism”, 154 for “Stephen King – interpretation and criticism”, 38 for “Grisham – interpretation and criticism”, but a meagre two results for “Nora Roberts – interpretation and criticism.”

<sup>11</sup> This description of the field is drawn from the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, a new, online, peer-reviewed academic journal that brings scholarship on “representations of romantic love in popular media, now and in the past, from anywhere in the world.” (“About”)

culture that this dissertation obviously focuses on – makes up an important part of the scholarship in this developing field. Scholarship on the popular romance novel is, however, still limited. In glaring contrast with the massive popularity of this literature in our contemporary culture, the scholarly community has, by and large, paid very little attention to this most popular of genres. Still, although the amount of studies that have been published is then disproportionately small in comparison to the genre's massive presence on the book market and bestseller lists, over the last forty years a nonetheless considerable number of studies on the popular romance novel have been published.

In this body of studies I very generally discern five different trends or approaches in the study of the popular romance novel, which to an extent overlap with each other but which in certain ways also develop in a certain historical sequence or order. The first approach that I discern here is studies that focus on the romance reader. This approach, which tends to be dominant in early studies of the popular romance novel, includes studies that focus on the figure of the romance reader, the process of reading romance novels and/or the effects of this reading act on the women with which these studies are concerned. Important works in this vein are Peter Mann's *The Romantic Novel: A Survey of Reading Habits* (1969), Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). This latter work is probably the most famous and, amongst the contemporary generation of popular romance scholars, one of the most controversial studies of the popular romance novel to date. Very often, these works are carried out from an explicitly feminist political perspective. Janice Radway, for example, quite explicitly and openly positions herself as a feminist in the introduction to *Reading the Romance* and in doing so implicitly differentiates herself from the group of readers she is studying in her work. These studies generally develop political feminist interpretations of the (meaning of) the reading experience and act.

These openly feminist concerns sometimes also play a role in the second type of popular romance study I discern here, which is one that is more focussed on the text and attempts to determine (part of the) generic conventions of the popular romance novel. This is for example the case in Margaret Jensen's *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story* (1984), *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (1984) by Kay Mussell, Carol Thruston's *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity* (1987) and several pieces in the anthology *Fatal Attractions: Re-scripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film* (1995) edited by Jacky Stacey and Lynne Pearce. Other studies in this second vein, such as John Cawelti's

*Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (1976), the anthology *Romantic Conventions* (1999) edited by Anne Kaler and Rosemary Johnson-Kurek and Pamela Regis' seminal *A Natural History of the Popular Romance Novel* (2003), do not adopt such an explicitly feminist or women's studies perspective and are instead more strictly focussed on the text and its generic conventions. Of these works, Pamela Regis' 2003 study, in which she proposes a definition of the popular romance novel that has since developed into a conceptual cornerstone of the field, is without question the most important study on the popular romance novel that has appeared in the last decade.

A third approach to the study of the popular romance novel I discern here is what could in very general terms be considered a political one. Such studies articulate readings and interpretations of popular romance novels that are mainly concerned with uncovering some of the concepts, values and political ideas present in these popular texts. Important examples of such studies are Leslie Rabine's *Reading the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, Ideology* (1985), the anthology *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* (1985) edited by Jean Radford, Jan Cohn's *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women* (1988), Mariam Frenier's *Good-bye Heathcliff: Changing Heroines, Roles, and Values in Women's Category Romance Novels* (1988), George Paizis' *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* (1998) and the recent anthology *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels* (2007) edited by Sally Goade. It goes without saying that very often in these studies an explicitly feminist perspective is adopted as well.

A fourth type of popular romance study discerned here is one that is more focussed on the institutions that surround the genre. This type of study mainly consists of studies of popular romance publishing houses, such as Paul Grescoe's study of Harlequin *The Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance* (1996), Joseph McAleer's magisterial *Passion's Fortune: the Story of Mills & Boon* (1999) and, from the same year, Jay Dixon's *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon: 1909-1990's* (1999). The fifth and final type of popular romance study I discern here concerns a more disparate group of studies that share not a particular overall perspective, but a particular approach to the selection of the corpus on which their studies are based. These studies namely focus not on the popular romance genre as a whole but on specific, often well-defined subgroups within the overall popular romance genre. Important examples of such studies are Juliet Flesch' *From Australia With Love: The History of Australian Popular Romance* (2004), Lynn Neal's *Romancing God* (2006) – a study of inspirational romance novels - , Lisa Fletcher's impressive and theoretically

sophisticated *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (2008) and, finally, Phyllis Betz' recent study of lesbian romance novels entitled *Lesbian Romance Novels: A History and Critical Analysis* (2009).

It is, I think, quite self-evident that in many studies two or more of these different approaches actually overlap. For example, while Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* is first and foremost a study of the romance reader, it also includes an account of what according to Radway are the core narrative conventions of the popular romance novel, gives evidence of the feminist-inspired political reading Radway develops of the romance novels in her corpus and discusses some of the genre's main institutional forces. Likewise, while Margaret Jensen's and Carol Thurston's respective studies are both predominantly concerned with determining and analyzing the (shifting) conventions that drive the genre, both scholars also develop explicitly political interpretations of the popular romance novel and, particularly in Jensen's case, describe the role of institutions in the genre. Finally, while Pamela Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is first and foremost focussed on the conventions of the genre, in the second part of this work Regis discusses the oeuvres of a number of important contemporary popular romance authors and thus focuses on subgroups of romance novels that exist within the genre. In the practice of popular romance scholarship these approaches thus often partially overlap. Still, a certain historical evolution in the approach to the study of the popular romance novel can also be discerned. Although this is not a fixed trajectory, romance scholarship initially tends to focus more on the reader, moves on to providing accounts of the conventions of the genre and in a more or less subsequent phase is more concerned with developing and extensively exploring what I have described as political readings of the genre.

The feminist, gender studies or women studies perspective is, furthermore, a near-constant in most of these studies. This is a perhaps seemingly logical consequence of the overwhelmingly feminine nature of the genre – popular romance is one of the few genres in our culture where both the reception and production of the texts is predominantly in female hands – and one that should, moreover, be applauded since it has yielded much important insight into the genre and its cultural functions. This perspective moreover also played an important role in enabling early romance scholars to put the genre on the academic map at all. Early scholars of the popular romance novel like Janice Radway, Tania Modleski and Margaret Jensen were able to carry out their studies of the genre in part because their work was so explicitly located in a feminist or Women Studies context. Still, I argue, this overwhelming association between romance scholarship and Gender Studies or Women Studies is also part of the institutional forces that implicitly mark the popular romance genre



as worthy of academic interest not because of its *literary* qualities – for many scholars it does not qualify as literature at all – but because of other characteristics. As I have remarked before, this a stance that I disagree with, which is one of the reasons why in this dissertation no explicitly feminist or gender studies perspective is consistently adopted in the discussion of a corpus that would, for many, almost automatically give rise to that perspective.

Despite the many different conceptual and theoretical approaches to the scholarly study of the popular romance novel that have been developed over the course of the last four decades, there are, I find, two evolutions that rather clearly and consistently take place in this in other ways quite diverse group of studies. A first evolution has to do with the scope of these studies. For a long time, studies of the popular romance novel quite consistently purport to address the genre as a whole. This approach is adopted in the earliest scholarly discussions of popular romance – Germaine Greer (1970), Ann Bar Snitow (1979), and Janice Radway (1984) are but a few members of this influential first generation romance scholars who talk about “the” popular romance novel as if one such novel cannot relevantly be distinguished from another – and remains a staple in the field for a long time. Only in the last five to ten years studies of popular romance increasingly tend to focus on particular and well-defined subgroups of the genre – Juliet Flesch (2004) addresses the Australian romance novel, Lynne Neal’s study (2006) is limited to the subgenre of inspirational romance and Lisa Fletcher’s work (2008) considers only historical romance novels, to give but a few examples.

This evolution in scope from general to specific is an inherent part of what I consider the process of maturation the field of popular romance studies is undergoing. By adopting a broad, genre-wide scope early studies of the popular romance novel were able to develop the scholarly frame that is now in place and in which much more specified studies of popular romance novels – including this present one – can be placed. In other words, later generations of popular romance scholars are able to study specifics because earlier generations and studies covered the generalities of the genre. Although the genre-wide scope that for a long time marked almost all scholarly discussions of the popular romance novel – and that is still regularly adopted today – is then an important and in many ways unavoidable aspect of developing the field of popular romance studies, it has also had important conceptual and methodological consequences that I find problematic.

This approach has (perhaps indirectly) led to frequent overgeneralization and a lack of methodological prudence in corpus selection in many studies of the popular romance novel. In her famous study of the genre Janice Radway, for example, quite consistently talks about “the” popular romance novel despite the fact that the corpus of the study consists of no more

than sixty quite specific (mostly historical) romance novels.<sup>12</sup> In a paper on popular romance novels published a decade later, scholar Catherine Belsey (1994) develops an otherwise very interesting and insightful argument about the popular romance novel on the basis of, what appears to be, a corpus of no more than five actual novels. While to an extent such overgeneralizations can be understood because of the historical context in which scholars like Radway were operating and because it seems unavoidable if one wants to say anything about the genre at all – how would we, after all, develop in a methodologically sound way a corpus that represents the genre as a whole? – one of the highly problematic consequence of this approach is that it reinforces and perpetuates the already widespread stereotype that popular romance novels are essentially all the same. By accepting as a sound scholarly method the wide extrapolation of characteristics of a limited number of romance novels to the genre as a whole romance scholarship implicitly or explicitly supports and even reinforces the notion that romance novels cannot significantly be distinguished from one another – even if it in other ways actively refutes or disproves this notion. The more narrowly focussed studies of generic subgroups of popular romance novels that have seen the light of day in recent years conceptually refute this implicit notion of generic sameness because by focussing on a particular subgroup of romance novels – Australian romances, historical romances, lesbian romances, etc. – their set-up implicitly assumes and thereby conceptually realizes the differences that exist within the genre. Although these studies still deal with serious methodological challenges in corpus selection, they, I find, no longer implicitly reinforce but instead conceptually refute the stereotype of generic sameness.

While various approaches to the study of the romance novel have, in the past forty years, then resulted in many different types of popular romance studies, somewhat surprisingly in my eyes one type of study that has not been regularly pursued in this developing field is the author study. There are, so far, no published monographs on contemporary popular romance authors. Although various papers presented at conferences and published in journals and anthologies over the last years indicate that today romance scholars tend to increasingly address the work of one or more particular romance author(s), to my knowledge very few, if any, sustained and comprehensive studies of the entire oeuvre of a contemporary popular romance author – like the one that is conducted in this dissertation – have been developed. This apparent scholarly reluctance to focus on oeuvre and author studies is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it ignores and even obscures the

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<sup>12</sup> For more on Radway's corpus see *Reading the Romance* 46-85.

increasing prominence of the figure of the individual author in the romance genre itself, which is one of the most significant developments the genre has undergone during the last three decades. Second, as both Kay Mussel and Pamela Regis noted in the landmark *Paradoxa* special issue about popular romance published in 1997, individual author studies are an important next step in the further development and consolidation of Popular Romance Studies as a critical field (Mussell, 10; Regis 146). Yet despite the scholars' astute observation and call to arms, fourteen years later no such studies have been developed or published. Third, the author study offers an obvious and simple solution to the methodological challenges of corpus selection that the field of Popular Romance Studies historically tends to struggle with. Although popular romance authors are often quite prolific – few are as productive as Nora Roberts, though – even such rather large oeuvres are still manageable from a scholarly point of view. And finally, as will be illustrated throughout this dissertation, the individual author study principally and radically refutes the generic stereotype of sameness and similarity that, despite popular romance scholars' best efforts, in many ways continues to haunt the genre. My study of the oeuvre of contemporary popular romance author Nora Roberts then not only addresses a number of significant lacunae in the study of the genre, but also attempts to formulate solutions to a few of the consistent methodological challenges faced by the field as a whole.

A second evolution that takes place in the scholarly study of the popular romance novel has to do with the position of the scholar conducting these studies. Whereas early scholars of the genre often openly acknowledge, and even emphasize, that they are not themselves readers of the popular romance genre – an iconic example of this strategic identification is Janice Radway's introduction (3-18) to the original edition of *Reading the Romance*, in which the scholar quite clearly if implicitly differentiates herself from the romance readers she is studying – many later popular romance scholars make it a point to openly identify as a romance reader (as I have, for example, done in the first lines of this introductory chapter). This shift was first observed by Kay Mussell in her introduction to the previously mentioned *Paradoxa* special issue, where she compares practices in popular romance scholarship in the early 1980s and the mid 1990s:

Perhaps most surprising, however, and certainly most interesting to me, was a marked change in the way some feminist critics presented themselves in their scholarship on romances. Instead of automatically assuming the role of outsider, of a presumably dispassionate judge and interpreter of a socio-cultural phenomenon, a few scholars

admit up front their own predilection for romances; and some of them use their own reading responses as a tool for interpreting those of other readers. ... In doing so, they challenge the notion advanced by Radway and others that trained academic critics read romances differently from “other” romance readers. The result is a welcome broadening in our sense of the range of potential responses to the romance as well as a more direct and ultimately engaged approach to criticism. (8)

As Mussell notes here, the popular romance scholar’s positional shift from acknowledged outsider to identified insider to the romance community makes possible new and different scholarly approaches to the popular romance novel, in part because scholars who are also readers of the genre (and openly acknowledge this identity) are able to draw on their own reading and community experiences in their scholarship.<sup>13</sup> This is a not unimportant consideration in this present study, where my own experience and interpretation of what I consider to constitute the popular romance genre of course plays a role in the account of the genre I develop.

While this evolution in the position of the scholar – which is, for that matter, is not particular to the study of the popular romance novel but has been taking place on a much wider scale in contemporary cultural studies (Hayward, 185) and has been discussed and theorized by scholars such as Henry Jenkins (1992) and Matt Hills (2002) – then not only creates conditions in which significant new understandings of the popular romance novel (or any other cultural text) can be developed, but also brings about an important conceptual shift that puts an end to the distancing “othering” of the romance reader by the romance scholar, the shift nonetheless also entails some risks. One such risk is the loss of objectivity and critical distance, which are crucial tools of inquiry and analysis for any scholar of literature and culture. While we should be careful such terms do not cloak a lack of genuine interest in, understanding of or even respect for the object of study, objectivity, distance and a critical attitude are nonetheless crucial ingredients of any scholar’s analytical tool box. As romance scholar Catherine Roach (2011) has remarked, a lack of this “fundamental mode of critical inquiry, of scepticism, so central and fundamental to the academic task” (13) might give rise to, for example, defensive or apologetic accounts of genre that are geared towards defense instead of analysis, apologia instead of criticism, and in doing so essentially miss the mark of

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<sup>13</sup> It then seems quite logical to me that the shift from genre-wide to more narrowly-focussed studies of the popular romance novel that takes place more or less simultaneously is causally connected to this shift in the scholar’s position. As members of the romance community, these later scholars are likely more thoroughly and genuinely aware of the differences within the genre than the scholar who approaches the genre as an outsider and cannot help but be influenced by the cultural stereotypes that so doggedly surround the popular romance novel.

good scholarship. The ideal romance scholar, I find, is then the one who manages a successful and constant negotiation between these two identities that leads to an integrated perspective that is so much more than the sum of its parts.

This negotiation is a crucial and constant ingredient of this present study, I believe. It is apparent in my account of the popular romance genre, which on the one hand draws extensively on my own experience and interpretation as a romance reader of what constitutes the popular romance novel, but which on the other hand attempts to develop an understanding of the constitution of this genre that surpasses my own experience and is, at least to an extent, objective. It is apparent in my discussion of Nora Roberts' oeuvre, which is unavoidably steeped in my personal reading history and genuine affection for this corpus but which also constantly engages with and relies on my training as a literary scholar. It is, finally, apparent in my focus on the notions of genre and authorship, which in certain ways constitute the very heart of the tensions between low and high, between similarity and difference, between the popular and the respected that pervade the study of the popular romance novel and this dissertation as a whole.



**PART I**

**THE CONTEMPORARY POPULAR  
ROMANCE NOVEL**





## CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS

### 1. Introduction

When Nora Roberts starts writing category romance novels for American romance publisher Silhouette in 1981 she enters a highly specific generic system which importantly influences both the creative and material production of her novels. Contemporary popular romance novels are produced in accordance with a complex myriad of literary and institutional norms, traditions and expectations that fundamentally shape these books. If we want to achieve a real understanding of Roberts' position in this generic system – and, more specifically, of the complex relation between her novels and their dominant genre – it is of paramount importance that we first thoroughly understand the properties and particularities of the generic context in which this author is mainly situated. This generic context is introduced in this first part of the dissertation; the in-depth discussion of Roberts' oeuvre follows in the dissertation second part.

Following the Post-Structuralist conceptualization of genre that is adopted in this dissertation, the discussion of the contemporary popular romance genre's main conventions focuses successively on the narrative conventions (chapter 1), the peritextual conventions (chapter 2) and some of the epitextual conventions (chapter 3) that characterize and perform the popular romance generic identity. In the discussions in this chapter a deliberately a-historical and trans-cultural approach to these generic conventions is adopted. These descriptions then provide a first general characterization of the genre, but do not yet focus on the conventions' culturally and historically more specific embodiments, which will be extensively discussed in part II of this dissertation.

This chapter focuses on the main narrative conventions that characterize the contemporary popular romance genre. It first provides a detailed discussion of the narrative elements that make up the basic romance narrative – the so-called romance “formula” – and then considers some of the main strategies via which narrative diversification within this basic generic framework is developed. In the rest of this study, the presence of one or more of these core conventional narrative elements in a story is conceptualized as narratively performing the popular romance generic identity.

## 2 The Conventional Romance Narrative

The basic popular romance narrative is at its core simply a love story with a happy ending. This is something that romance authors, readers and scholars seem to agree on across the board. Romance Writers of America (RWA), an association that represents over 10,000 mainly American romance writers, stipulate on their website: “Two basic elements comprise every romance novel: a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending” (“About the Romance Genre”). Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, two erudite romance readers who run the popular romance (review) blog *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* ([www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com](http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com)), summarize the “deceptively simple basic formula” of the contemporary popular romance novel in their characteristically tongue-in-cheek but pointed style as “[b]oy meets girl. Holy crap, shit happens! Eventually, the boy gets the girl back. They live Happily Ever After”<sup>1</sup> (Wendell and Tan, 11). Romance scholar Pamela Regis, in her foundational study on the definition and history of the genre, briefly defines the romance novel as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines.” (*A Natural History*, 19) These descriptions of the popular romance’s core narrative provided by the genre’s writers, readers and scholars then all indicate that the contemporary popular romance novel basically tells a happily ending love story.

This love story relates the tale of two people who meet, fall in love and attempt to establish a romantic relationship. The development of this romantic union takes effort in a contemporary popular romance novel. Romance protagonists do not fall blissfully in each other’s arms upon meeting but, to the contrary, initially always “[struggle] to make the relationship work” (RWA, “The Romance Genre Overview”). This romantic struggle often provides the focus of the romance narrative, which relates the relationship’s ups and down in varying degrees of detail. Most of the romance courtship plot is indeed taken up by an exposition of the protagonists’ (emotional and physical) attraction to each other and the conflict(s) that (initially) stand in the way of a successful relationship. While the romance novel finds a lot of its genre-internal variation and diversity in the countless different ways in which this basic narrative structure can be embodied in a concrete plot, the outcome of this tale is always the same. At the end of each romance novel the lovers-protagonists are deeply in love with each other, have declared this love to each other and are engaged in a committed romantic union with the prospect of remaining in this blissful romantic state for the rest of

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these bloggers and their in the romance community influential blog, see chapter 3 of this part.

their lives. The popular romance novel ends with the strong generic promise (but not narrative actualization) that the recently established couple will never fall out of love, split up or be kept apart in any other way during their lives. The romantic love achieved in the popular romance's idyllic Happy Ever After – ending, which in the romance community is often referred to with the acronym HEA, is ideal, everlasting and indestructible.

While the actual narrative exposition of this happy ending is often rather brief in comparison to the more elaborate narration of the process leading up to it, it is an integral aspect of the generic narrative. The happy end determines much of the narrative logic that underlies the basic romance plot. Each conventional element in this standardized narrative structure – from the attraction to the conflict to the resolution and the declaration of love (cf. below) – contributes in its own way to achieving the happy ending of everlasting romantic happiness. The romance narrative is then best understood as a teleological narrative in which each basic plot element is functional in achieving the final happy resolution.<sup>2</sup> This striving towards a happy, optimistic form of narrative closure characterizes all romance novels regardless of the substantial differences that exist between them in numerous other regards. “However various in other ways, the structural feature which most universally applies to popular romance is its insistence on a proper *ending*” notes Lynne Pearce in her study of the cultural history of romance writing (original emphasis, *Romance Writing*, 146). In the Happy Ever After-ending the romance narrative reaches its ultimate resolution – the promise of everlasting romantic happiness – and comes to a logical and natural conclusion.

This happy ending is not simply an optional or convenient ending to the popular romance narrative, but a generic must. Indeed, the contemporary popular romance novel is rigorous in its insistence on the happy ending. As we will extensively discuss in much of the rest of this dissertation, in many other regards the romance story is a fairly flexible narrative form: it can be long, short, sweet, sexy, contemporary, historical, suspenseful, humoristic, fantastical or realistic, to name but a few common variations. But in its structural adherence to the happy ending as the promise of everlasting romantic love the popular romance novel is unbendable. The HEA is then a feature that *all* contemporary popular romance novels have in common. Pamela Regis observes:

Romance novels end happily. ... The happy ending is the one formal feature of the romance novel that virtually everyone can identify. This element is not limited to a

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<sup>2</sup> This observation only applies to the elements of the generic *romance* narrative, which does not necessarily include all narrative elements in a given novel.

narrow range of texts: a marriage – promised or actualized – ends every romance novel. (*Natural History*, 9)

Although Regis' equation here of the happy ending with "a marriage – promised or actualized" is disputed – as the scholar acknowledges herself later in the same study, many popular romance novels published in the last three decades do not include the institutionalization of the romantic union in a marriage (37-38) – each and every popular romance novel does end on the implicit or explicit promise that the romantic protagonists will spend the rest of their lives together. Shared by all members of the genre, the HEA is often considered a defining feature of the genre that distinguishes it from other related generic narrative forms such as chick lit.<sup>3</sup>

The ubiquity of the happy ending in popular romance novels influences the often strongly stereotyped perception of the genre in contemporary culture. As Pamela Regis notes, the happy ending is "the one formal feature of the romance novel virtually everyone can identify" and the genre is indeed (in)famous for its unwavering love of happy ever after. This fame is not, as the ending itself, univocally positive, however. To the contrary, the romance's happy ending seems to be one of the elements that gives rise to some of the rather negative cultural stereotypes that influence the contemporary perception of the genre. For example, the fact that all popular romance novels end in a similar manner seems to fuel the widespread cultural stereotype that all popular romance novels are essentially the same; it seems to give rise to a perception of the genre in which its novels are considered the literary equivalent of paint-by-numbers – inferior, fluffy pulp novels based on formulaic hackwork and devoid of any form of creativity, individuality, artistry or originality. Moreover, the particular ending in a lasting romantic union – which is often, though no longer necessarily, a heterosexual union institutionalized in marriage – has frequently been interpreted negatively by critics, many of whom consider it to be enslaving for the heroine and, consequently, for the (predominantly female) romance reader.<sup>4</sup>

Each novel written by Nora Roberts between 1981 and 2008 – with the noted exception of those published as J.D. Robb – tells a story that fits this most basic description of the generic

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<sup>3</sup> While novels in the chick lit genre also relate love stories or marriage plots, their endings are not necessarily happy in a romantic sense. The happiness or optimistic tone of these endings can be constituted by, for example, the heroine's realization that she is better off without the hero and that she is a happy single. For a more in-depth discussion of chick lit, see for example Ferris and Young (2005); in this anthology Anna Kiernan (207-218) discusses the notion that "chick lit signals a shift away from the primacy of romantic closure in traditional romances" (207).

<sup>4</sup> For more about this particular argument and an interesting rebuttal, see Regis 9-16.

narrative. Whether Roberts writes about a poor virginal Irish girl and a rich American horse baron who marry for convenience but fall in love along the way (as in the author's first novel, *Irish Thoroughbred* (1981)), two clairvoyants with superpowers who reluctantly fall for each other while fighting an apocalyptic battle against an evil demon (as in the most recent novel in this study's corpus, *The Pagan Stone* (2008)), the unlikely love between a high-spirited Scottish beauty and a noble Englishman striving for independence in eighteenth-century Scotland (as in *Rebellion* (1988)), the passionate love affair between a jaded Hollywood superstar and the mysterious bodyguard protecting her from the antics of a deranged stalker (as in *Skin Deep* (1988)) or the slow blossoming of long-repressed love between a Maryland crab fisherman with a horrific past and a hardworking single mother (as in *Rising Tides* (1998)), all of the author's fictional works share a core love story that relates how two people fall in love, overcome the obstacles between them and finally join in a blissful, everlasting romantic union based on true love.

## 2.1 The Eight Narrative Elements

In the scholarly discussion of the narrative conventions that characterize the popular romance novel Pamela Regis' aforementioned study *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* is the standard work. Although, as I have indicated in the introductory chapter, there are numerous other studies in which the narrative conventions of the popular romance genre are discussed, Regis' 2003 book offers the most complete and analytically most useful articulation of these conventions. Regis' work is, moreover, one of the few that offers an a-historical and trans-cultural articulation of the generic narrative conventions that looks beyond their historically and culturally specific embodiments. For these reasons I base my discussion of the generic conventions mainly on Regis' suggestions. I am not alone in doing so. Since *A Natural History* was published in 2003 growing and widespread consensus amongst romance scholars has developed about the formulation of the genre's narrative conventions that Regis suggests in this study. For this reason, Regis' account is used here as the starting point for a more in-depth discussion of the popular romance novel's narrative conventions. In this discussion Regis' perspective is complemented by the formulation of the genre's narrative conventions in a small corpus of handbooks for writing popular romance novels.<sup>5</sup> In such handbooks

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<sup>5</sup> This corpus of handbooks consists of the following publications: *The Art of Romance Writing* (Valerie Parv, 1997), *You Can Write a Romance* (Rita Clay Estrada and Rita Gallagher, 1999), *Writing Romance Fiction* (Daphne Clair and Robyn Donald, 1999), *The Romance Writer's Handbook* (Rebecca Vinyard, 2004), *Kate Walker's 12-Point Guide to Writing Romance* (Kate Walker, 2004) and *Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies*

experienced members of the romance community (often romance authors or editors) discuss in the form of advice to the novice author what they consider the core conventions of the genre. These user-based accounts serve here not only to include the user perspective, but also to ascertain the relevance of Regis' claims in the contemporary practice of the genre. As the now following discussion makes clear, Regis' formulation of the genre's core narrative conventions is very similar to the independently made claims in the various handbooks. This independent similarity suggests, it seems to me, that both Pamela Regis and the various handbook authors formulate the core narrative elements of the popular romance genre in a useful and significant manner.

Pamela Regis' account of the romance novel's narrative conventions revolves around eight narrative elements she identifies as making up the basic romance narrative.<sup>6</sup>

All romance novels contain eight narrative elements: *a definition of society*, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the *meeting* between the heroine and hero; an account of their *attraction* for each other; the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*. (original emphasis, 14)

While Regis is adamant that these elements are essential to the genre – she remarks that “without them the work is not a *romance* novel” (original emphasis, 27) – she also stresses that the concrete incorporation of the elements into a given narrative is quite flexible. Elements “can appear in any order”, one narrative event or action can fulfil the narrative purpose of two or even three elements (for example when the declaration of love and the proposal happen in the same scene), elements can occur more than once and they can be diminished – they happen off screen and are related but not dramatized in the narrative – or “expanded to any length” (30-31).

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(Leslie Wainger, 2004). My thorough knowledge of these handbooks stems from the work I did on them in my M. A. thesis *En Ze Schreven Nog Lang en Gelukkig: normatieve narratologie in handboeken voor het schrijven van romances* (2006) [And They Wrote Happily Ever After: normative narratology in creative writing handbooks for popular romance].

<sup>6</sup> The formulation of these elements emerges from Regis' interpretation of the romance novel as a transformed subgenre of comedy and romance in the broader sense. While classical comedy basically revolves around the desire of a white man for a woman, Regis poses by way of Northrop Frye, in the romance novel the female is no longer the object of the hero's desires, but becomes an actor – i.e. a heroine – herself. This recasting transforms the other elements of the classical comedy genre in at least two important ways: first, the typical conflict between father and son is transformed into a conflict between the heroine and “the laws, dangers, and limitations imposed on them by the state, the church or society, including the family” (29). Second, the “freedom that characterizes the final society in comedy” (idem) is not, like for the classical hero, freedom from paternal restraint and competition, but freedom from “various encumbrances imposed by the old society” (30) so that the heroine arrives “at a place where society stops hindering her” (idem). For more on this, see Regis 27-30

The handbooks identify a similar set of narrative elements that they consider to make up the narrative core of the conventional contemporary popular romance novel. All handbooks consulted in this study generally distinguish between seven basic plot phases in the romance narrative. The first phase contains the first dramatized *meeting* between hero and heroine in which both the immediate attraction and the first seeds of conflict are established. In the second phase the *conflict* between the protagonists is developed, often along an internal and an external line. During the third plot phase conflict and *attraction* intensify – often the protagonists engage in a full sexual relationship in this stage of the story. Towards the end of the romance narrative, the handbooks consistently indicate, four plot phases occur in rapid succession: in a moment of *crisis* the various internal and external conflicts between the protagonists erupt, hero and heroine separate and the relationship seems forever doomed. This phase is followed by the so-called *black moment* in which hero and heroine are separated and face the now very real prospect of losing the romantic other forever. This prompts *insight* and character growth, which leads to a *resolution* of the conflict(s). The resolution in turn enables the actual *happy ending* in which the relationship between hero and heroine is definitively established. Although the handbooks stress the importance of the (causal) sequence in which the elements are narrated more than Pamela Regis does, it is evident that the scholar and the handbook authors identify by and large the same narrative conventions. These descriptions of the conventional romance narrative structure the general romance plot – a happily ending love story – into separate narrative elements or phases and thus facilitate their identification, analysis and comparison across different texts.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter each conventional narrative element that has been identified by Pamela Regis and the handbooks is discussed in more detail, while its range of narrative embodiments is illustrated by means of novels published by Nora Roberts between 1981 and 1994. This discussion aims to facilitate a more thorough understanding of each narrative convention by illustrating the formally identified element with concrete scenes, plots and texts. It also begins the discussion of Nora Roberts' massive oeuvre and illustrates the ways in which some of Roberts (early) novels narratively perform the romance generic identity via the inclusion of these conventions. Although the discussion of Roberts' oeuvre is much more extensively and

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<sup>7</sup> Enabling analysis is indeed one of the purposes Regis intends her definition to fulfil. She remarks: "This identification [of the common elements of the romance novel] ... invites analysis, permitting, as it does, a comparison of works across time and space and directing the focus of that comparison to the meaning of the action that makes a romance novel a *romance* novel" (22-23).

thoroughly pursued in part II of this dissertation, due to the size of Roberts' body of work it seems appropriate to already make a first start with the exploration of this vast corpus here.

*a) Definition of Society*

Pamela Regis poses that the "definition of society" is an essential element of the romance narrative and describes this element as follows:

Near the beginning of the novel, the society that the heroine and the hero will confront in their courtship is defined for the reader. This society is in some way flawed: it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt. It always oppresses the heroine and hero. ... The scene or scenes defining the society establishes the status quo which the heroine and hero must confront in their attempt to court and marry and which, by their union, they symbolically remake. (31)

This narrative element thus refers to the fact that the romantic union between the protagonists somehow evokes a change in the society surrounding them. The term "society" should be loosely understood here: it can refer to the protagonists' most immediate social environment – their family and friends – as well as to the wider societal context in which they move. The protagonists' permanent romantic union which is established at the end of the romance novel tends to confront flaws in this environment that are (symbolically) healed or overcome by the heroine's and hero's unifying love for each other. Although the handbooks do not as such formulate this element as a narrative convention of the genre, it seems to me that this discrepancy with Regis' account is due to the different background and purposes of both accounts and does not diminish the actual relevance of this element to the generic narrative conventions.<sup>8</sup>

The definition of society takes different forms in different popular romance narratives. For example, the flawed society the protagonists confront and heal can consist of their immediate families. In Roberts' *Boundary Lines* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1985) a feud has long muddied the waters between the families of neighboring ranchers Jillian Baron and Aaron Murdock. Although Jillian and Aaron have never met each other, their relationship is immediately strained due to the conflict between their families. The novel indeed portrays this society as "flawed": instead of supporting each other in their common struggle with the fickle powers of nature that characterizes life in the (Wild) West – the novel, set in the Western

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<sup>8</sup> Regis' explicit formulation of this element as essential to the romance novel is related, I believe, to the scholar's underlying conception of the romance novel as a transformed subgenre of (classical) comedy. The feature of the movement from one kind of society to another is integral to this genre, according to Northrop Frye's account of the genre on which Regis bases her claims. (see Regis 28-29)



vastness of Montana, sketches the rancher's life as a constant give-and-take with nature – the Murdocks and Barons have long been at odds and refused any form of cooperation, to the detriment of both sides. Jillian and Aaron's romantic union at the end of the novel "symbolically remakes" this "flawed" society and signifies professional and personal success for all parties. The novel's final scene emphasizes the importance of this restorative bridging of the boundary lines initially dividing them:

"Your house, my house – that's not going to work for either of us. So we'll build our house, and that's where we're going to raise our children."

*Our.* She decided it was the most exciting word in the English language. ... "Where?" ... "Right on the damn boundary line."

With a laugh, Jillian circled his neck. "What boundary line?" (*Engaging the Enemy*,<sup>9</sup> 506)

Future generations – Aaron, Jillian and their offspring – will live on the boundary line thereby erasing its existence ("what boundary line?"); instead of a boundary there will be a house that is a home to all of them – instead of discord, there is unity. As Jillian and Aaron "build [their] house" and family, they symbolically rebuild and redefine the society in which they live.

The societal flaws confronted by the romance's couple can also originate in broader social traditions and structures. For example, in Roberts' *Command Performance* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1987) it is the class difference between the hero, His Royal Highness Alexander Robert Armand de Cordina, Crown Prince of the fictional city-state Cordina, and the heroine, American commoner Eve Hamilton, that is part of the problem. The gap their difference in societal status creates between the protagonists is bridged in the proposal scene at the end of the novel:

He placed the box [with the engagement ring] in her hand.

First she had to draw a breath, a long one. She was not an aristocrat; she was not of royal blood. Equal terms. She remembered her own demand. ... [T]he ring [was] ... not a gift, she thought, but a request.

"It was my mother's. When I told my father I intended to ask you to marry me, he asked that I give you this. It's more than a ring, Eve. I think you know some of the

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<sup>9</sup> This title and the page numbers refer to a compilation edition in which *Boundary Lines* was reissued. Such reissuing of Roberts' older novels in new compilations that carry a new title is a frequent practice with regards to Roberts' vast oeuvre today. Since these recent compilations are often more readily available than the old and out of print original editions of the novels, I often refer to these editions in the examples used in this chapter. A discussion of the fact of these reissues and what they signify for Roberts' authorship is provided at the end of the second chapter in part II.

duties, the expectations that go with it, not just to me, but to the country that would have to be yours as well. ...

“Why are you asking me to marry you?”

“Because I love you.” ...

“That’s all you ever had to say.” (*Cordina’s Royal Family*, 381-383)

The heroine accepts the hero because he makes abstraction of their social differences - “equal terms” - and because he loves her; the success of this romantic union is then dependent on the protagonists’ ability to relinquish their societal role in their romantic interactions with each other. This relinquishing paradoxically enables the heroine’s social mobility: accepting the hero’s proposal, she becomes not only his romantic equal but also his societal equal: a Queen for his King. The “remaking” of society is located here in the protagonists’ ability to take up their royal personas in the public sphere and relinquish them in the private sphere (consisting of their immediate family), where they remake society to fit their romantic union.

Often the narrative execution of the definition of society is influenced by the subgenre to which a given popular romance novel belongs. This is most obvious in historical romance novels, where the rules and costumes of society often extensively influence the interactions between the protagonists. A less obvious example is perhaps the paranormal subgenre; in paranormal romances – popular romance novels featuring supernatural elements of some kind - the initial society in which (one of) the protagonists move(s) might be “flawed” in the sense that it does not believe in or accept supernatural powers. This is for example the case in *Captivated* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1992), one of Roberts’ early paranormal romance novels. Heroine Morgana Donovan is a witch; although she lives in our non-magical society, she is only truly herself in the company of her family members, who share her magical abilities. Hero Nash Krikland, a down-to-earth man, initially does not believe in Morgana’s proclaimed abilities, but comes to fully accept them by the time they enter into a successful romantic union. In this novel the “symbolic remaking” of society consists first of the hero moving from one society, the non-magical one, to another, the magical one constituted by the heroine and her extended family. The new society is further remade by Morgana’s pregnancy, which literally unifies Morgana and Nash:

“How likely is it that the baby will, you know, inherit your talent?” ...

“You mean, what are the chances of the baby being a witch? Very high. The Donovan genes are very strong.” Chuckling, she nuzzled his neck. “But I bet she has your eyes.” (*The Donovan Legacy*, 191)

These final lines of the novel signal the hero's definitive embedding in the new society: he contributes to its endurance by fathering a child in whom his and Morgana's characteristics are combined. He is thus not only a member of this redefined society, but also one of its perpetrators.

### *b) The Meeting*

For the romance to take place, heroine and hero need to meet each other. Pamela Regis and the handbooks provide a very similar description of this conventional element of the romance narrative. Regis describes the meeting as: “[u]sually near the beginning of the novel, but also sometimes presented in flashback, the heroine and hero meet for the first time. Some hint of the conflict to come is often introduced” (31). The handbooks generally agree that the first dramatized encounter between the protagonists introduces both their mutual (sexual) attraction and the beginning of conflict. With hints of both (sexual) attraction and conflict setting the tone, the meeting scene(s) between hero and heroine establish(es) clearly that hero and heroine strongly *affect* each other. Romance protagonists do not leave each other cold; to the contrary, whether their initial response to the other is positive, negative or a combination of these is less relevant than the manifestation itself of a strong and immediate response. In fact, this strong reaction is so conventional it tends to function as a signal that these two characters are headed for eventual romantic happiness.

The most stereotypical first meeting scene in a popular romance novel is then one in which both conflict and attraction flare. For example, in Roberts' *Taming Natasha* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1990) hero Spence Kimball is immediately and strongly attracted to heroine Natasha Stanislaski, but she is offended by his flirtation because she mistakenly thinks he is married and because she hates the superficiality of men's systematic response to her physical beauty. (14-19) Both the hero's attraction and the heroine's fury are presented as exceptionally strong responses: “the muscle-numbing heat of pure desire” (14) he feels for the heroine is the “strong[est] sexual punch” he has ever experienced – “like being hit by lightening” (22) –; she is so “infuriated” and “disgust[ed]” with him she “sw[i]ng[s] a fist at a punching bag” and becomes incoherent (19). While in this particular novel the conflict in the meeting scene is largely situational – the heroine's mistaken assumption that the hero is married is soon rectified – the hints of conflict in the meeting scene can also be a more direct prelude of the more substantial conflict that will form a barrier between the protagonists during the majority of the rest of the romance narrative. Such is the case, for example, in *One Man's Art* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1985). In the meeting scene the hero and heroine not

only experience the conventional immediate (sexual) attraction, but also butt heads over her disturbing his privacy – the heroine shows up at the hero's door looking for shelter during a raging storm; since his is the only house in the area, he has no choice but to let her spend the night on his couch. His manifestly rude behaviour triggers her annoyance and anger and they continually snipe at each other throughout the meeting scene (261-270). The core conflict of the ensuing romance is prefigured in this scene since that barrier revolves around his exaggerated need for privacy, which the heroine eventually interprets as such basic mistrust it makes a successful relationship between them impossible.

The narrative element of the meeting is often doubled in romance novels in which the characters have met each other before the start of the narrative's present time; in such narratives both the first in-book encounter and the chronologically first meeting which precedes it are often related. In these situations the protagonists' interactions in the present-time first meeting are often influenced by their shared past. Sometimes this is rather self-evident, as in stories in which the protagonists have had a romantic relationship with each other in the past. In Roberts' *Storm Warning* (Silhouette Romance, 1984), for example, the hero and heroine have had a short but intense relationship which the hero abruptly broke off about two years before the start of the narrative's present time. The protagonists' first in-book meeting (21-24) is charged with both sexual tension and the unresolved issues still between them – she has never understood why he suddenly ended their relationship – and triggers the heroine's memory of their chronologically first meeting and brief relationship a couple of years earlier (24-26). In a few compact scenes the narrative then establishes the status of the present-time relationship between the protagonists, accounts for the history that has created this situation and gives an overview of all the relevant interactions between the hero and heroine up to that point in time.

Although the meeting is an obvious, narratively self-evident and logically indispensable element of the romance narrative – protagonists simply have to meet for the romance to take place – in my view its functioning reveals a lot about the romantic *fantasy* that lies at the heart of the popular romance genre. This becomes more evident when we consider the doubling of meeting scenes in narratives in which this is not strictly required by the plot, for instance in romances in which the past interactions between the protagonists were so limited, superficial, brief or banal that they might at first sight seem irrelevant to the romance. For example, in Roberts' *Suzanna's Surrender* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1991) hero Holt Bradford and heroine Suzanna Calhoun met each other one single time before the novel's present. As teenagers they were both involved in a minor car accident; neither was

hurt badly and although Holt raged at Suzanne for causing the accident even as she was convinced he was at fault, they both walked away virtually unscathed. They do not meet again until twelve years later, when a quest for a family secret brings Suzanna to contact Holt. In their first present-time meeting, traces of their past disagreement resurface as does their obvious mutual attraction (*The Calhoun Women*, 365-371). Functioning as a (minor) source of conflict in the first present-time meeting, this past encounter then initially seems to be no more than a convenient but further irrelevant narrative device. However, in the course of the story Holt realizes he has been in love from afar with Suzanna since their teenage years. In the declaration of love scene, Holt explicitly references both past and present meeting scenes and draws overt parallels between his reactions to her:

“I’ve been in love with you nearly half my life. ...[Twelve year ago] [e]very time I looked at you I wanted you so much I couldn’t breathe. My mouth would go dry and my stomach would knot ... You run into me and knock me off my bike and I’m lying there bleeding and – and mortified. You’re leaning over me, smelling like heaven and running your hands over me to see if anything was broken. One more minute of that and I’d have dragged you onto the asphalt with me. ... Lord, you were only sixteen. ... I talked myself into believing it was just an adolescent fantasy. Even a crush, and that was tough to swallow. Then you came walking across my yard. [= present-time meeting scene] I looked at you and my throat went dry, my stomach knotted up. We were both past being adolescents.” (487)

Holt’s revelation recasts the seemingly irrelevant past meeting between two teenagers into the actual start of the romance; even though the process would be paused for twelve years, the first romantically relevant and meaningful interactions between Holt and Suzanna take place during their seemingly banal encounter at the accident site. It is at this moment that they first strongly affect each other; it is at this moment that they start, in effect, to function as romance protagonists.

This example illustrates that the romance conventionally starts *from the very first moment* hero and heroine meet.<sup>10</sup> Although these initial interactions are often charged with conflict, they invariably establish a kind of depth and immediacy to the protagonists’ responses to each other that sets this Meeting apart from all other first meetings. The notion,

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<sup>10</sup> One of the few exceptions to this convention, it seems to me, is the romance novel in which the protagonists have known each other since they were children. However, these romance novels often have scenes in which the protagonists (sometimes suddenly) explicitly and for the first time recognize the other as a potential sexual and romantic partner. These scenes in effect function as the romance’s generic element of the meeting. See for example Roberts’ *Honest Illusions* (Putnam, 1992) pp. 144-47.

constructed in the narrative element of the meeting, that romance protagonists are *immediately* profoundly affected by each other gives their interactions – and in a later stage of the story their love for each other – a sense of authenticity and genuineness that, to me, seems a crucial aspect of the romantic fantasy the contemporary popular romance novel creates. This kind of meeting scene begins the narrative construction of the love the protagonists will come to feel for each other as a pure, strong and true feeling; romance novels treat about True Love. Although the narrative element of the meeting might then at first sight seem like a narratively indispensable but otherwise rather unremarkable conventional element of the genre, in my view it in fact reveals a lot about the nature of the narrative the romance novel conventionally offers.

### *c) The Barrier or Conflict*

The barrier or conflict between the romance protagonists is the element (often a series of elements) which keeps the hero and heroine apart and throughout the narrative prevents them from establishing a successful romantic union (Regis 32). This element is of course of crucial importance to the romance tale since without conflict there would not be much of a romance story to tell. There are, generally speaking, two different types of conflict in romance novels: so-called “external” and “internal” conflicts (idem). The external conflict consists of “a circumstance that exists outside of a hero’s or heroine’s mind”, while the internal conflict is constituted by “a circumstance that comes from within either or both [protagonists]” (idem). External conflicts are often made up of elements in the social, economic and/or geographic setting or coincidental circumstances, while internal conflicts tend to be based on “attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by the heroine and hero that prevent the union” (idem). Often, internal conflicts are also related to the protagonists’ past experiences. Conflicts are often layered in popular romance novels; as soon as one aspect has been resolved, another crops up until the core issue is revealed. They are established in a series of scenes scattered throughout the story, making conflict a near-constant presence in the romance narrative.

External conflicts come in all shapes and sizes, but are always related to the circumstances surrounding the protagonists. In contemporary romance novels these circumstances are often of a professional nature. For example in Roberts’ *Ending and Beginnings* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1984) two rival reporters vie for exclusives as they fall in love, in *Nightshade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1993) the private investigator hero runs interference with the police investigation conducted by the cop heroine, in *Best Laid Plans* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1989) the professional collaboration between the structural

engineer heroine and the architect hero causes tension and in *Sacred Sins* (Bantam, 1987) the cop hero principally mistrusts the heroine because she is a psychiatrist-profiler. Other circumstances that can form an external barrier between the protagonists are for example age differences (in Roberts' *Dance of Dreams* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1983) the hero is first attracted to the heroine when she is only sixteen and he twenty-eight) or opposed interests (in *Luring a Lady* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1991) the heroine is the new landlord of the hero's run-down apartment complex for which he is demanding repairs; in *Courting Catherine* (Silhouette Romance, 1991) the hero wants to buy the heroine's beloved house to turn it into a hotel, while the heroine refuses to sell her ancestral home). While external conflicts then pit the protagonists against each other and cause tension, at their core they are circumstantial and can therefore also be solved by powers outside of the protagonists. Often, the external conflict is the first layer of the barrier to become apparent; it tends to manifest rather quickly in the narrative, sometimes even functioning as the immediate cause for the hero and heroine to (first or again) meet. For example, in *The Last Honest Woman* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1988) the hero first meets the heroine because he wants to write a biography about her late husband and she wants to prevent this: their external conflict is the reason for them to meet at all. In many contemporary romance novels the external conflict is then not only a barrier to a successful romantic union, but also an element which puts hero and heroine repeatedly or structurally in touch with each other.

The internal conflict is of a different order; it deals with barriers that are of an emotional or psychological nature and speak to the core of the protagonists' being. They are substantial and more complex than the external barrier and are often related to the past experiences of one or both protagonists. Internal conflicts revolve around the protagonists' core beliefs or attitudes and reveal a lot about the characters' psychological and/or emotional condition. Generally, internal conflicts are developed slowly throughout the narrative; initially, this part of the conflict is often hidden underneath other more obvious (i.e. external) sources of tension or conflict. It appears later in the story than the external conflict or barrier does because the issue it essentially revolves around – the inability or unwillingness on the side of one or both protagonists to commit to a long-term romantic union – tends to only come up once the relationship is somewhat established. Many different reasons can underlie this unwillingness or (psychological and/or emotional) inability of committing. It can be related to negative past experiences with romantic relationships or love. In *Luring a Lady*, for example, Sidney's initial refusal to commit to Mikhail essentially stems from her experience with her failed past marriage; since the marriage fell apart despite the fact that Sidney and her husband

loved each other, Sidney has become convinced marriage ruins love. In *Dance to the Piper* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1988) it is the hero, Reed Valentine, who has major problems with the notions of marriage and life-long love and refuses to commit to the heroine. Reed's lack of faith in love and marriage originates in his relationship with his mother, who walked out on him and his adoptive father when he was a young boy; she never looked back or showed any sign of love for her son. Afraid that his mother's callousness could have been passed on to him and not having experienced any other example of a long-lasting, successful romantic union, Reed does not believe in marriage and commitment.

The fear of commitment that underlies the internal conflict or barrier can also originate in (emotionally traumatic) experiences of a different kind. For example, in *All the Possibilities* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1985) heroine Shelby Campbell is unwilling to commit to hero Alan MacGregor because she fears losing him. Alan is a young, up-and-coming senator who plans to run for President in the (not so very distant) future; Shelby's father was also a politician who was assassinated in front of her eyes when she was a young girl. Shelby's hesitation of committing to Alan is then directly related to her traumatic past and her irrational fear it will repeat itself. In *Nighthshade*, heroine Althea Grayson's initial refusal to commit to hero Colt Nighthshade is based on the emotional trauma she suffered as a child when she was emotionally, physically and sexually abused by her foster parents and later her foster brother. These traumas have made Althea afraid, and initially unable, to completely trust men. Her relationship with Colt, which is established while they are searching for a missing girl who has fallen victim to organized prostitution, brings her emotional traumas to the surface; they subsequently form a substantial barrier to the happy romantic union between hero and heroine. As these final examples show, conflicts or barriers can sometimes deal with serious topics (such as abuse, sexual violence or emotional trauma) and can then importantly influence the tone or style of a particular novel.<sup>11</sup>

#### **d) *The Attraction***

The narrative element of the attraction depicts in a series of scenes the reason(s) the romance hero and heroine fall in love with each other. A significant element of this attraction is of course sexual chemistry, which is perhaps the most important way in which romantic love can be distinguished from other kinds of love. While all romance novels depict, to a greater or

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<sup>11</sup> Regis remarks: "Through this element [of the barrier] a writer can examine any situation within the heroine's mind or in the world itself. Literally any psychological vice, virtue, or problem, any circumstance of life, whether economic, geographical, or familial can be made a part of the barrier and investigated at whatever length the writer sees fit" (32).



lesser extent, the physical attraction between the romance protagonists, this is not the only (or the main) way in which the characters appeal to each other.<sup>12</sup> Romance protagonists' mutual attraction, Regis stipulates, "can be based on a combination of sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society's expectations, and economic issues. In modern works these separate motives get lumped together under the rubric "love"" (33).<sup>13</sup> The attraction element is then the narrative counterpart of the conflict or barrier: instead of establishing what drives the protagonists apart, it depicts the (eventually more powerful) forces that irrevocably bring them together. Like conflict, attraction is a matter of development in the romance narrative: it is established with increasing intensity in a series of scenes scattered throughout the story and therefore a near-constant presence in the romance tale.

All romance novels depict the sexual attraction between the protagonists, but the degree of explicitness of these depictions differs vastly within the genre. A more extensive discussion of how this element functions as a strategy of narrative diversification in the popular romance genre follows later in this chapter; here I limit the discussion to some brief examples. Some romance novels, such as the subgenre of inspirational popular romance<sup>14</sup>, limit the portrayal of erotic or sexual acts to for example a mere kiss. These chaste instances of the genre, often referred to as "sweet" romances, contrast markedly with more sexy incarnations of popular romance in which the entire act of love making is depicted. Within this last group diversity still rules as the tone, style, content and degree of explicitness of the depicted sexual acts varies greatly; while some romance novels' love scenes are so explicit they verge on erotica, many others use much more euphemistic terms and phrases, not infrequently reverting to clichéd expressions and purple prose.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding this substantial variety in the depiction of sexuality within the popular romance genre, some general conventions still apply to this aspect of the narrative. In popular romance novels sex is

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<sup>12</sup> The representation of sexuality is, however, an aspect of the romance genre that has been (and still is) focussed upon a lot – in my view even proportionally too much in relation to the importance of sexuality in the genre itself. We see this over-focus both in the general public's stereotypical perception of romance novels (as sexy and secretly pornographic pulp fiction) and in (early) scholarly studies of the genre, which focus extensively and sometimes even exclusively on representations of sexuality and gender in popular romance novels. Examples of such studies include Modleski (1982), Radway (1984), Jensen (1984), Thurston (1987) and Belsey (1994). While sexuality is indeed an integral aspect of the genre, I argue it is less central to the narrative than these studies and the (stereotypical) perception of the genre tend to imply.

<sup>13</sup> While in historical romance novels society's expectations and economic issues can indeed be considerations in the protagonists' attraction to each other, these are far less relevant in contemporary romance novels.

<sup>14</sup> Inspirational popular romance novels are "[r]omance novels in which religious or spiritual beliefs (in the context of any religion or spiritual belief system) are a major part of the romantic relationship" ("Romance Literature Subgenres"). Conventionally this subgenre is very chaste and hardly includes any depictions of sexual interactions between the protagonists. For more about this subgenre see the recent study by Lynne Neal (2006).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the representation of sexuality in popular romance, and particularly the concepts and language on which this representation tends to rely, see Belsey (1994): 21-41.

associated with emotion. Although this does not mean that characters are always already in love before they have sex, sexual acts of whatever kind are never represented as casual, gratuitous or meaningless. To the contrary, they are invested with (emotional) significance. Consider for example this depiction of the first kiss between heroine Lilah Calhoun and hero Max Quartermain in Roberts' *For the Love of Lilah* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1991):

She enjoyed kissing – the affection of it, the elemental physical enjoyment. And she liked him. Because of it, she leaned into the kiss, expecting a nice tingle, a comforting warmth. But she hadn't expected the jolt. The kiss bounced through her system, starting with her lips, zipping to her stomach, vibrating into her fingertips. ... Before the first sensation could be fully absorbed, others were drifting through to tangle and mix. Flowers and hot sun. The scent of soap and sweat. Smooth, damp lips and the light scrape of teeth. ... There was something more than simple pleasure here, she realized. Something sweeter, far less tangible. ...

He was reexperiencing the sensation of drowning, of being pulled under by something strong and dangerous. ... Fascinated he slid his tongue over hers, tasting those secret flavors. Rich and dark and seductive, they mirrored her scent .... He felt something shift inside him, stretch and grow and heat until it gripped him hard by the throat. (55-56)

This scene illustrates the deep impact a simple sexual act has on the romance protagonists; although they merely kiss, both Lilah and Max experience profound sensations and emotions – emotions which are not (yet) named explicitly, but which are nonetheless clearly felt: “something more than simple pleasure ... something shift inside him.” Moreover, the explicit depiction of the contrast between this kiss and the heroine's expectations regarding a regular kiss (“a nice tingle, a comfortable warmth”) emphasizes the exceptionally deep impact of this simple sexual act. A second convention that applies to representations of sexuality in popular romance novels is that romance protagonists are nearly always sexually compatible partners who have exceptional sexual chemistry. Their sexual interactions tend to be intensely passionate and profoundly satisfying for both parties.

The emotional and psychological attraction between the romance protagonists is of even greater importance than their sexual chemistry. In popular romance novels people *fall in love*; this is, in a manner of speaking, the genre's core business. Notwithstanding the important role of the initial friction and the often seemingly insurmountable conflicts or barriers in the romance narrative, romance novels essentially revolve around the notion of two people who fall deeply, passionately and irrevocably in love with each other. This process is

depicted in a large part in the narrative element of the (psychological and emotional) attraction between the protagonists. Like its narrative counterpart the conflict, the emotional and psychological attraction between the hero and the heroine is established gradually in the romance novel. To this extent the emotional attraction then often differs from the physical one: while the sexual chemistry often sparks instantaneously between the protagonists, their emotions need more time to catch up and develop. In many romance novels a narrative tension between emotional attraction, physical chemistry and conflict is developed: often these three elements intensify gradually throughout the story, constantly upping the stakes for the protagonists. While the sexual tension can reach its zenith the first time the protagonists sleep together (or in their first passionate kiss, if they do not engage in full sexual intercourse within the space of the narrative), the emotional tension that is developed throughout the narrative via the mirror-elements of the conflict and the (psychological and emotional) attraction is not resolved until the final phase of the narrative in which multiple elements rapidly succeed one another.

*e) The Point of Ritual Death*

The point of ritual death, a narrative element that in some handbooks is referred to as the “black” or “dark moment”, is the point in the romance narrative when the relationship between the hero and the heroine seems irretrievably lost (Regis 35). The (internal) conflict reaches its climax, bursts out and makes the barrier(s) between the protagonists more tangible than ever before. In this phase of the story the problems driving hero and heroine apart seem insoluble and the happy ever after ending appears to be in serious jeopardy. Hero and heroine actually split up and reach emotional rock bottom. It is one of the few moments in the romance narrative, the handbooks note, that the protagonists are not interacting with each other; hurt and angry, each figuratively and often literally withdraws to his or her own corner to lick their wounds. Regis remarks that in this phase of the story the heroine is often associated with death – not actual death, but ritual death: “Often enough death itself, or an event equated with death, threatens or actually transpires at this point when the barrier seems insurmountable. The death is, however, ritual. The heroine does not die” (Regis 35). The images of or associations with death symbolize the potential demise of the protagonists’ relationship that is contemplated and to an extent even experienced during this narrative phase.

The point of ritual death or the black moment is triggered by and follows immediately upon the final outburst of the conflict(s). Very often the emotional alienation this causes takes

shape in physical and geographical distancing between the protagonists. In Roberts' *Dance of Dreams* (1983), for example, both hero and heroine leave New York, the geographical setting of their romance, after the outburst of the internal conflict; she visits her family in a small town a few hours north of the city, while he goes to California. With each of them residing on a different U.S. coast, the tangible geographical distance between them symbolizes their emotional estrangement. In Roberts' paranormal romance *Charmed* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1992) the relationship's point of ritual death is symbolized in a combination of physical near-death and geographical distance. Witch heroine Anastasia Donovan has kept her emphatic psychic healing powers a secret from hero Boone Sawyer, but sees herself forced to reveal her supernatural abilities when Boone's daughter's life is in danger after an accident. The act of saving the seriously injured child, however, endangers Ana's own life and seems to be the end of her relationship with Boone, who feels betrayed by the heroine's secret keeping. The demise of the relationship that threatens is symbolized first in actual near-death – Ana faints and remains unconscious for more than twenty-four hours, suspended in an in-between state, “drifting ... in and out of worlds without color ... no feeling at all ... as insubstantial as mist” (*Donovan Legacy*, 555) – and second in Ana's travel from California to Ireland, where she stays for more than a month before Boone comes after her.

While geographical distance often plays a role during the point of ritual death, it is not strictly necessary since it is the emotional – not the physical – distance between the protagonists that is the point of this narrative element. In Roberts' *Tempting Fate* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1985), for example, hero Caine MacGregor and heroine Diana Blade continue to work in the same office as colleagues during their temporary separation. The narration does consequently associate the heroine with imagery of paleness and stillness that remind us strongly of death; she is described as “numb and nauseated” with “ice cold and nerveless” hands, she is “still as a stone” (237), “[s]he ha[s] never felt more alone or more lost than at that moment” and “she f[e]els like she is sinking.” (238) This heroine has clearly reached emotional rock bottom – a ritual, symbolic, emotional death. Although Regis claims such associations of death always concern the heroine, in many contemporary popular romance novels the hero is equally, or sometimes even more explicitly, targeted by symbolic death in this phase of the story. In Roberts' *Convincing Alex* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1994), for example, this scene represents the start of the point of ritual death story phase:

The color went out of his face and turned his eyes to midnight. He felt something slam into his chest. It was like being shot.

She was standing in the center of the room, her laughter just fading away. In another man's arms, her mouth just retreating from another man's lips. ... The bright, beaming smile on her face froze, then faded away like laughter. ...

"I guess I should have knocked." His voice was dead calm. (232)

Upon seeing what he believes is the heroine betraying him with another man, hero Alex Stanislaski pales, experiences a pain that is "like being shot" and resumes a "dead[ly] calm" demeanour; these conventional images of death (paleness, shooting, stillness) symbolize the hero's emotional low point: giving in to his mistrust of the heroine – the internal conflict that forms the most substantial barrier to Alex and Bess' romantic union – he believes their relationship is over. Whereas the associations with death are very often symbolic, sometimes actual death also threatens during the point of ritual death. This is for example the case in Roberts' *Night Smoke* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1994), in which hero and heroine are caught in a burning building during the story's point of ritual death phase. In the long scene, both fear at different moments the other might have died (*Night Tales*, 742, 744).

The elaborately constructed emotional intensity of the point of ritual death – which, to the critical (or generically untrained eye) might come off as exaggerated and overly-dramatic – is related to the somewhat peculiar position the point of ritual death takes up in the romance narrative. Although it relates, for all intents and purposes, the possibility of the romantic relationship's demise – that is, it raises the notion that this particular romance novel might *not* end happily – the generic conventionality of the happy ending is so strong that this raising can never be more than that: a hypothetical possibility, but never a narrative actuality. The construction of the point of ritual death as an emotionally incredibly intense moment, however, serves to counter, temper or play upon that generic certainty and briefly raise the option of the (generically impossible) *unhappy* ending, even if this option is never followed through. Furthermore, this construction also serves as a very effective contrast to the emotional highpoint of the resolution, which often follows immediately upon the black moment.

#### *f) The Recognition*

The recognition refers to the scene or series of scenes in the romance narrative in which (part of) the barrier(s) is overcome (Regis 36). Resolutions take many forms; depending on the kind of conflict that is resolved, recognitions can be based on a change in (the protagonists' dealings with) external factors or in a crucial psychological or emotional insight, acknowledgement or realization on the part of one or both protagonists. For external conflicts,

the causes of which lie in the circumstances surrounding the protagonists, recognitions are often constituted by a removal or disregarding of the external impediments to the romantic union (Regis 36). For example, in Roberts' *Untamed* (Silhouette Romance, 1983) the resolution of the external conflict – which is the heroine's suspicion that the hero will divide and sell in separate parts the circus in which she works and which he has recently inherited – consists of the hero donating the circus to the heroine, thereby effectively putting her in charge and making it impossible for this issue to form an obstacle to their romantic union (200-201). In *Summer Desserts* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1985) the recognition of the external barrier – that hero and heroine are professional associates and both principally opposed to romantic attachments between colleagues – is the protagonists' explicit agreement to keep their personal and business relationships completely and strictly separate – that is, they disregard the element that was initially perceived as an (external) barrier, thereby erasing its power (145-147). In *Luring a Lady* the external conflict is resolved when heroine Sydney recognizes that the repairs to his apartment complex hero Mikhail is rudely demanding are necessary and agrees to facilitate and finance these (26-27). As these examples demonstrate, resolutions to external conflicts are often, like their causes, (emotionally) superficial – that is, while they remove relevant practical obstacles to the romantic union, they do not address the emotional and psychological barriers that often form the most important and substantial barriers between protagonists in a contemporary popular romance novel.<sup>16</sup>

The resolution of such interior barriers or internal conflicts is conventionally situated within the psyche of one or both protagonists and frequently requires a psychological or emotional insight, acknowledgement or transformation on their side (Regis 37). Often the recognition of this ultimate and most substantial of barriers occurs when one or both protagonists are moved to understand their own psyche better and realize(s) the importance of their love for the other. This psychological or emotional recognition can be triggered by numerous elements, but is often connected to the point of ritual death (which regularly, though not necessarily, immediately precedes it in the narrative). Faced with the at that moment seemingly very real possibility of a life without the romantic other, the protagonists are thrown back upon themselves and forced to examine the (psychological or emotional) core of their interior barrier. In romance novels which follow this pattern the emotional shock of

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<sup>16</sup> Regis, whose study has an explicit historical orientation and is extensively concerned with romance novels from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century, remarks that in older romance novels the recognition, like the barrier, is often more concerned with external elements while in contemporary, late twentieth century popular romance novels the recognition of the interior barrier is far more important to achieving the generic happy ending (36-37).

the black moment – symbolised in the associations with death often invoked in these scenes – tends to enable the recognition. For example, in *Loving Jack* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1989) hero Nathan Powell realizes during the dark moment that at the core of his refusal to marry heroine Jackie MacNamara lies not his lack of love for her, but a deep-rooted fear that he, like his parents who had a loveless, perfunctory marriage, will not be able to succeed at marriage and hurt her in the process. Nathan arrives at this crucial insight in his own psyche during a heart-to-heart with his best friend and experiences this self-reflective, self-critical concession as “tough”; he admits:

“I’m worried about what I might do to her. If it were up to me...”

“If it were up to you, what?”

“It comes down to the fact that I’m not better off without her.” *That was a tough one to bring out in the open, to say plainly and live with.* “But she may be better off without me.”

“I guess she’s the only one who can answer that.” (my emphasis, *Love by Design*, 190)

In Nathan’s unspoken but elliptically implied realization that if it were up to him he would agree to the romantic union and that it is hence not his fear of being hurt but of hurting the heroine that is keeping him back, Nathan performs the crucial recognition he subsequently puts into words: he is “better off” with her, hence she has the power to decide their fate. It is precisely this act of bringing psychological or emotional issues (fears, doubts, irrational but deep-rooted beliefs about or perceptions of the self, etc.) out in the open, of saying things plainly, of acknowledging, naming and admitting them that constitutes the core of the *recognition* that solves the interior barrier in many contemporary popular romance novels.

The recognition is then not the same as the protagonists’ realization that they love the other; although recognition scenes can certainly include this realization, they essentially deal with providing the resolution to the barrier(s) or conflict(s) – conflicts which are not the lack of love on either side (although it can certainly be a lack of *declared* love). The recognition does not constitute the part of the narrative that relates how and why the protagonists fall in love (the attraction element takes care of that) but is made up of providing the element(s) necessary to overcome the barrier(s) to using that love as a basis for an everlasting, blissful romantic union. For example, in *Convincing Alex* the hero and the heroine realize quite early on that they love each other deeply, but the fundamental barrier to a blissful romantic union is Alex’s inability to trust Bess’ feelings for him since she has been engaged multiple times in the past. During the time they spent apart in the point of ritual death, a conversation with his brother Mikhail makes Alex recognize his mistake:

“She falls in love easily.”

“So? There is love, and love. How many times have you taken the fall?”

“This is the first”

“For this kind, yes. There were others.”

“They were different.”

“Ah.” Patient and amused, Mikhail held up a finger. “So it’s okay for you to play with love until you find the truth, but it’s not okay for Bess.”

“It’s – “Put that way, it was tough to argue with. (237)

Although the barrier is in this case not either protagonists’ inability or unwillingness to engage themselves in a long-term commitment, the recognition to the internal conflict still requires one of the protagonists to self-critically examine certain of their prejudices, beliefs or fears; in a later scene with Bess Alex admits: “I was afraid to believe in you. No woman has ever meant what you mean and I let myself imagine that you’d be with me forever. Just as I let myself imagine that you’d turn away. And I because was more afraid of the second, it seemed more real” (248). Like the first meeting element, the recognition then indirectly points towards an important aspect of the fantasy offered by the contemporary popular romance genre: the conflicts or barriers which initially prevent these romantic unions are never predicated on a *lack* of love, but on obstacles to *acting* on a love that is always present.

The emotional transformation that is often required of the protagonists to arrive at the recognition – a process that in the handbooks is generally referred as the all-important notion of “character growth” – does not always, as the previous examples might seem to indicate, take place in one clear-cut moment or scene, but is often a more gradual, step by step process that might culminate in a particular recognition scene, but is also spread out over the course of the narrative. For example, in Roberts’ *Irish Rose* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1988) the interior barrier between the hero and the heroine is mainly located in the hero’s emotional inability to trust in the existence of genuine and unconditional love. His lack of faith originates, as is so often the case in popular romance novels, in his childhood: his mother’s life was wrecked when his father abandoned their family. This experience turned Burke into the ultimate *Einzelgänger*, a man who strictly avoids emotional attachments so as not to be vulnerable when people inevitably leave. In order to make his relationship with heroine Erin work, however, Burke needs to overcome his ingrained misgivings about love and trust in their feelings for each other. This is a gradual process that takes place in roughly three phases: first he falls in love with her, second, during the dark moment (the heroine is kidnapped), he recognizes that his love for her is absolute and unconditional, but he remains weary about



trusting his own and her emotions. Finally, after learning the heroine is pregnant and wrongly believing she wants an abortion (a second dark moment, if you will), he finally dares take up an emotionally vulnerable position: he confesses his love for her, learns to accept her unconditional love for him and embraces the family they are becoming. This hero then clearly undergoes a gradual emotional growth process, transforming from an emotionally unavailable loner into a warm, loving husband and father-to-be. This process is predicated on a repetition of the recognition element; in each phase a part of the barrier is recognized (and partly resolved) until the core problem finally comes to light.

*g) The Declaration of Love*

The declaration of love refers to the scene or scenes in which the protagonists declare their love to the other (Regis 34). Conventionally, this declaration consists of the protagonists uttering the words “I love you” (or other words to that effect). These words have a profound but singular meaning in contemporary popular romance novels; they always signify that the speaker feels a deep, passionate, strong and genuine romantic love for the other.<sup>17</sup> Although the declaration as such does not suffice to establish the everlasting romantic union – for this, the barrier(s) has to be overcome by way of the recognition(s) – it is, of course, a crucial element of the romance narrative and one which is often an (anticipated) emotional highlight. Nonetheless, its place in the narrative is flexible; indeed, Regis insists, the declaration of love “can occur anywhere in the narrative” (34). The declaration of love, then, does not always automatically function (as might stereotypically be assumed) as the final act logically concluding the romance tale, nor as the solution to all romance-related ails, but is rather one of the crucial-but-structurally-flexible components of the conventional romance narrative.

The declaration of love is to be distinguished from the protagonists’ internal (private) realization or acknowledgement that they love the other. While the former is an external (even public) act in which love is declared *to* the other and thereby made part of the world outside the protagonists, the latter plays out solely within the protagonist’s personal, private psyche. Although these two events sometimes occur in very close succession within the narrative, (more) often they are separated in time and this separation creates an important part of the narrative’s dramatic tension. For example, in Roberts’ *Blithe Images* (Silhouette Romance, 1982) the heroine realizes about halfway through the narrative that she is in love with the hero

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<sup>17</sup>In her impressive, theoretically dense work on the historical romance novel, romance scholar Lisa Fletcher argues that “I love you” can be interpreted as a speech act that constitutes the romance genre. For more on this see Fletcher (2008), 1-48.

(104), but openly declares her love to him only much later, after the barrier has been overcome (215). It is certainly not always the heroine who first realizes she is in love and/or openly declares this love to the hero; in *Night Shift* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1991) for example, hero Boyd Fletcher is the first to feel and speak of love. Boyd realizes he is in love with heroine Cilla O’Roarke, but initially decides not to tell her because he feels she is not ready to hear this:

She couldn’t have known, couldn’t have had any idea, that at that moment, at that one instant of time, he teetered off the edge he’d been walking on and tumbled into love with her. And if he told her that, he thought as he felt the shock of the emotions vibrate through him, she would never believe it. Some women had to be shown, convinced, not merely told. Cilla was one of them. (*Night Tales*, 96)

As we see in this scene, withholding the declaration of love can be a conscious choice made by the protagonists (note that the motivation for this can differ immensely, however), which implies that when this act does occur it takes on significant meaning. Indeed, in romance novels the declaration of love is conventionally a very significant, meaningful and emotionally profound moment. Consider Boyd’s first declaration of love to Cilla, which occurs when their relationship has further developed and they have established not only an emotional, but also a more tangible sexual connection.

[Cilla]: “What I’m trying to say is that if we’re reasonable I think we can keep it uncomplicated.” ...

[Boyd ]: “No, I don’t want to be reasonable, and it’s already complicated.” He gave her a long look that was very close to grim. “I’m in love with you.” He saw the shock. It flashed into her eyes an instant before she jerked back. The color drained away from her face. “I see that thrills the hell out of you,” he muttered. ...

[Cilla]: “Love’s a real big word, Boyd.” ... She was terrified. And she was thrilled. She was filled with regrets, and hammered by longings. (136-37)

Boyd’s declaration of love clearly has an intense effect on Cilla and triggers a whirlwind of emotions in her. While the significance and impact of this speech act is then established clearly, its effect is not unqualifiedly positive: Cilla is “shock[ed]” and “terrified” and does not, at this time, reciprocate the hero’s declaration.

Indeed, hero and heroine do not necessarily declare their love to the other at the same time; often, in fact, one of the protagonists declares quite a bit sooner or later than the other. In such situations, the declaration (or lack thereof) can become a source of tension, conflict or

even a barrier between the protagonists. For example, in *Ending and Beginnings* heroine Olivia Carmichael strongly rejects the first declaration of love by hero T.C. Thorpe:

“I love you.” He felt her immediate stillness and realized he had spoken aloud. ... “I love you,” he said again. ...

She heard the words, saw them repeated in his eyes. Something moved inside of her like a tug-of-war, toward him and away. “No.” ... “No, don’t. I don’t want you to.”

“You don’t have a choice.” ... Her answer, and the anxiety in her eyes, cut at him.

“No.” ... Old doubts, old fears, old resolutions crowded at her. ... Love – that dangerous, dangerous word left you naked and senseless. Accepting it was a risk, giving it a disaster. ...

Her response left him hurt and angry. (*From the Heart*, 501-502)

Notice in this scene the lack of interpretative flexibility in determining the meaning and significance of the love-phrase (“that dangerous, dangerous word”) – neither protagonist questions the immense importance of Thorpe’s words. The linguistic declaration of love, much like its sexual counterpart “making love”, is then never casual in popular romance novels but always invested with profound meaning. Furthermore, the declaration (not the emotion) is not reciprocated in this scene: to the contrary, it is rejected by the heroine, which in turn hurts the hero and effectively re-establishes the barrier between them. This declaration is then far from a solution to the conflict or a way to overcome the barrier; to the contrary, it triggers and reinforces the heroine’s interior barrier (“left you naked ... a disaster”).

While (ill-timed) declarations of love might then often create more problems than they solve, in essence the declaration is of course a positive force in the narrative world of the popular romance novel. Indeed, romance narratives often work towards declaration scenes, which are then constructed as part of the (long awaited) climax of the story. If the declaration is preceded by the recognition – that is, in narratives in which the declaration occurs after the barrier(s) has been overcome – the declaration is a singularly positive act and often the one final element that seals the deal on making possible the everlasting, blissful romantic union of the generic happy ending. For example, in Roberts’ *From This Day* (Silhouette Romance, 1983), hero and heroine declare their love to each other at the very end of the novel and thereby resolve all remaining barriers between them (210-212). In *Entranced* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1992) the protagonists’ mutual declarations of love are met with joy and happiness:

With a laugh, she launched herself into his arms. ... The spontaneous applause from the kitchen [where family members are witnessing the declaration scene] made her

laugh again. “Oh, I do love you, Donovan. I’m going to do my best to make your life eventful.” He swung her in one giddy circle. ... After one last long kiss, he took her by the hand. (*The Donovan Legacy*, 386)

This declaration scene, the novel’s closing scene, establishes not only the romantic union between the protagonists, but also explicitly portrays the *happiness* this gives rise to in the protagonists and their family members (laughter, applause, giddy circles).

#### ***h) The Betrothal***

The betrothal refers to the scene or scenes in the romance narrative which definitively establish the everlasting romantic union between the protagonists. In many popular romance novels the betrothal takes the form of an engagement or marriage – the hero proposes marriage to the heroine and she accepts or, vice versa, the heroine proposes to the hero and he accepts (Regis 37). The legal institutionalizing of the romantic union in marriage is, however, not a formal requirement of the genre; in recent romance novels marriage between the protagonists is sometimes not discussed. However, regardless of whether or not the romantic union is legalized in marriage, the notion that this union is everlasting is present in each popular romance novel (Regis 37-38). Romance narratives always end on the notion that the protagonists will happily spend the rest of their lives together. Moreover, the prospect of this everlasting union is always a source of fundamental, profound, even existential joy and happiness.

To a certain extent the formal element of the betrothal and the notion of the romance narrative’s generic ending are to be distinguished from each other. That is, if the betrothal takes the form of a marriage or engagement it is structurally flexible – it can appear anywhere in the romance narrative (Regis 38). Romance narratives in which the marriage element is moved forward in the plot are often a variation on the so-called “marriage of convenience”-plot; in such stories the romance protagonists enter into an engagement or marry each other for reasons other than strong feelings of romantic love. For example, in Roberts’ *Irish Thoroughbred* hero Travis Grant and heroine Adelia Cunnane enter a marriage of convenience for the sake of her ailing uncle, who has asked Travis to take care of Adelia in the event of his death (*Irish Hearts* 144-45). Travis and Adelia marry, but the marriage is set-up as a charade to keep her uncle happy; they agree to arrange an annulment as soon as the heroine’s uncle is on the mend, despite the fact that unbeknownst to the other both protagonists are actually already falling in love with each other. Likewise, in *Gabriel’s Angel* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1989), the protagonists ostensibly enter a marriage of

convenience to safeguard the heroine's custody of her unborn child, but their true-but-undeclared feelings for each other complicate the situation. As is conventional in this type of romance narratives, the status of the marriage becomes a source of confusion and even a barrier between the protagonists, who increasingly struggle with keeping the marriage or engagement fake as their feelings grow more and more real. In these narratives the status of the betrothal then transforms from being merely formal at the beginning to being completely real – that is, emotionally true – at the end of the narrative.

Although the formal betrothal is then structurally flexible, in the majority of popular romance novels it does occur at the end of the narrative, after love has been declared and the barrier has been completely overcome. In these situations the betrothal – in the form of a proposal, engagement and/or marriage – formally embodies and narratively establishes the much more important emotional truth of the romantic union: that the protagonists deeply love each other and will remain committed to their union for the rest of their lives. Betrothal scenes which are placed after all other conventional elements of the romance narrative have been narrated are then often the most tangible narrative representation of the generic happy ending. Consider this example of the final scene in Roberts' *The Playboy Prince* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 1987), in which hero Prince Bennett of Cordina proposes to heroine and secret agent Hannah Rothchild and she accepts:

[Bennett]: "I'm asking you to marry me. ... I love you ... I am not letting you go, Hannah, not now, not tomorrow, not ever." ...

Was it magic, or was it a dream come true? Her head was still spinning as she tried to get a grip on common sense. ... She was almost ready to believe it could be real, and true and lasting. ... She was crossing a line in her life, on that allowed for no deceptions. He was offering her a chance to be herself, to love openly and honestly. ... Looking down, she saw the ring glow against her finger. A promise. A lifetime. "I love you, and nothing's ever been more true."

"Share my home." He caught her ring hand in his and pressed his lips to the palm.

"Yes."

"And my family."

She twined her fingers with his. "Yes." (*Cordina's Royal Family*, 563-64)

Referencing the now resolved major barrier between them – her "deception" of him in her role as secret agent – the emotional truth of their love is definitively established ("nothing's ever been more true") and immediately transformed into the basis for the "promise" of "a lifetime" spent together. This promise is institutionalized in the ring – the traditional symbol

of betrothal -, the engagement, the future marriage, and the sharing of “home” and “family.” The definitive establishing of the successful romantic union is represented as a source of such joy that its reality-value is very briefly questioned (“was it magic, or was it a dream come true?”) – perhaps a subtle meta-reference to the romance narrative’s nature as a fictional *fantasy* –, but even as these doubts are raised, they are eased as the truth of romantic love is immediately reinforced and the narrative ends.

## 2.2 A Note on the HEA

Regardless of where the formal element of the betrothal is placed in the story, once the romance narrative has run through the above-discussed conventional narrative elements it reaches its (in)famous Happy Ever After-ending. Although, as I remarked earlier, this ending is often considered a distinguishing feature that sets the popular romance narrative apart from other similar narrative forms, the HEA is more than simply a formal generic characteristic. It is also, and importantly, an element that is intrinsic to the narrative logic that underlies the generic romance story. The HEA is paramount to providing this story with a sense of close narrative cohesion. As I indicated above, all core elements in this narrative teleologically strive towards reaching the happy end, which, from this perspective, then functions as the main drive or narrative motor that constantly propels the basic romance plot forward. Simultaneously, the HEA also derives much of its significance and fictional credibility from the narrative elements that precede it. These conventional elements all resonate in the HEA, thus making it emotionally sincere and authentic. That is, the romance’s happy ending is only as happy as the conflict is deep, as the attraction is strong, as the point of ritual death is black, as the declaration of love is sincere, etc. Precisely because each preceding conventional narrative element thus contributes to and resonates in the final HEA, this ending is emotionally and narratively significant and manages to offer the happy narrative closure that characterizes the popular romance story.

Notwithstanding the fact that the romance’s happy end is then crucial to the genre as both a formally distinguishing feature and a central factor to the narrative logic and coherence, its narrative representation in the romance’s story text is conventionally quite short. The happy end often consists of no more than one or two relatively brief scenes in which the idyllic romantic union between the protagonists is definitively established. While these scenes tend to very strongly imply that this romantic union is one that lasts a lifetime and remains idyllically happy throughout this time, this lifelong romantic happiness is as such

*not* represented in the romance's narrative text. To a large extent, the HEA that is so crucial to the functioning of the popular romance's narrative is then constituted by a narrative promise instead of a narrative actuality. The romance story text does not as such represent the major part of the HEA it depends on and gives rise to – the lifelong happy romantic union between its protagonists – but conventionally stops precisely at the moment this union is convincingly, definitively and satisfyingly established.

The fact that the romance narrative reaches its definitive *end* once the HEA has been established is an important notion on which the successful functioning of the HEA *as* HEA in fact conceptually depends. That is, the happy end is a happy end in part because it is a definitive *end* to the romance narrative. This has two important consequences: first, it means that within the conventions of the genre there is no possibility of disrupting the happiness of the HEA – since the romance narrative is over, the ending that is reached cannot be changed. This is why the happiness of the HEA in part depends on it being an end to the narrative. In this regard I find that the romance HEA functions in a manner very similar to the one associated with the concept of “utopia” as discussed by Ernest Bloch and Theodor Adorno (1988). These two thinkers have suggested that since “the fulfillment of the wishes takes something away from the substance of the wishes” (1) the utopia is in fact necessarily unrepresented. Something can only be utopian as long as it is only an idea, a concept, and not an actuality. This is, I find, a useful way to think about the HEA – although Bloch and Adorno were hardly talking about popular romance novels, of course – because it seems to me the fact of its narrative “unrepresented-ness” – that it is a state that is conventionally very strongly implied, but not realized by the romance narrative and therefore always ideal, that is, utopian – is a crucial factor in its successful functioning as an HEA. The romantic happiness it promises is ideal, in part because this idyll is not disrupted by an actual representation that would show it to be something else than what the reader imagined – a fulfilled wish that would lose substance in its fulfillment.

Second, that the romance narrative conventionally ends with the HEA also means that there are no generic conventions regarding the concrete narrative representation of events that chronologically take place after the HEA – which is a usually unactualized narrative phase I refer to as the “post-HEA”. Although the HEA determines the content of this post-HEA on a conceptual level – it is everlasting romantic happiness – there are no concrete generic conventions that determine what precisely constitutes this abstract notion of romantic happiness, let alone how such everlasting romantic bliss is to be represented in a narrative. In this regard, the generic HEA of the popular romance novel is a strangely *abstract* concept that

remains relatively insubstantial within the narrative conventions of the genre. This relative abstractness is all the more poignant in comparison to the rest of the romance narrative for which quite detailed conventions exist, as the discussion above has elaborately indicated.

The Happy Ever After ending of the popular romance novel is then a remarkable and perhaps somewhat ambivalent generic element. On the one hand it is crucial to the genre – both to distinguish the genre from related narrative forms and to provide it with internal narrative logic and coherence – while on the other hand it is a relatively abstract, even vague concept that is conventionally only very briefly actualized in the romance narrative and in fact mainly consists of a non-textual narrative promise or implication. Very often this ambivalence of the romance's HEA is unproblematic because in most popular romance novels the end of generic *romance* narrative coincides with the end of the narrative as a whole. In such novels the story text stops immediately after the HEA has taken place, the post-HEA remains textually and narratively largely unactualized and the functioning of the HEA, which in part rests on its abstractness, is guaranteed. However, when the end of the generic romance narrative – the HEA – precedes the end of the narrative as a whole, a different situation occurs. In these novels the post-HEA is to a greater or lesser degree narratively actualized, which, it seems to me, might change its generic and narrative functioning. This is an issue to which we extensively return in the second part of this dissertation in which Nora Roberts' tendency to frequently and sometimes extensively portray post-HEA narrative situations is discussed.

### **2.3 The Eight Narrative Elements as Narrative Prototype**

Within the conceptual and theoretical framework of this dissertation the narrative conventions of the popular romance novel are considered the genre's narrative prototype that narratively perform the popular romance generic identity.<sup>18</sup> This prototypical conceptualization implies that while narratives featuring all of these conventional elements can be considered as the most successful or most prototypical incarnations of the generic romance narrative, narratives that lack one or more of these conventional elements are not automatically counted out but might still qualify for genre membership as well. In other words, the presence of every one of these eight conventions is not a *necessary* condition for genre membership. The exception to this principle is, in my view, the happy ending. This, it seems to me, *is* a necessary condition for membership to the popular romance genre – a love story without a happy ending can

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<sup>18</sup> This conceptualization of genre as a prototype is based on suggestions made by Dirk De Geest and Hendrik Van Gorp (1999).



simply not be considered a popular romance novel. Furthermore, in the poststructuralist conceptualization of genre that is used in this dissertation, the narrative elements of a given text do not suffice in determining genre membership since genre is, importantly, also considered an expression of the use of the text that is often in part determined by institutional framework. That implies that in the discussions of the generic status of a particular novel in this dissertation, a consideration of the above-discussed narrative generic conventions is always complemented by and compared to a consideration of the use of this text as it is expressed in its paratext and, to a lesser extent, its institutional framework. In other words, novels that contain all of the prototypical narrative conventions of the popular romance genre might, depending on their paratextual and institutional framing, still not automatically be considered popular romance novels and vice versa.

The conceptual position in this dissertation thus fundamentally differs from the approach that is followed by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, the study that is nonetheless one of the main sources for the earlier discussion of the romance genre's narrative conventions. Regis' approach differs from the one in this study in two main ways. First, throughout her study Regis repeatedly remarks that the eight narrative elements she identifies are "essential" (30) to the romance genre and that "without them the work is not a *romance* novel" (original emphasis, 27). Regis then considers the totality of the eight conventional narrative elements she identifies as both a necessary and sufficient condition for membership to the romance genre – a position that is emphatically not followed in this dissertation. Second, in defining the genre of the romance novel, Regis *exclusively* focuses on textual – more specifically narrative – characteristics and ignores the use of the text that is in this dissertation considered an equally important aspect of genre. Indeed, Regis defines the romance genre on the basis of narrative elements and disregards completely the material, institutional and other ways in which texts with these narrative elements are framed and hence interpreted by their users. This allows Regis to claim for example, as she does in *A Natural History*, that Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) belongs to the same genre as Nora Roberts' *Sea Swept* (1998) (or any other contemporary narrative that contains the eight essential elements, for that matter) – a claim that is disputed within this dissertation because the use and institutional framework of both texts is considerably different. The exclusively textual and essentialist conceptualization of genre that underlies Regis' study then fundamentally clashes with the much more constructionist approach to genre that is adopted in this dissertation.

## 2.4 Strategies of narrative diversification

As appears clearly from the above discussion, narrative conventionality is an important aspect of the contemporary popular romance novel. Indeed, as so-called “genre fiction” popular romance narratives are characterized by a standardized core structure – often referred to as the romance “formula” – which the members of the genre (to a greater or lesser extent) share and which is often considered as characteristic of the genre. However, the impact of this conventional narrative structure on the individual popular romance novel is often overrated. Following the widespread but exaggerating cultural stereotypes that tend to determine our cultural perception of the genre, the popular romance novel is often considered an extremely formulaic story and is thought of as the literary equivalent of paint-by-numbers. This perception of the genre lies at the core of the commonly accepted notion that all romance novels are essentially the same. The narrative diversity that is present within the genre is consequently systematically underestimated or simply completely overlooked. Yet this narrative diversity is a crucial aspect of the contemporary popular romance genre. Notwithstanding the fact that popular romance novels do share a basic narrative structure, they also tend to be quite different from one another. These differences are first and foremost, as I discuss in the second part of this dissertation, importantly related to individual authorship. Narrative variation within the popular romance genre is furthermore created by the regular use of what I consider customary (even institutionalized) strategies of narrative diversification. One such strategy is the already discussed flexible order of the romance narrative’s core conventional elements. Other important strategies of narrative diversification include the subgenre, the level of sensuality and the romance format; these are discussed in the following pages.

### 2.4.1 Romance subgenres

Within the popular romance genre a distinction is made between numerous subgenres. On the level of the narrative, these subgenres are constituted by a combination of the conventional romance narrative with narrative elements that are traditionally considered characteristic of other genres. There are many romance subgenres. On their website Romance Writers of America currently mention and describe nine different subgenres, which include for example paranormal romance (“Romance novels in which the future, a fantasy world, or paranormal happenings are an integral part of the plot.”), romantic suspense (“Romance novels in which suspense, mystery, or thriller elements constitute an integral part of the plot.”) and historical

romance (“Romance novels set in any time period prior to 1945, and taking place in any location.”) (“Romance Literature Subgenres”). Subgenres are a very important aspect of the contemporary popular romance genre: not only are there many different romance subgenres, but very many contemporary popular romance novels belong to one subgenre or another. In fact, there are probably more such generically mixed or hybrid romances than there are generically pure ones; consequently, the straightforward romance – that is, the courtship narrative without narrative elements that are conventionally associated with other genres – is often considered a subgenre itself that is referred to by the phrase “contemporary romance” (or even simply “the contemporary”). This is due in part to the fact that the core romance narrative is a relatively open narrative form that combines easily with generically different story lines and narrative elements. Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that popular romance is a strongly conventional genre of which the narrative conventions are determined in quite some detail, the popular romance genre is characterized by a narrative form that mixes smoothly and fruitfully with other generic narrative forms.

Subgeneric narrative combinations often consist of the addition of a generically different (sub)plot to the basic romance plot. In a romantic suspense story a mystery (sub)plot with conventional narrative elements of the detective, adventure and/or thriller genre(s) is developed on top of or besides the core romance plot. For example, a murder is committed and while the romance protagonists track down the killer they fall in love with each other. In such a story the conventional detective plot is thus added to or grafted onto the romance narrative structure. The narrative entanglement of these generically different plot threads is often quite close; one story thread feeds the other, as a result of which the distinction between the two plot lines often tends to blur in the actual narration. In a romantic suspense narrative the tension of the shared hunt and the constant potential danger that the stray killer poses often works to bring the romance protagonists closer together and stimulates their mutual attraction. At the same time, in these kinds of stories part of the barrier between the protagonists is often the fact that one of them is a potential suspect in the homicide. In subgeneric narratives the addition of a generically different story line thus often has the effect of creating interesting possibilities for the narrative representation of the conventional romance elements. In this way such generic mixes are often narratively fruitful endeavors.

The narrative manifestation of the non-romance generic elements that characterize the romance subgenre is not limited to plot-related issues; often it is the setting or general atmosphere of a romance narrative that is influenced by the story’s subgeneric affiliation. In the historical romance, for example, the romance story is set in a historical context. Such a

historical setting tends to quite extensively influence the development and narrative representation of the conventional romance elements as these are adapted to, among other things, the socio-cultural mores of the time in which the narrative is set. In many historical romance novels the narrative representation of the romance's conflict and attraction conventional elements is, for example, quite significantly impacted by the story's historical setting. In such stories part of the barrier between the romance protagonists is more often than in other romance subgenres related to the socio-cultural origins and context of the protagonists – issues of money, class or societal expectations might stand between the historical hero and heroine, for example. The sexual attraction and interaction between the romance protagonists is another conventional romance element that is impacted by the historical context of the historical romance story as the representation of sexuality is adapted to the particular sexual mores of the time in which the story is set. Since sex before marriage is, for example, unacceptable in many historical contexts, historical romance novels often move the formal betrothal between the protagonists forward in the romance plot. This enables the inclusion of sexual interactions between hero and heroine without an implausible violation of the historically accurate sexual manners of the time.

A romance story that belongs to a subgenre than in fact incorporates a secondary set of narrative conventions on top of the primary popular romance conventions. Although such additional conventions in one respect limit the narrative and creative possibilities of the story – in a historical romance novel sex before marriage is often impossible because it violates historical norms; a western romance is limited to plots that can more or less convincingly take place on a ranch or other typically western setting – the addition of generically other plot threads and narrative elements often also substantially increases the creative and narrative options of a particular romance story.<sup>19</sup> The combination of romance and traditional fantasy or science fiction narrative elements in paranormal romance, a romance subgenre that has become very popular over the last decade, results, for example, in numerous otherwise unavailable narrative possibilities for the romance genre. The conventional immortality of many paranormal creatures (such as vampires, werewolves or elves) adds, for example, extra emotional intensity to the romance narrative since it can function both as a substantial barrier to the HEA – when one romance protagonist is immortal and another is not, as is frequently the case in paranormal romances, this forms a serious impediment to the HEA – and as an

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<sup>19</sup> That creative restrictions can have a creatively stimulating effect is a notion that has long been accepted and practiced by the art form known as constrained writing, in which artificially imposed restrictions work as the main creative principle guiding the artist. For more on how contemporary popular romance novels can be considered peculiar instances of constrained writing, see De Geest and Goris (2010).

element that intensifies the “ever after” aspect of this HEA. Secondary narrative conventions thus not only increase the conventional, even predictable character of a romance narrative, but also propel the genre in new, less self-evident creative directions.

Subgeneric romance narratives thus rather strongly incorporate the conventions of other genres and, as it were, absorb these into the basic narrative structure of the popular romance genre. As the examples above indicate, this absorption of the generically other elements manifests in part precisely in the narrative representation of the conventional *romance* elements, that is the eight narrative elements discussed earlier. Often the romance-identifying narrative elements that in the concrete narration of subgeneric romance stories take on generically other characteristics. This mechanism, whereby the other, secondary genre as it were encroaches upon the *romance* elements, makes the narrative differences between romance novels in different subgenres relevant and significant to these stories *as romance narratives*. A western romance is a different kind of romance than a historical romance, which is different from a paranormal romance, which is different from a romantic suspense story - notwithstanding the fact that all these stories share the basic romance narrative structure. Each subgenre then not only has its particular set of secondary generic characteristics that distinguishes it from other romance subgenres, but also tends to interpret and narratively represent the shared romance conventions in different ways. This is why the subgenre is a very effective strategy for creating narrative diversity and variation within the popular romance genre.

Of course, narrative diversity in the contemporary popular romance genre does not only exist between the various subgenres but also within these groups. This is in part due to the fact that the secondary generic conventions that characterize these subgenres are narratively represented in various ways in concrete subgeneric romance narratives. For example, within the subgenre of the historical romance novel there are medieval romances, pirate romances and so-called regency romances (these are romance narratives that are set in England and take place between 1811 and 1820, the time England was ruled by the Prince Regent) – all of which are rather different kinds of romance stories, despite the fact that they share the double set of narrative conventions that characterizes the historical romance subgenre. The paranormal subgenre is another subgenre in which narrative variation occurs widely; vampire romance, futuristic romances and space romance are, for example, all considered part of the paranormal romance subgenre but are nonetheless quite different types of stories. Narrative variation within a subgenre can further also be created by the addition of narrative elements that are characteristic of a third and even a fourth genre. In paranormal

romances conventional mystery or suspense elements are often present, for example; narrative conventions from the romance, western and historical genres are combined in the historical western romance; suspense, western and romance can be combined in the western romantic suspense novel, etc. As these examples indicate, the possibilities of mixing genres within the overall narrative framework of the popular romance genre are nearly endless. This is another element that creates considerable narrative variation within this genre.

#### **2.4.2 Level of sensuality**

A second important strategy of narrative diversification within the popular romance genre is the level of sensuality or degree of sexual explicitness that is adopted in the romance narrative. This is another way in which romance narratives differ potentially quite strongly from one another. In the above discussion of the narrative element of the attraction, I already pointed out that this level of sensuality varies enormously within the genre. Some popular romance novels, such as the inspirational romance, are very chaste and represent only the most innocent of sexual acts and interactions. Other romances are highly erotic and feature many, long and very explicit sex scenes in their narratives; BDSM romances, for example, – a rare type of romance narrative that rather prominently features sexual acts that can be characterized as part of the activities known under the acronym BDSM (Bondage/Discipline; Dominance/Submission; Sadism/Masochism) – often feature very explicit descriptions of intensely sexual acts. The majority of contemporary popular romance novels of course adopt a level of sensuality that is located somewhere between the two extremes represented by inspirational and BDSM romance respectively. Still, the inclusion of these two hugely different subgenres in the folds of the contemporary popular romance genre is indicative of the great degree of variation in the level of sensuality that is present in the popular romance genre today.

This variation is not only achieved via the number of sex scenes a romance narrative contains and the kind of sexual acts represented in these scenes, but also via their length, frequency, erotic explicitness, degree of detail, and, importantly, the linguistic register in which these sex scenes are narrated. Although this register might also influence the narration of scenes other than the actual sex scene, the impact of the level of sensuality on the narrative predominantly regards sexual scenes and is much more limited (or even absent) in other parts of the narrative. From this perspective the narrative impact of the level of sensuality is then less extensive than that of the subgenre and the romance format (see below), which are narrative strategies that tend to influence various (or even all) aspects of the romance

narrative. Despite this fact, the level of sensuality is an *important* parameter on the basis of which individual romance novels, authors, series, subgenres and even publishers are often distinguished from each other. It is an element that is regularly included, for example, in reviews of romance novels and other descriptions that characterize an individual book, the oeuvre of an author or the profile of an imprint or publisher. In short, it is one of the more significant ways in which popular romance novels are distinguished from each other within the genre and its concomitant community of users.

Both the significance of this parameter and the huge degree of variation it includes are due to the particular functioning of sex scenes in the romance narrative and the romance reading act. As I pointed out earlier, sex scenes are an important aspect of the narrative representation of the attraction element, which is the positive force that ultimately unites the romance protagonists in the romantic union. In the popular romance novel sex scenes and sexual acts are conventionally connected to the emotional state of affairs between the romance protagonists; as I noted before, a causal connection usually exists between the development of the sexual relationship between the protagonists and their emotional attachment to each other.<sup>20</sup> As a tangible representation of otherwise often unarticulated emotions, sex tends to play an important role in the reader's emotional experience of the romance narrative. While this does not negate the potentially titillating effect of sex scenes in romance novels, it does mean that the romance reader is usually emotionally invested in these scenes. Given this emotional investment, it is important that sex scenes in particular and the representation of sexual tension throughout the narrative adopt an appropriate tone. Adopting this appropriate tone is, however, perhaps easier said than done. Opinions on what is and what is not sexually explicit can vary greatly – a scene may be very erotic to one reader and quite tame to the next. The appropriateness of sexual descriptions is then often a matter of the reader's personal taste, which explains why it is one of the elements that e.g. romance reviews conventionally discuss. As I discuss in chapter 3 of this part, discussions often use a kind of code – that is, there are standard codes or categories that designate the degree of sexual explicitness in a

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<sup>20</sup> Although in numerous popular romance novels this connection is straightforward – the more in love the protagonists are, the more intense their sexual relationship is – this is not always the case. In some (more recent) romance novels this connection between sex and emotions works in an almost inverse way. In such romance novels the protagonists might engage in a full-out, intense sexual relationship before they are in love with each other and as their emotions change the tone and perhaps acts of their lovemaking might change as well, developing from impersonal and ostensibly meaningless (yet physically satisfying of course) to tender and emotionally intense (and equally or even more physically satisfying). While the connection between sex and emotions is then always present in the popular romance novel, the way in which this connection works can differ significantly from one novel to the next.

particular novel – which further indicates the standardization of this parameter as a parameter of narrative diversity in the genre.

The level of sensuality is largely unrelated to the two other strategies of narrative diversification that I discuss here. Within one subgenre and within one romance format there are narratives with substantially varying levels of sensuality. Moreover, the level of sensuality often functions as an important way of distinguishing (types of) narratives within a subgenre or a format; there is a narrative difference, for example, between romantic suspense novels with a low, medium or high level of sensuality. Although the level of sensuality is then conceptually disconnected from the subgenre as a strategy of narrative diversification, sometimes both overlap. This is mostly the case for subgenres, such as the previously discussed inspirational romance subgenre and the BDSM romance subgenre, in which a particular level of sensuality is part of the narrative elements that characterize the subgenre. Since the subgenre of inspirational romance is in part predicated on its very low level of sensuality, inspirational romances with explicit sexual descriptions are in principle impossible because such intensive eroticism would disqualify these narratives from being considered part of the inspirational subgenre.

### 2.4.3 Romance format

A third important strategy of (narrative) diversification that I distinguish within the popular romance genre is the so-called romance format. Contemporary popular romance novels are published predominantly in two different formats: the *category romance* (sometimes also called the “series” romance) and the *single title romance* (sometimes also called the “stand alone” romance).<sup>21</sup> Romance Writers of America describe the characteristics of both formats as follows:

Series or "category" romances: books issued under a common imprint/series name that are usually numbered sequentially and released at regular intervals, usually monthly, with the same number of releases each time. These books are most commonly published by Harlequin/Silhouette.

Single-title romances: longer romances released individually and not as part of a numbered series. Single-title romances may be released in hard cover, trade paperback, or mass-market paperback sizes. (“The Romance Genre Overview”)

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<sup>21</sup> A third, much less common romance format is the novella. Since it is a relatively little used format in the contemporary popular romance genre I do not consistently include it in my discussion of romance formats.



The category or series romance is perhaps the most stereotypical kind of popular romance novel; these are the small, short, cheap paperback books, with bright covers and printed on low-quality, brownish paper, that are available wherever books or magazines are sold. The vast majority of category romance novels is published by a publisher known as Harlequin, Silhouette and/or Mills & Boon<sup>22</sup>, the largest and most important popular romance publisher in the world. A category romance novel derives many of its narrative characteristics from the series in which it is published. Such series (also called “lines” or “imprints”) group together romance novels which share a relatively large number of narrative features beyond the genre’s above-discussed core narrative structure. While category romances are the kind of popular romance novels most stereotypically associated with the genre, a large part of the genre is in fact constituted by the so-called single title romance novel.<sup>23</sup> In comparison to category romances, single titles are longer, thicker and sometimes literally bigger books. They are not published as part of a series or imprint, but are released individually. More than category romance novels, single titles are part of the mainstream popular fiction scene. They are published by many different publishers, widely available in traditional bookstores and make regular appearances on national and international bestseller lists.

Within the dynamics of the contemporary popular romance genre, the conceptual difference between the two romance formats is fundamental: the category is a very different kind of romance novel than the single title. Although, as is indicated by the brief typifying descriptions of both formats above, these differences are importantly related to the ways in which the books are published – category romances as part of series, single titles as individual books – significant narrative differences are intertwined with these material, paratextual and institutional dissimilarities. In the following pages these narrative distinctions between the two romance formats are extensively considered. An elaborate discussion of the paratextual and institutional characteristics of each romance format follows in the next two chapters, but such a distinction between the narrative level and the paratextual and institutional levels is, to

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<sup>22</sup> This publishing concern, officially named Harlequin Enterprises Limited, is a conglomerate of three formerly separate romance publishers: the British Mills & Boon, the Canadian Harlequin and the American Silhouette. In the course of the 1970s and early 1980s Harlequin bought its competitors and merged the world’s three most important popular romance publishers into one. Although they have thus been part of one big publishing concern for over twenty-five years, the publishers’ original names are still used as separate brand names today. For more on the history of romance publishing, see the first chapter of part II.

<sup>23</sup> This is the case, at least, in the American and by extension the entire English speaking context in which the vast majority of contemporary popular romance novels are originally published. In translation the difference between the category romance novel and the single title romance novel is often not as such preserved. In Dutch translation, for example, the single title format does not exist as part of the same genre as the one the (translated) category romance novel belongs to; instead, original single title romance novels are translated either as category romances or as novels belonging to another genre, such as e.g. women’s fiction, general fiction, or even mystery or suspense, depending on the subgenre (Goris and Olivier (2009); Goris (2009)).

an extent artificial, since in the practice these aspects of the book are intimately intertwined and mutually influence each other. The typifying narrative characteristics of a romance format give rise to the manner of its publication, but simultaneously the format's typifying material, paratextual and institutional features fundamentally influence its narrative and discursive characteristics. While it is then correct to, as I do here, consider the format as a strategy of narrative diversification in the contemporary popular romance genre – there are, after all, essential narrative differences between a category and single title romance – it is incorrect to consider the narrative level as conceptually completely separate from the book's paratextual and extratextual dimensions.

While the narrative differences between categories and single title romances are various, they can essentially be reduced to the formats' significantly different relation to narrative conventionality. Popular romance novels in both formats performatively incorporate the core conventional elements that characterize the popular romance genre – i.e. the eight narrative elements – but the way in which they deal with this conventionality differs significantly. As a rule, category romance novels feature much more conventionalized stories than single title romances do. This is in part due to the fact that category romances are considerably shorter books than single titles; an average category romance is about 50.000-55.000 words, while a single title romance easily exceeds the 100.000 words mark. This means, quite simply, that single titles have more narrative time and space to develop more complex plots and more layered characters than categories do. The latter then tend to more frequently fall back on conventional storylines and stereotypical characters. This tendency is, moreover, significantly enhanced by the fact that category romances are published in a line (also called imprints or series) with a particular narrative profile. In order to incorporate that narrative profile, each individual category romance novel absorbs an extra set of quite detailed narrative conventions. This makes of category romances very strongly conventional stories. Although single titles are certainly not devoid of conventions – like categories, they incorporate the romance genre's core narrative elements – these narratives are, on the whole, considerably less inundated by conventions than their category counterparts.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Describing the considerable differences between the two romance formats, Nora Roberts once famously remarked that “[i]f writing a great mainstream book [i.e. single title romance novel] is like staging an opera successfully, then writing a great series book ... is like staging that same opera successfully – but in a phone booth” (“From the Beginning: Nora Roberts at Silhouette.” 39). This image pointedly characterizes the conceptual distinction between a single title and category romance narrative.

### a) The Category Romance Novel

**Category romance novels** are short, brief books. In 55.000 words or less they run through the entire conventional romance narrative and often include a subplot of some sort as well. This narrative crowdedness – a lot is happening in a relatively brief narrative – characterizes the category romance’s story, which is generally rather compact and stereotypical. The category romance novel often uses well-known, classic romance plot lines – such as amnesia, revenge, secret baby or marriage of convenience plots<sup>25</sup> – and strictly respects the above discussed narrative formula of the genre; as a rule, the category romance novel includes each of the eight romance conventional elements. Often, category romances have relatively few characters. The protagonists carry the book; they (or at least one of them) appear in virtually every scene, which makes for a very strict narrative focus. Although their emotional growth is often an important part of the romance plot – it tends to play a role in the internal conflict and the resolution – the character types used in the category romance are often stereotypical. Category protagonists then frequently go through a conventional and rather predictable pattern of emotional and psychological development. Secondary characters, insofar as they are a significant part of the story, are often rather underdeveloped, stock characters belonging to easily recognizable, narratively functional types, such as The Best Friend, The Unfair Boss, The Other Woman, The Meddling Sister/Mother, etc. These characters are rarely individualized beyond the narrative function they perform. Overall, the prototypical category romance novel’s narrative is then pervasively steeped in conventionality.

Although the explicit and obvious conventions in the category romance often give the format – and by extension the entire genre – a bad name because they are interpreted as repetitive and formulaic, this pervasive conventionality serves important purposes. One of these purposes is that the category’s many conventions work as a kind of code or shorthand in the romance reading act. That is, for the experienced romance reader the many conventions tend to invoke a wider set of meanings than the ones they literally denote. Discussing the functioning of these hidden codes of the romance genre, popular romance authors Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz remark:

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<sup>25</sup> In the amnesia plotline one of the protagonists is suffering from (often only temporary) amnesia. In the revenge plot one of the protagonists wants to take revenge on the other – very often in the form of starting a relationship with them with the intention of suddenly breaking it off to hurt the other; the thirst for revenge is motivated differently, but it is often grounded in either the protagonists’ own shared past or that of their families. The secret baby plot line is based on the fact that there is a secret baby – often, though not always, the protagonists are the child’s parents but the heroine, for various reasons, has kept the baby’s existence a secret from the hero. Finally, as explained earlier, the marriage of convenience plot consists of the hero and heroine entering into a fake form of betrothal – depending on the story’s (historical) context, this can be a fake engagement, an actual marriage that is supposed to remain unconsummated, etc.

[C]ertain plot devices have become associated with an elaborate set of emotional and intellectual responses in the minds of both romance writers and romance readers. When she sits down to pen a novel, the romance writer takes this web of responses for granted. She knows the conventions, she understands the layers of meaning that certain words, phrases, and plot elements have accumulated through the years, and she knows these meanings have been sharpened and redefined for romance. She can be confident that her readers also understand these subtleties. (18)

The conventions of the genre, - the always-recurring plot lines, archetypal characters and standardized descriptions – which are particularly strong and pervasive in the category format, then serve interpretative efficiency: shared by readers and writers of the genre alike, they invoke more meanings than they literally denote and are thus very handy tools in a format so constrained by its short length as the category romance is. As Barlow and Krentz note here, these codes are (assumed to be) shared by the users of the genre: the romance author assumes her reader to be familiar with the hidden, intertextual codes of the genre and, in writing her text, presupposes that the reader is able to decipher the code – that is, reads more into the text than its conventionalized surface layer would indicate.

This system of codes or shorthand is at work in both the narrative and discursive level of the text. An example of such a narrative code is the first kiss between the romance protagonists. This is not only an often highly anticipated moment in the romance narrative and an act that is usually rendered in quite some detail (unless, of course, the romance narrative has a very low level of sensuality) but it is also a narrative code that in the conventional interpretation of the romance narrative takes on more meaning than the scene as such denotes. Strictly speaking the scene simply represents a kiss between two people; while this kiss is often very passionate and satisfying for both parties, it is still only a kiss. As a romance narrative code, however, this first kiss takes on additional meaning. It denotes the tangible start of the romantic and sexual relationship between the protagonists; on the basis of the conventions of the genre the reader assumes and even knows this first kiss will lead to a full-blown romantic and sexual relationship between the protagonists. As a romance code the first kiss also signifies the definitive establishment of both sexual and romantic exclusivity: after the first kiss neither protagonist convincingly develops a substantial romantic or sexual interest in anyone other than the other protagonist. Although this notion is not literally represented in the narration that renders the first kiss scene, this meaning is part of the romance's narrative code that guides the (experienced) romance reader's interpretation of the scene. Recognizing the first kiss scene as a conventional romance code, the (experienced)

romance reader then interprets this scene as referring to a conglomerate of meanings and associations beyond the actual narrative exposition.

This mechanism is equally (if not more) effective with regard to discursive conventions. Barlow and Krentz remark in this regard:

In our genre (and in others, we believe), stock phrases and literary figures are regularly used to evoke emotion. ... Romance readers have a keyed-in response to certain words and phrases (the sardonic lift of the eyebrows, the thundering of the heart, the penetrating glance, the low murmur or sigh). Because of their past reading experiences, readers associate certain emotions – anger, fear, passion, sorrow – with such language and expect to feel the same responses each time they come upon such phrases. (21)

Certain words and phrases have then become standardized in romance diction and effectively function as code or shorthand in both conveying a message and evoking a response that is more elaborate than the text would give rise to for someone not familiar with the conventions – codes – of the genre. For example, when a romance novel describes that in response to the physical proximity of the hero the heroine's heart is thundering, the use of this stock phrase likely seems rather unimaginative and unoriginal in the eyes of the critical outsider. For the experienced romance reader, however, (at least if we follow Barlow's and Krentz's reasoning) this standardized expression evokes a wider set of meanings. Intertextually associating the phrase with previous generic reading experiences, the trained romance reader might interpret the standard phrase of the "thundering heart" for example as referencing the conventionally two-sided response of the romance heroine to the romance hero, to whom she is both instantly attracted and whose overwhelming physicality also, at least initially, creates a sense of awareness or unease, perhaps bordering on fear. Romance heroes, traditionally overwhelmingly masculine men, are capable of physical violence (which does not necessarily mean they are actually violent men) and the heroine tends to respond to this potential with both attraction and a hint of unease or at least awareness of the hero as a potential physical threat. As a generic code, the heroine's thundering heart might refer to the two-sidedness of the heroine's response without the text making that meaning textually explicit.

While this interpretation of the stock phrase "thundering heart" is not absolute – other interpretations are always possible, of course – it does exemplify the process I believe Barlow and Krentz are referring to: standardized, conventional diction that to the reader inexperienced with the genre seems (and effectively is) unimaginative, repetitive and formulaic – signs of, in other words, both the low quality and interpretative superficiality of this writing – functions in

a different, i.e. coded, way for the experienced romance reader and, on the basis of an intertextual web of generic knowledge, takes on an interpretative complexity that is not immediately clear or accessible to the outside reader. Consequently, such stock phrases or very conventionalized descriptions might evoke for experienced romance readers a more complex and faceted (emotional) response than the seeming superficiality of the phrase would warrant in the eyes of the reader unfamiliar with this generic code. Category romance novels are, (much) more than single title romances, pervaded by these codified narrative and discursive conventions, which are constantly reproduced and reinforced by popular romance novels published in this format.

The conventional character of the category narrative is further enhanced by its publication in a line or series. As I noted above, lines group together romances with very similar narrative characteristics. Each line has a particular narrative profile that recurs in all novels published in that line. Such a profile revolves around one dominant narrative element, which often provides the inspiration for the line's name. Harlequin Intrigue and Silhouette Romantic Suspense, for instance, are two lines which publish romantic suspense narratives; the lines Harlequin Blaze and Silhouette Desire publish sensual, sexually explicit popular romance novels. The narrative profile of a category line can be focused on all kinds of elements from the narrative; some lines specialize in particular characters (Harlequin Medical Romance is a line of romances with medical personnel protagonists), particular settings (Harlequin Historical exclusively publishes romances set in historical times, while Harlequin American Romance offers only romances set in the United States), a particular audience group (the Harlequin Kimani Romance line features exclusively African-American characters and is in the first place aimed at an African-American readership<sup>26</sup>) or the novel's exceptional length (at 60.000 – 65.000 words Harlequin Superromance is one of the publisher's longest category lines and one which features longer-than-usual category romances with relatively substantial subplots and numerous secondary characters).

Although a line's narrative profile is primarily composed around its focus on one particular narrative element, it is in fact characterized by an interacting conglomerate of narrative features. For example, the Silhouette Romantic Suspense line is dominantly profiled

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<sup>26</sup> This explicit racial profiling on Harlequin's part is not universally appreciated within the romance community. While some romance readers and authors applaud the publisher's explicit efforts to include African-American characters and address a black readership in a genre that is otherwise overwhelmingly white, others find the approach hints of racist tendencies and induces a kind of cultural segregation: in American stores "black romances" are sometimes shelved with the "African-American fiction" away from the "romance" shelves where many romance readers find their books; thus some black authors maintain they miss out on sales because the average romance reader does not encounter their books (Wendell and Tan 190-195).

around the suspense subplots that give rise to the line's telling name; however, the line's narratives are additionally also characterized by a high degree of sensuality and sexual explicitness, a dominant heroine point of view and a contemporary setting. A Silhouette Romantic Suspense novel features all of these narrative elements, not only the suspense subplot around which it is profiled. Similarly, Silhouette Desire novels are known for their sensual, rather explicit love scenes, but these stories also consistently feature a contemporary setting and tone, a quick and clear exposition of the core conflict and a particular type of heroine. It is such a combination of narrative characteristics – the totality of all specific narrative conventions of the line – that sets the narrative profile of one romance series apart from the profiles of all others. While this detailed differentiation is useful in the category publication system, where imprints are only functional in so far as they differ from other imprints<sup>27</sup>, it does add to and reinforce the very conventional nature of the category narrative.

Conventions in category romance novels are then very strong. This relates not only to the above described pervasive presence of conventions in the novels' narrative content, but also regards the force with which these conventions are invoked in the publication system of category romance novels. That is, to be published as a category romance novel a narrative has to respect and incorporate the conventions of both the genre and the line in which it is published. Under no circumstance do category narratives deviate from this crucial principle. In this regard, the romance publishers play a pivotal role since they essentially function as gatekeepers: they determine what is (and importantly what is not) published within the category format. To ensure that writers submit manuscripts that comply with the generic, and more specifically, the line-related narrative conventions, romance publishers often provide so-called "writing guidelines" or "tip sheets." These are documents in which the publisher articulates in quite some detail the specific narrative profile of a line and stipulates what is expected, allowed and not accepted within the series. As essentially a list of narrative "do's and don'ts" the existence of such guidelines indicates the (normative) force with which (line-specific) conventions are applied – narratives which do not generally comply with these conventions are not published in the line. The guidelines' content testifies to the degree of

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<sup>27</sup> These differences can be minimal. Harlequin and Silhouette have many very similar lines, such as Harlequin Blaze and Silhouette Desire, Harlequin Intrigue and Silhouette Romantic Suspense, and Harlequin Special Releases and Silhouette Special Releases. In such cases the overall profile of the publisher (cf. below) often plays a role in differentiating the lines from one another.

specificity with which they encroach upon the category's narrative.<sup>28</sup> For example, the current guidelines for the Silhouette Desire line stipulate that the core conflict between hero and heroine is to be presented to the reader "by the end of chapter one", they specify the type of hero that is required ("The Desire hero should be powerful, wealthy – an alpha male with a sense of arrogance and entitlement. ... The Texan hero should own his own ranch, not work on it, and the urban hero should be the company CEO, not a handyman.") and they demand a particular distribution of point of view ("Desires should be more 60% heroine and 40% hero") ("Harlequin Desire").

Such a pervasively conventional and narrowly constrained format presents a compositional challenge to the author. She<sup>29</sup> is faced with the difficult task of making a text that is full of rather strictly determined conventions somehow fresh, lively, and new. One of the main strategies by which category romance authors achieve this intricate balance is by inserting relatively small variations on the conventions in their category narratives. While such minor changes and variations probably appear insignificant to the generically inexperienced eye, to the generically trained romance reader they stand out and are quite significant precisely because the ruling conventions of the format and the line are determined to such an extensive degree. An example illustrates this principle, which is crucial to the creative functioning of the category romance. An obvious instance of this mechanism is the minor variation upon the strict line-imposed conventions. If a Desire novel features, for example, equal point of view distribution between the hero and the heroine (instead of the conventional dominant heroine point of view), experienced readers of the line are likely to take this variation on the line-specific convention into account in their interpretation of the story – in such a case, the additional hero point of view might contribute, for example, to the interpretation of the hero as a more dominant, more important and/or more complex character. This interpretation is based not only on the actual dominance, importance or complexity of the hero in the narrative, but also (and maybe more) on his *perceived* increased dominance, importance and/or complexity in relation to the standard convention which acts as a norm.

Note that such variations, both those upon the line specific and the wider generic conventions, always take place within certain boundaries or constraints. That is, while a degree of variation is possible, and in fact much appreciated, these variations are not limitless. They cannot, for example, violate the basic convention – thus, a Desire novel never has

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<sup>28</sup> An example of such a current guideline, all of which are freely available on Harlequin's website, is included in attachment to this dissertation.

<sup>29</sup> I will consistently refer to the romance author with the female personal pronoun because, as I remarked in the introductory chapter, the vast majority of popular romance authors are women.



exclusive male point of view. It is precisely because the variations take place within clearly determined generic and line-specific boundaries, that they are much appreciated by readers. The reverse is also true: precisely because the conventions are determined in such detail, the generically experienced reader is able to notice and appreciate relatively minor variations. In what could be considered a paradoxical process, the recognition and appreciation for variation and differentiation within the category romance narrative is then enabled by precisely the high degree of conventionality upon which these narratives rely.<sup>30</sup>

It is via this intricately balanced give-and-take between convention and variation that the individual author manages to leave her mark on a format and a narrative that is in all aspects pervasively determined by conventions. This is perhaps not as obvious or self-evident a process as it might seem to the outside reader or critic because the category romance is a format that is remarkably at ease with conventions, stereotypes and recurring patterns. Indeed, while appreciation for individual variation is certainly an important aspect of what could be described as the category romance novel's poetics, the pressure to be respectful of the conventions is at least as strong (if not stronger) than the pressure to be individual, different, original or new. The most successful romance author is then one who manages, within this intricate system, to write romance stories that are both conventional and original, that use the patterns of the genre and line while paying homage to the author's individual voice and vision. As I will extensively discuss part II of this dissertation, an author like Nora Roberts is exceptionally skilled at this intricate balancing act between convention and variation – she manages to perform her authorial and creative singularity via variation without unacceptably transgressing the ruling normative conventions – and it is this skill which is one of the main elements that distinguishes her from many other, less successful category romance authors.

#### **b) The Single Title Romance Novel**

The **single title romance novel** is a quite different kind of popular romance novel. It is a much less circumscribed and constrained format than the category romance novel and one

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<sup>30</sup> In this regard, literary scholar Thomas Roberts argues that the mechanics underlying the appreciation for popular and canonical works of literature are essentially very similar, despite the common perception that the former are much more formulaic (hence of a lesser quality) than the latter. Comparing the often misconceived functioning of recurring narrative patterns in popular fiction (which Roberts refers to as “vernacular fiction”) to some forms of canonical poetry (like the Spenserian stanza), Roberts remarks: “As suggested earlier, the pattern seems to play much the same role in vernacular fiction that the metrical scheme plays in a poem. In both cases, readers sense the formal scheme as the norm that permits them to appreciate the figural variations. The writers are like the jazz musicians who give us a familiar melody at the opening of the piece so that we understand the variations that follow. We do not listen for that melody. We listen for the variation.” (165-66) This process of appreciation for variation enabled by the specificity of the conventions which the variations play upon is crucial to both writing and reading of category romance novels.

which is, consequently, more difficult to define and describe. In principle, all novels which feature the conventional elements of the generic romance narrative and which are not published as category romance novels belong to the single title format. Evidently, this means that there is a lot of narrative variation within the single title format since the generic romance narrative – a love story with a happy ending – can be included in many different kinds of stories. Indeed, single title romance novels come in all shape and forms – from elaborate, slowly-developing historical romance narratives to fast-paced, romantic thrillers in which the romance plot is rivaled (if not dominated) by the suspense storyline. Particular single title romance novels might then have relatively few narrative features in common with each other. While the narrative diversity that is thus present within the single title format makes it somewhat difficult to characterize the “standard” single title romance novel, in comparing the format to its generic counterpart the category some of the single title’s typifying characteristics do emerge.<sup>31</sup>

As considerably longer books, single titles generally feature more substantive and complex narratives than category romances. Single title plots often consist of several interacting narrative threads. The overlapping and interweaving story lines make the typical single title narrative a more layered and somewhat more diffuse kind of narrative than its category counterpart, which is usually characterized by a strict focus on the developing romance between the protagonists. While single title narratives of course also feature such a romance narrative, one or more subplots often tend to widen their narrative scope. In accordance with such a more complex plot structure, single title narratives also tend to have a larger cast of characters, many of whom tend to be more substantially developed than their often stereotype-driven, cardboard category counterparts. In general, the single title hero and heroine are well-developed, round characters which are individuated beyond the core character type on which they are still based. And although the multiple secondary characters that often roam the narrative realms of the single title are still functional – that is, they often partly still serve as vehicles to establish and expand the protagonists’ emotional and psychological range – these characters too are often developed beyond the functionalist type to which they belong. In single title romance, secondary characters are often portrayed as having an (emotional) life of their own which is expanded beyond their functionalist position

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<sup>31</sup> This characterization of the single title, like the majority of the discussions in this dissertation, deliberately adopts a genre-internal comparative perspective, which of course influences the elements that do and do not stand out. A discussion of the single title from a different perspective – e. g. one in which it is compared to the broader categories of women’s fiction or general literary fiction – would likely give rise to a slightly different characterization of the format.

in the protagonists' lives. A secondary romance might be developed, for example, between a pair of secondary romances. Such subplots not only offer fun and interesting in-story opportunities for mirroring or contrasting the main romance plot, but also flesh out the overall narrative girth of the single title.

While every single title romance novel features the basic generic romance narrative, the prominence of this storyline in the narrative as a whole differs considerably between individual single titles and between the single title and category format. Some single title narratives focus almost entirely on the romance plot and offer elaborate courtship narratives in which each phase of the generic narrative is explored and developed at length. Other single titles develop a generically other (sub)plot that is equally prominent in the overall narrative as the romance plot. In still other single title novels the generic romance narrative is relegated to subplot status as the main focus of the narrative lies elsewhere. Although popular romance novels in both formats feature subgeneric romance narratives, in the extent to which the generically other narrative elements are prominent to the story overall category and single title romances differ significantly. In the category the romance plot is *always* the dominant narrative force, which makes the category's main narrative identity a clear-cut matter: category romance narratives are always first and foremost romance stories. In the single title narrative, by contrast, the romance generic narrative is not always and necessarily the most dominant narrative thread and the narrative's overall generic identity is often less straightforward. The question that almost automatically arises here is of course to which extent some of these novels can still be considered popular romance novels. If the romance narrative is nothing but a thinly developed subplot in a novel that is dominated by actions and elements with other generic connotations, is that novel then still also a romance novel or does that generic label require more than the strictly formal inclusion of the conventional elements of the generic narrative? I come back to this and similar questions in part II of this dissertation; for now it suffices to remember that whereas the category romance always has a rather straightforward narrative generic identity, in some instances of the less constrained and less convention-driven single title format this is a more ambiguous matter.

This brief sketch of the characteristic narrative profile of the single title romance – in so far as the single title has a narrative profile that is characteristic of the format, of course – establishes clearly that the single title romance novel deals quite differently with conventions than the much more circumscribed category romance format. Where the category romance runs into conventions at nearly every narrative twist and turn, the single title is a much less constrained kind of romance narrative in which conventions do play a role but are not as all-

decisive. As a substantially longer text than the convention-inundated category novel, the single title does not need to resort to using the coded conventions of the genre for interpretative efficiency; to the contrary, it has both the (narrative and textual) space and time and the conceptual freedom to tweak, change and vary upon the stereotypical characters, recurring plotlines and standardized descriptions that often make up much of the category narrative. In the single title format publishers have less stringent narrative norms, readers less specific expectations and the individual author, therefore, quite a bit more creative leeway.

This does not mean, of course, that the single narrative is devoid of conventions. To the contrary, like the category romance, it incorporates the popular romance's generic narrative; on top of that, the multigeneric single title often also (sometimes rather extensively) uses narrative conventions traditionally associated with other genres such as detective, adventure or fantasy. While conventionality is than anything but absent from the single title narrative, the (romance) conventions do potentially function somewhat differently in the single title than in the category romance novel. Whereas in the category the coded conventions are a crucial aspect of the experienced romance reader's enjoyment of the text – enhancing, according to the above discussed reasoning, the reader's interpretation of the text, making it richer in meaning, adding subtlety and diversity to the interpretation; that is then, essentially, making it better, or at least more enjoyable – and accordingly render the enjoyment of the category narrative nearly inaccessible to the outside reader, in the single title romance novel the hidden, codified meanings of the conventions are a less pivotal part of the interpretation. While they are still in effect for the experienced romance reader – who still recognizes and enjoys them - generally single title narratives and texts do not rely on the codified meanings of the conventions to the extent that they become opaque – no longer enjoyable, annoyingly repetitive – to outside or generically untrained readers.

The different ways in and extents to which different romance formats incorporate conventions in their respective narratives then reveal quite a bit about the respective intended reader of each of these formats. The particular use and functioning of conventions in the category romance novel indicates that this format is targeted at a generically specific readership: category romances are in the first place directed at (and most enjoyed by) readers who are thoroughly familiar with the genre and its narrative and discursive conventions. These are readers who enjoy the conventionality of the format and are simultaneously able, on the basis of their intertextually composed generic knowledge, to detect, decipher and fully appreciate minor variations and changes upon the ruling, generally quite strict conventions. Single titles,

by contrast, target a less generically specific readership; relying less on the coded conventionality of the romance genre to be enjoyed and appreciated, these books target a wider and more diverse group of readers who, while appreciative of the conventional generic romance story, are not necessarily expertly familiar with the codes of the genre and their “hidden” meanings. Moreover, the more extensive inclusion of narrative elements from other generic traditions in many single titles indicates that these books also target a wider readership than the specific romance niche. Indeed, as we will see in our discussion of Nora Roberts’ single titles, such multigeneric narratives have the potential to appeal to different audiences - attracting, for example, not only romance readers, but also readers of the detective, mystery or fantasy genre. More than the category romance, the single title romance novel is then part of the broader popular fiction scene, targeting and appealing to mainstream as well as genre-specific readerships. As we extensively discuss in the next chapters, in this targeting of a particular readership the romance novel’s paratext and institutions of course play a very important and influential role. We will indeed establish that the paratextual and institutional differences between the category and the single title romance novel are considerable and clearly indicate to the reader what type – i.e. format – of romance novel they are dealing with.

Before we move to this extensive discussion of the conventional romance paratext, I want to make three final remarks. First, although in the discussion above I have strongly emphasized the differences between category and single title romance novels – and although these differences are indeed of great importance in the internal organization and logic of the contemporary popular romance genre – we should not lose track of the fact that these differences between the category and the single title romance novel are gradual and not absolute. That is, while generally category and single title romance novels are indeed characterized by a diverging approach to the romance generic narrative – and while we will extensively focus precisely on these differences in many parts of this dissertation – category and single title romance novels still belong to the same narrative genre. They performatively use, at their core, the same narrative generic structure and are in line with one another. While from the genre-internal perspective that is adopted in this dissertation these differences take on much significance, from a perspective external to the genre it is likely these differences are considerably less significant. Second, the above characterization of the typical category and single title romance novel is very general and therefore also very generalizing; the formats’ most frequent and most typical narrative properties are described. It goes without saying that individual instances of both formats can and do of course deviate from the here described

characteristics. In the second part of this dissertation the discussion will often focus precisely on the way in which Roberts' novels both incorporate and transgress the prototypical models and conventions that are described here.

Finally, as I have already implicitly indicated in the discussions above, the three strategies of narrative diversification that I distinguish between partially overlap. That is, there are subgenres in every format and there are romance novels that feature nearly every level of sensuality in nearly every subgenre (with a few noted exceptions) and in every format. These three strategies of narrative diversification can then perhaps best be thought of as three axes on which each individual romance narrative takes up a position. The combination of these three positions determines to an extent the particular characteristics of the particular narrative. Together these three strategies then create a degree of narrative variation and diversification *within* the borders of the contemporary popular romance genre that is significantly more extensive than the stereotypical image of the genre – the notion that all romance novels are essentially the same – implies and allows for.

The kinds of narrative variation that come into being as a result of the application of these various strategies are, however, always themselves to a large extent conventional. That is, these strategies consist of the customary, generally accepted, common, almost stock ways in which consequently conventional kinds of variation within the overall narrative structure of the genre can be achieved. Other, in a way more fundamental kinds of variation, such as for example the variation that is created by the personal input of each individual author – a notion that is often referred to via the concept of an author's voice – are nearly completely ignored in the above discussion. This discussion is then (deliberately) limited to the customary narrative diversification strategies that are present in the contemporary popular romance genre. In the discussion of Nora Roberts' oeuvre that follows in part II of this dissertation, the analysis is, however, not limited to Roberts' wielding of these conventional diversification strategies, but also considers whether and to which extent Roberts incorporates variations upon and even transgressions of the above discussed multiple sets of conventions. In such discussions the various forms of conventions that are discussed in the present chapter serve as the framework within and against which Roberts' oeuvre is constantly placed. The resulting comparative discussion will yield, I believe, important insights about the interaction between genre and authorship in the contemporary popular romance genre specifically and contemporary popular culture more generally.

## CHAPTER 3: PERITEXTUAL CONVENTIONS

### 1. Introduction

As I noted in the introductory chapter, the performance of both authorship and genre is in large part located in the paratext of a book and oeuvre. In this and the following chapter the paratext of the popular romance genre, which like its narrative is in part determined by generic conventions, is discussed and analyzed. In contrast to the discussion of the narrative conventions in the previous chapter, this discussion of the paratextual conventions is not extensively based on previous studies. This lack of secondary sources is due to the simple fact that such sources do not exist. That is, there is presently no standard, in-depth study of the paratextual conventions that characterize the contemporary popular romance novel. Indeed, whereas the narrative conventions of this popular genre are an elaborately discussed topic in the field of Popular Romance Studies, the romance novel's paratext is largely overlooked or simply ignored in academic discussions on the genre. Although some romance scholars have made a few rather sporadic observations<sup>1</sup> about the romance genre's paratext, none of these discussions have been developed into anything resembling Pamela Regis' thorough study of the romance novel's narrative conventions. The present discussion begins the development of such a general account of the contemporary popular romance novel's paratextual conventions. It attempts to take stock of the existing tendencies and to map, identify and begin to analyze the most conventional core characteristics of the popular romance paratext. As the first extensive account of its kind, this discussion is of course not considered the final and definitive account of the conventional characteristics of the popular romance genre's paratext, but is, to the contrary, meant to initiate and stimulate the development of a further more extensive study of this matter.

This dissertation's central interest in the connection between genre and authorship runs as a leitmotif through this description and critical discussion of the paratextual conventions. The following analysis is then often focused on the ways in which and the extent to which the romance paratext develops the identity of the linguistic text it encloses in terms

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<sup>1</sup> These include Juliet Flesch (2004 45-71), Janice Radway (1984 19-45), Jennifer McKnight-Trontz,(2002) and various comments throughout the studies by Paul Grescoe (1996) and Joseph McAleer (1999). While these comments are useful, many of them are either out of date (e.g. Radway), focus on romance novels published before the 1980s (McKnight-Trontz and McAleer) or almost exclusively treat about the front cover and production system of the popular romance novel (e.g. Flesch). Thus, none of these offer the kind of comprehensive account that I strive towards in this and the next chapter.

of genre on the one hand and authorship on the other. In this discussion the paratext is considered to simultaneously play what I call a *reflective* and a *performative* role in the development of the text's identity. That is, it is a conglomeration of elements that on the one hand reflects an already existing textual identity – namely the identity that is (supposedly) developed and performed in the text it (re)presents to the outside world – and on the other hand actively takes part in process of further developing and performing this identity. The category romance novel, for example, is published with the conventional paratextual elements that mark the book as a category romance because this format is part of the already existing textual identity – the paratext reflects the text's existing identity – but simultaneously these paratextual elements also make the book into a category romance – they actively perform and develop that part of its identity. As such the paratext is then considered as a dynamic zone that is marked by a constant tension between passive reflection and active constitution and performance of textual identity.

Since a text always has multiple, layered identities, there are several kinds or types of identity that are reflected in and performed by the paratext. For contemporary popular romance novels usually at least two types of identity take up a prominent position in the paratext: the overall generic identity (the book is a popular romance novel) and the genre-internal, format identity (the book is either a category or a single title romance novel). The overall generic identity of popular romance implies other more general identities as well – a book that is a popular romance novel is also a novel, fiction, popular literature and genre fiction, for example – and thus performatively assigns the book a place in the overall cultural and literary field. The more specific genre-internal format identity places the book within the system of the popular romance genre itself – the category romance novels takes up a different position in this generic system than the single title romance novel – and implies, moreover, also the relevance of more specific forms of identity (the category romance novel always belongs to a particular line, for example). Category and single title romance novels thus share a number of paratextual characteristics – much as they share core narrative characteristics – but there are also rather extensive and important differences between the typical category and single title paratext – much as there are significant narrative differences between the two romance formats, as the previous chapter showed.

Indeed, the most important differences between the basic paratextual conventions of the category and single title romance novel are conceptually very similar to the narrative differences that exist between the two formats. The category romance's paratext is then characterized, much like its narrative, by a set of rather well-defined and quite detailed



conventions which construct a very clear-cut textual identity. In this layered identity the generic romance identity is always dominant; indeed, the prototypical category romance paratext strongly presents the novel as first and foremost a popular romance novel. While the line in which the book is published is another important aspect of the textual identity that is reflected in and constructed by the category's prototypical paratext, the novel's author is usually not. The single title's paratext is, by contrast, to a lesser extent determined by well-defined conventions. Indeed, much like its narrative, the single title paratext features a lot of variation, which makes it trickier to determine its prototypical features. While it often tends to develop a generic identity as a popular romance novel, this generic identity is not infrequently to a greater or lesser extent complemented by (and sometimes even entirely replaced by) the author's name as an important pillar of the paratextually constructed textual identity. Such tendencies offer very useful perspectives on the in this dissertation central issue of the relationship between genre and authorship in the popular romance genre.

The paratext is made up of a complex conglomerate of many quite different elements. Genette characterizes it as an "undefined zone between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward world's discourse about the text)" (2). To structure the discussion of the conventions that determine this complex zone for the contemporary popular romance genre, this chapter first focuses on what Genette calls the "peritext" – that is all the paratextual elements that are "located within the same volume" (4) as the linguistic text proper. The next chapter deals with the so-called "epitext", i.e. those paratextual elements that, "at least originally, are located outside the book" (4). The discussion of the peritext in this chapter approaches the book from the outside to the inside: it starts with an analysis of the book as a material object (size, format, paper, etc.), it moves on to a discussion of the outside cover (front, back and spine) and it concludes with an examination of the peritextual elements that are located on the inside of the book (the title page, the colophon, the dedication, etc.).

Although all of these peritextual zones and elements are considered and discussed more or less separately from one another in this chapter – which successively analyzes each of these elements – I want to emphasize that in the performance of textual identity and the interpretation of this performance by the user of the text, these peritextual elements – and more generally the entire paratext – do not function separately from each other. To the contrary, the performance by and interpretation of the peritext is, I believe, a layered, step-by-step process in which each element influences the total interpretation and performance so that

one single element rarely, if ever, plays a decisive role. These are then complex, layered, constantly interacting processes in which one element cannot be considered completely separate from all others – an impression the following discussions might create – but in which all elements function simultaneously both independently from and in function of one another. In the final interpretation and performance of the peritext – and the paratext more generally – it is the result of this complex and compound process that matters most.

## 2. The Format

“The most all-embracing aspect of the production of a book – and thus of the materialization of a text for public use – is doubtless the choice of *format*,” Gerard Genette remarks at the beginning of *Paratexts* (original emphasis, 17). In this context, the term **format** has a somewhat different meaning than it has in the context of the popular romance genre, where it denotes an entire system of production and consumption. In the more general and frequent use of the term it refers essentially to the three-dimensional size of a book and the material from which it, and in particular its cover, is made (although here too concomitant strategies of production and consumption typical for each format can be discerned). Contemporary popular romance novels are published in three main formats: the mass market paperback, the trade paperback and the hardcover.<sup>2</sup> The mass market paperback is by far the most common format

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<sup>2</sup> These three formats are without question the most common in the publication of popular romance novels. According to the latest statistics (2009) provided by Romance Writers of America the most popular romance format is the paperback, which is used by 90.6% of romance readers; the hardcover format is less common – 47.6% of readers indicate they read hardcover editions of popular romance novels - but still considerably more common than all other formats. There are indeed a number of less frequently used formats that, for various reasons, are not further discussed in this dissertation. One is the so-called tall paperback, which is a variation on the trade paperback. Because it is quite rare in the publication of romances and, moreover, because it shares many characteristics with the trade paperback format, I do not distinguish the tall paperback as a separate fourth format. Another format that is not included in this discussion is the audiobook; some romance novels are released as audiobooks, but this format is certainly not amongst the most common of romance formats; according to the 2009 RWA stats only 6.5% of readers indicate that they use romance audiobooks. Moreover, reading and listening to a story are still two different kinds of experience and this dissertation focuses on the romance novels as books – that is, as written texts. Finally, another format that I deliberately leave out of the present discussion is the e-book or digital book. The e-book is a recent, but increasingly popular format in the publication of romance novels. The number of romance e-publishers and romance e-books is constantly on the rise; while many such e-publishers and e-retailers were initially small players focussing on particular niches of the genre, in the last few years more established publishers and retailers have become increasingly involved with the romance e-book. In the summer of 2009 Harlequin/Silhouette – the most important print publisher of popular romance in the world – launched Carina Press, a subdivision of the publisher that specializes in digital books. Barnes and Noble, America’s largest book store chain, is increasingly focussing on the romance e-book market as well; in an interview with *The New York Times* its chief executive, William Lynch, says the company expect its e-book sales in romance to surpass its print sales in 2011 (Bosman). These are all signs that the digital book format is becoming increasingly important in romance publishing. Indeed, *The New York Times* reports that “[r]omance is now the fastest growing segment of the e-reading market, ahead of general fiction, mystery and science fiction” (idem). Still, the digital book format is generally not discussed in this dissertation for mainly two reasons. The first is the fact that, despite its growing sales and increasing importance, the e-book is still a much

in the popular romance genre: *all* category romance novels and the majority of single titles are published as mass market paperbacks. Some single titles novels also appear as trade paperbacks or in hardcover editions, although this last format is less common in the popular romance genre and generally reserved only for novels written by the most popular authors. While book formats differ from one another mainly in terms of material and economic properties, these aspects of a book tend to significantly influence the various ways in which a particular book is (pragmatically) used and (culturally) perceived. This pragmatic use and cultural perception in turn play a not unimportant role in the general development and performance of the book's textual identity.

The perhaps most obvious way in which romance novels published in different book formats differ from each other is in the size of the book and its other material properties. The mass market paperback is the smallest of all formats with standardized dimensions of either 110mm x 178mm (for categories) or 130mm x 198mm (for some single titles); trade paperbacks are quite a bit larger (standard size 135mm x 216mm) and hardcovers might be larger still though they have no one standard size. As the name of each format implies, their covers are made of different materials. Mass market paperback covers are made out of paper or a soft, pliable kind of cardboard material; the trade paperback cover is made out of a sturdier, less pliable kind of cardboard while the hardcover (as the term implies) is made of the sturdiest, non-pliable cardboard material, which is sometimes additionally surrounded with a dust jacket in thick, shiny paper. Often, different kinds of paper are used for different formats: the mass market paperback book is traditionally published in low-quality, grainy, acid-free, greyish or brownish paper that tends to discolour over time. For the trade paperback edition paper of a higher quality is used, but this is often still of a lesser quality than the sparkling white, often thick paper of the hardcover. Formats' bindings are also different; pages in both mass market and trade paperbacks are normally glued together in the spine, while pages in hardcovers tend to be more firmly sewn together in the binding. Of all formats, the mass market paperback is then literally the lightest book; particularly category romances – which are only about two hundred pages long – are small, lightweight books that are very

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less common format than print books – according to RWA's 2009 statistics, only 5.4% of romance readers read at least one romance e-book in the past year, which implies almost 95% of romance readers do not read e-books. Although all indications are that the e-format is rapidly gaining popularity – by the time this dissertation is published in 2011 these numbers are probably already outdated – for now it seems to me that the print format remains quite dominant. Moreover, and this the second reason the digital book format is further ignored in this dissertation, it seems to me that the material and other paratextual aspects of the e-book – and hence of the various interpretative processes that accompany its reception – differ from print publication to such an extent that it is a topic that should be studied in its own right and not as a minor (and therefore likely inadequate) part of a study with essentially a different focus.

easy to handle and carry around. Mass market single titles are thicker and therefore literally more substantial than the small categories, but still much lighter and easier to carry around than the trade paperback and particularly the hardcover, which is literally the heaviest and materially most substantial of formats.

Book formats also have different economic properties. Generally, the mass market paperback edition (of a romance novel or any other book) is the least expensive, the trade paperback is more expensive and the hardcover is the most expensive edition. Within the mass market paperback format romance novels still differ in terms of price since categories are often (considerably) cheaper than single titles. In fact, category romance novels are (famously) inexpensive books - today they rarely cost more (and often less) than \$6. While category romance novels published in the same line are sold at the same standardized price, prices might differ slightly between lines. For example, most Harlequin and Silhouette lines are currently priced at \$4.99, but some lines, such as Harlequin Historical (currently \$5.99) and Love Inspired (currently \$6.50), are more expensive.<sup>3</sup> No such price uniformity exists for single titles, which are priced individually. Prices of single title romance novels do, however, often fall within certain ranges; here the considerable economic differences between the different formats is most obvious: the mass market paperback often ranges between \$8 and \$10, the trade paperback goes for about \$15 whereas the hardcover edition of the same novel is often around \$25. While these price differences are of course reflections of the actual material differences between the formats – trade paperbacks and hardcovers are indeed more expensive to materially produce than mass market paperback books – it seems to me they also have a more symbolic effect. That is, since we have the tendency to equate monetary value with other kinds of value – such as artistic or literary quality – the notion that a very inexpensive book is likely to be of lesser artistic or literary value than a more expensive book is, it seems to me, implicit but common in our culture. While we should be careful to not overestimate the impact of such implicit cultural perceptions, the widespread notion that popular romance novels are bad – i.e. low-quality – books is, I think, in part an effect of their (in)famous monetary cheapness.

Finally, a third important difference between the three most common book formats in the romance genre regards the edition of a text – original or reissue – for which they are used.

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<sup>3</sup> These were the prices in December 2010. The prices mentioned here refer to the list price, which is the official price of a book set by the publisher. Often, this price is printed on the book's cover and functions as an upper price limit – the book should not cost more than the list price indicates. Many retailers (and even the publishers themselves) sell books at a lower (so-called discounted) price, so the customer rarely pays the “full” list price. In December 2010, for example, many of the \$4.99 priced novels were sold at \$2.99 or \$3.99 on the Harlequin/Silhouette website and at \$3.99 at the web-based retailer Amazon.

In romance publishing, the hardcover and trade paperback formats are only used for original editions of single title romance novels, while the mass market paperback format is used for both original editions of categories and single titles and for reissues of single titles that have previously been published in a different format. The category romance novel, originally published as a mass market paperback, is conventionally not reissued.<sup>4</sup> The romance genre's standard pattern of format use deviates to a certain extent from the common customs on the English language book market where the use of the mass market paperback format for the original publication of a text – a strategy that is dominant in the popular romance genre – is less frequent for other kinds of literature. Literary fiction novels, for example, are usually first published in a hardcover edition; if this edition is reasonably successful, a cheaper mass market paperback edition of the novel is often published.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, on the English language book market the use of the mass market paperback format for original editions of a text is predominantly reserved for, and therefore strongly associated with, the category of literature that resides under the umbrella-term “genre fiction”<sup>6</sup>. The specific and often rather negative cultural associations and prejudices that are associated with this type of literature are, amongst others via the use of the mass market format for original editions, then often transferred to the popular romance novel published in this format. The reverse is also true of course: a single title romance novel that is published in the hardcover or trade paperback format is, because of its material format, in part distinguished from the category of genre fiction and the concomitant cultural associations and prejudices.

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<sup>4</sup> While this is the regular, most common format strategy that is used in the publication of popular romance novels, we will see in the discussion of Nora Roberts' oeuvre that deviations of this pattern occur - they should, however, be considered as precisely that: deviations of the standard. As we will then extensively discuss later in this dissertation, Nora Roberts' category romance novels are, against the customs of the genre, reissued (multiple times even). This is one of the areas in which, I will later more extensively argue, Nora Roberts has decisively influenced the common practices of the genre as a whole.

<sup>5</sup> Note the somewhat different cultural connotations these uses of the paperback format entail. The paperback format has positive connotations when it is used for the reissuing of e.g. literary fiction, where it signals a kind of approval: because of the text's quality or appeal, its wider circulation is stimulated by making a cheaper edition available. A particular example of this dynamic is the reissuing of literary classics in paperback series such as Penguin Classics; in these instances the paperback format (and the series) implies a positive kind of selection - it signals the admission of the work into the literary canon, associating the paperback format with notions of canonization. When the mass market paper format is used for the publication of original editions of popular genre fiction, however, the use of the format signals almost the opposite, namely that the work is deemed not worthy of the more expensive and preservable hardback format and is meant *only* for immediate consumption.

<sup>6</sup> The term “genre fiction” refers to the kind of popular literature that is explicitly written according to certain narrative patterns associated with certain genres. Examples of genre fiction other than popular romance are detective, crime, western, fantasy and horror. While the distinction between genre fiction and other kinds of (literary) fiction is fluid and relative – genre patterns and conventions play a role in all texts, after all – genre fiction is generally considered to be more explicit and conventional in its use of and reliance on obvious and recurring generic patterns. The group of literature the term is supposed to refer to is generally perceived to be repetitive or formulaic, hence of little artistic or literary value, written mainly for escapist entertainment purposes and commercially oriented.

One of the important effects of the economic and material properties of a format is that they constitute, perhaps more so than many other paratextual elements, a kind of *program* for the use of the book; that is, these properties make the book suited for particular uses and stimulate or incite the reader to use the book in these ways.<sup>7</sup> These uses are, as I remarked in the introductory chapter, in turn relevant factors in the performance of genre. Since each format has different material and economic properties, it follows that the (pre)programmed prototypical use of each format is (slightly) different. Let me briefly elaborate on this notion by comparing the prototypical uses of the mass market paperback with that of the hardcover book. As I have remarked above, the hardcover is big, often literally quite heavy and physically inflexible (the cover does not easily bend or ply in the reader's hands); these material properties often imply that the most comfortable position for reading a hardcover – the format's materially “pre-programmed” reading position, as it were – is one in which the reader is not holding the book up (due to the books' weight and material inflexibility this experience could become physically unpleasant and thus distract the reader from the reading experience), but one in which the book is resting on e.g. a table or the reader's lap. The materiality of the hardcover then programs – stimulates the reader to adopt - particular physical reading positions in which the book's material properties are used to the greatest advantage. The same is true for the mass market paperback book which, certainly in comparison to the hardcover, is smallish, lightweight and pliable (to the horror of some readers and the delight of others, the paperback cover often easily bends and curls, flexibly adapting itself to the reader's physical manoeuvring). This kind of book is easy to hold up and can, consequently, be comfortably read in many different physical positions: the paperback reader can, for example, be snuggled up on the couch, relaxingly stretched out in the bathtub, warmly curled up under the covers in bed, languishingly lying in a hammock, etc. The book's suitability or adaptability to different physical reading positions suggests that prototypically

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of program is crucial here; it describes a kind of ideal or prototypical use of the book by an ideal (constructed, not-real, theoretical) reader. This programmatic use of the book describes the kind of uses that are as it were ingrained in the material and economic properties of the book – the uses that the book is materially and economically most suited for, that follow most logically from the book's typifying features, that the book as an object logically gives rise to. While, it seems to me, these uses are also most common in the actual uses of the book by individual readers, to an extent the concept of the programmatic use is to be distinguished from actual uses by individual readers, which can (and do) deviate from what I consider to be the programmatic use. It goes without saying that the individual reader always enjoys the freedom to use a book in any way he sees fit and that these uses might be substantially different from the ones here considered programmatic. In the present discussion, however, it is not such individually determined uses that are relevant but the programmatic ones. I would like to thank Steven Surdiacourt for suggesting the term “program” to me.

paperbacks and hardcovers can be (and are) read in different situations.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the small and lightweight mass market paperback is a book that is generally easy to transport (it e.g. fits in most purses, bags or coat pockets) while this is not always as comfortable for the much heavier hardcover. Consequently the paperback is, more than the hardcover book, programmed to be read on the go (in the car, in the train station<sup>9</sup>, on the bus or plane, etc.) or far away from its storage area (in the park, on the beach, etc.), while the hardcover is a book that is most comfortably read close to the place it is kept – in the armchair next to the book case, for example, or behind a table in the library.

Another aspect of the use of a book that is influenced by its material properties is its longevity – that is, the amount of time the book typically remains in use. Generally, the sturdier hardcover lasts quite a bit longer than the paperback, which is a more temporary artefact. The hardcover, made out of strong materials, is a book that is materially more enduring than the paperback; it stands the test of time and, even after much handling, remains materially intact. This material longevity suggests that the book is meant – programmed – to be preserved over time. Collected and kept in both private and public book collections, the hardcover book can be read and reread long after it was first published. This implied – programmatic – use of the books provides the hardcover with a hint of timelessness; that is, the use of the book is not as materially connected to its time of production than is the case for e.g. the less sturdy paperback. The publication of a text in the hardcover format in turn

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<sup>8</sup> While we might additionally be inclined to further connect the different programmatic reading positions and situations to different kinds of reading and the reading of different types of texts (indeed it seems a not unlikely assumption that someone reading a paperback in bed, the bathtub or a hammock is reading a fun and frivolous story for entertainment and relaxation purposes), it seems to me that in the current cultural constellation no such straightforward connection between the format on the one hand and the reading function and/or kind of text read exists. We would be grossly oversimplifying a complex cultural situation if we were to claim that paperbacks are always read for fun or hardcovers always contain serious texts. At the same time, however, this connection is not totally unfounded or ludicrous, not in the least because (at least in the English speaking world) it is partly a result of and based on a complex history. That is, there is a historical connection between the rise of the paperback book (and its predecessors) and the coming into being of the concept of reading for entertainment by a mass public. The development of the paperback book technically enabled a rapid and cheap circulation of book-length texts on a massive scale, which was one of the elements that stimulated the coming into being of the mass reading public of modernity. Other concepts that were fully developed at this time were the notion of leisure – time off from work during which entertaining activities could be pursued – and the conception of mass culture as an essentially formulaic, repetitive and inferior form of culture preoccupied with consumption (and implicitly or explicitly opposed to the notion of “high” art, preoccupied with the pursuit of artistic value). This triumvirate of the paperback book, leisure and mass consumption culture played a decisive role in the development of the current concept of popular literature as a kind of literature that targets a mass audience, circulates on a mass scale and consists of texts that are more formulaic and conventional than other (more respected) forms of art. Although the situation on the book market has since become much more complex and the connection between the book’s materiality, the kind of text it contains and the purposes for which it is read is no longer straightforward, these historical developments might still have some (conceptual) impact. For more on these historical developments see for example Storey (2003), Radway (1984 20-30) and McCracken (1998 19-22).

<sup>9</sup> The Dutch term for popular romance novel – “stationsromannetje”, which literally translates as “small novel from the train station” – refers to the fact that popular romance novels are often read on public transportation.

suggests – performs – that its text is deemed to remain valuable over time, that it is a text worthy of collection, rereading and preservation. This is not typically the case for the paperback edition of a book, which is prototypically programmed for a shorter life cycle. The paperback is materially less enduring than the hardcover; after much or intensive handling, the paperback book might literally fall apart: the cover and spine creases, the paper discolours, wrinkles or even rips, the glue-based binding gives way, causing pages to fall out of the book thus rendering it (physically) incomplete and therefore essentially worthless. The paperback is then not a book that is prototypically preserved for a long time; on the contrary, while it is initially used intensely, once it has been used – read, reread, materially and conceptually consumed – it is rather easily discarded or thrown away. While these significantly different uses of book formats over time are most importantly based on the books' material properties – hardcovers are simply more suited for long term preservation than paperbacks – they are of course also connected to the format's different economic properties. That is, to put it simply, we are generally more inclined to carefully handle and preserve an expensive book than an inexpensive one, which we discard more easily.

The format's economic and material properties furthermore also play a role in the symbolic interpretation of the book. The reader, a member of the cultural landscape and community in which the book figures, is familiar with the program of use that is inscribed in the book's economic and material properties and this knowledge implicitly influences his or her perception and interpretation of the book. If we consider, as I have suggested earlier, the paratext as a complex conglomerate of constantly interacting elements and the interpretation of the paratext as a compound, step-by-step process in which each element is interpreted independently as well as in function of the other elements, the book's format – and the program of use that is inscribed therein – is an essential element that plays a significant role in the initial phase of that interpretation. That is, its influence is perhaps strongest in the very first, unguarded moments the reader encounters the book when the basic outlines of the interpretation of the book as an artefact that figures in the cultural order are created. The crude interpretative outlines that are drawn here are essentially based, it seems to me, on a basic transformation of values – namely the book's economic and material value is transformed into, and even reinterpreted as, cultural or symbolic value. Thus, in this basic process the hardcover is seemingly instinctively associated with notions of an important, qualitative and/or valuable kind of text, while the paperback book is more easily perceived as containing a more frivolous, less ambitious, less significant and/or less qualitative kind of text. This is, of course, a very basic and simplistic interpretation; indeed, it seems to me that this



interpretation serves only as a stepping stone – a first step in the complex process of interpreting the value-laden meaning of the paratext. As other elements of the paratext are taken into account – not in the least the front cover – this initial interpretation is modified to fit the compound multi-layered interpretation that emerges; it might be confirmed and reinforced by other elements of the paratext, but it might just as well be contradicted and fundamentally changed. Still, it seems to me that this initial interpretation, that first and very basic notion of what kind of book we are dealing with, remains important in our general interpretation of and dealings with the book.

This discussion makes clear that the format in which a popular romance novel (or any other book, for that matter) is published not only has important implications for the (pragmatic) use of the book, but also brings with it a number of rather significant and often value-laden cultural associations. In this way the format influences the perception, interpretation and active paratextual construction of the layered textual identity. The romance novel published as a hardcover – which is a small minority of the total number of popular romance novels published today – is used, perceived, interpreted and constructed quite differently from its mass market counterpart. The format, much like many of the other paratextual elements, simultaneously works in both a reflective and constitutive way. On the one hand it is a reflection of aspects of an already existing textual identity which it also serves. In this regard the dominance of the mass market paperback format in the contemporary popular romance genre is logical. The popular romance novel's identity as light reading for the masses economically and pragmatically best suits the mass market paperback format, which is cheap to produce and easy to circulate on a mass scale. The romance's identity as genre fiction is, moreover, also reflected in its prevalent use of the mass market paperback format that in the English speaking world is strongly associated with this category of literature. On the other hand, of course, the format, like the rest of the paratext, actively develops the romance's textual identity. In other words, the mass market paperback format also constructs the romance novel that is published in this format as (culturally little appreciated) genre fiction, as light reading, as mass literature, etc. – this textual identity does not exist only independently from, in this case, the format but comes into being in part in the use of this particular format for the publication of the text.

From this perspective the use of the hardcover format for contemporary popular romance novels is of course somewhat remarkable because the format performs aspects of textual identity that are traditionally not considered typical for the popular romance novel. Via

the use of the hardcover format the popular romance is, for example, differentiated from the category of genre fiction (which is characterized by original editions in the mass market format) and consequently (implicitly) divorced from the various connotations (of, amongst other things, extensive conventionality and explicit commercialism) which this broader category entails. Popular romance novels are furthermore, for example, usually not thought of as books that are suited for long-term preservation or extensive rereading, which are uses of the book that the hardcover format does seem to imply or give rise to. Here again the format works in a double way: even as the hardcover format enables – makes possible, even stimulates – such a long time use of the book, it also implicitly constructs the book as one that is suited for - worthy of - such repeated use over time. Even as the format makes it easier for the reader to single out these novels and collect them, in this process of creating the possibility for doing this the format also more actively encourages, even enables the reader to conceive of this novel in such individual terms. That is, while the choice for the hardcover format might anticipate an already existing desire on the reader's part to single out this novel – to collect it, reread it, keep it – at the same time it also creates the conditions in which this desire and this particular conception of the novel becomes possible.

In the contemporary popular romance genre the choice for a particular format is predominantly based on economic and commercial factors. The publisher, who makes the final decision in this matter (with or without consulting the novel's writer), gauges the market potential of a particular romance novel and subsequently selects the economically most suitable format. Since the hardcover format is (considerably) more expensive to produce than the mass market paperback format, it consequently circulates on a smaller market, but its margin of profit is considerably bigger than the mass market paperback's. A hardcover romance novel can, in principle, then make a (considerably) larger profit for the publisher (and the author) but only if it sells quite well, otherwise loss threatens. A mass market edition, by contrast, is much cheaper to produce and circulates on a bigger market, but the profit margin is considerably smaller than the hardcover's. The publisher thus takes a smaller financial risk by publishing a book in the mass market paperback, but the potential for profit is often also smaller. In practice all of this means that usually the hardcover format is only reserved for single title romance novels that the publisher expects to sell really well at the comparatively high hardcover price (indeed, the price difference between a \$25 hardcover romance novel and a \$5 (or less) paperback romance is significant). Hardcover romances are then the most popular romance novels – or, at least, the romance novels publishers expect to be most popular – for which readers are willing to pay more. In exchange they get a book they

know they will be able to keep, preserve, reread, etc. An indirect consequence of this situation is that in the contemporary popular romance genre the publication of a novel in the hardcover format, and to a lesser extent the trade paperback format, is a sign of (expected commercial) popularity, which in the romance community often functions as one of the most important yardsticks of success. Indeed, it is a tacit agreement that publication of a popular romance novel in the trade and, even more so, the hardcover format equals true success for its author.

What emerges clearly from this discussion is that the format is one peritextual element in which dynamics of textual and literary identity formation in an explicitly commercial genre such as the popular romance genre are constantly conflated with commercial and economic considerations. The latter seem, at least initially, to have more weight in the decision making process. That is, a romance novel is published in a particular format primarily because of commercial considerations; the ways in which this format plays a role in the construction of the text's (generic and other) identities seems to be of less importance in this decision. However, the identity of the text, of course influences this text's commercial potential. Many people will, for example, not buy a novel they perceive to be (on the basis of its paratext) a popular romance novel because they do not identify as romance readers; the reverse is of course also true as many readers who do identify as romance readers buy a particular novel precisely because on the basis of its paratext they believe it is a popular romance novel. A romance novel published in the hardcover has, I believe, at least the potential to initially appeal to the first group of (non-romance) readers precisely because the book does not have one of the most (proto)typical paratextual elements that performs the popular romance generic identity – the mass market paperback format; reversely (and interestingly), the book might for the same reason initially appeal less to the reader who does identify as a romance reader. Of course, in the final reading and/or purchasing behaviour the format as such is unlikely to be a decisive factor – as I remarked earlier, the paratextual construction of textual identity is a complexly layered process in which elements function both separately from and in interaction with one another – but the above discussion has made clear, I believe, that its importance to the whole should still not be underestimated.

### **3. The Cover**

The importance of the cover in the book's overall paratextual functioning can hardly be overestimated. The cover encloses the entire text, literally (re)presenting it to the outside world. As, moreover, one of the very first and most encompassing elements of the book the

reader encounters it has a major influence on the interpretative process that unlocks the book as a semiotic object. The cover then carries out a major part of the interpretative task the paratext as a whole fulfils. It acts as an intermediary between the book's producers and consumers, offering the former a privileged space in which the latter can be addressed, influenced and/or guided in their initial perception and interpretation of the text. While the cover is then constructed and shaped by the book's producers - here more prominently the publisher than the author - it is also interpretatively appropriated by the consumer, who reads it and uses it to develop an (initial) idea and interpretation of the text the cover is (re)presenting. Indeed, the cover's main semiotic task is to identify and individualize the text, that is, to transpose it from the general category "a book" to the singular category "this particular book".

Conventionally, the cover is spatially divided into three main areas: the front cover, the back cover and the spine.<sup>10</sup> Each area of the cover provides slightly different information about the text, which often anticipates the most conventional functioning of the particular cover area. The front cover, the part of the book the reader is likely to encounter first, provides a rather general idea of what kind of text the book encloses. Standard elements on the front cover are the book's title, the name of the author and images or other semiotic signs that in some way give information about the text (type). This information performs an often basic identification and categorisation of the text. For many kinds of books, and popular romance novels are certainly amongst these, the front cover also has a secondary commercial function of drawing the consumer's attention and increasing its appeal to the targeted reader. The back cover, a peritextual element that is most likely encountered after the front cover, conventionally elaborates on the basic categorisation. It often provides more detailed information about the text and/or its author, featuring, for example, a summary of the text and/or a brief bio(biblio)graphy of the text's author. The spine, finally, is an element of the cover that is most likely to be semiotically activated when the book is placed in a particular position, namely when it is shelved. The spine is then most likely read when the other areas of the cover are temporarily muted because they are momentarily invisible. The information provided on the spine is adapted to this particular situation and usually provides the text's most basic identifying elements: its title, the name of its author and, often via a logo, its publisher.

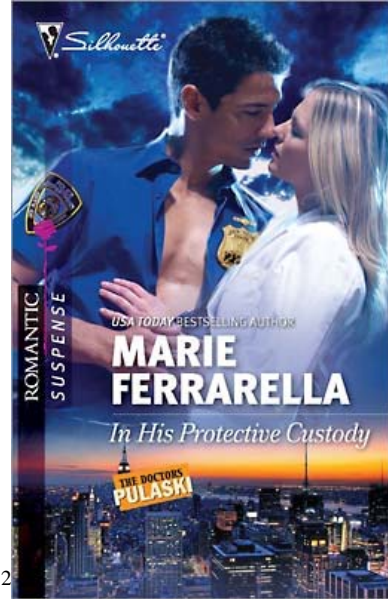
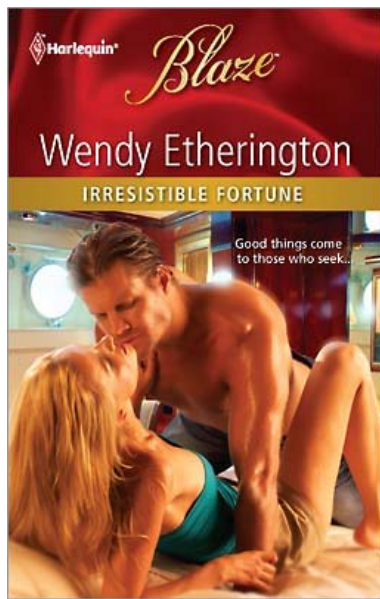
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<sup>10</sup> This terminology and division differ slightly from Gerard Genette's, who refers to the front cover as "cover 1" and to the back cover as "cover 4" and includes the usually blank - "mute" - insides of the front cover ("cover 2") and of the back cover ("cover 3") in the concept of cover. In this present discussion, the cover is understood to refer to all aspects of the book that are on the "outside" of book - i.e. that are visible when the book is closed.

On the cover of the popular romance novel, as on that of any other book, multiple identities are performed. Covers of popular romance novels conventionally perform this generic identity quite strongly. While these covers frequently also contain performative references to the narrative's subgeneric identity, the performance of the romance identity is often dominant. Another identity thread that is always clearly performed on the popular romance novel cover is its genre-internal format, that is whether the book is a category or single title romance novel. The cover differences between the formats, which are discussed and analyzed in this section of the dissertation, are myriad and considerable. But they come down to two fundamentally different compositional and identity logics that underlie both formats. The category romance cover is dominantly geared towards performing a generic and line-related identity and representing the novel as an instance of the line (and thus genre) in which it is published. The single title cover develops multiple identity strategies on its cover – sometimes the generic identity performance is dominant, in other cases the title or author are the focal points on the cover – but is in essence geared towards (performatively) representing the novel as an individual text. These different identity strategies, this discussion demonstrates, function as the core principles according to which the category and single title cover are respectively composed.

### 3.1 The Category Romance

The construction of the category romance as a novel that is predominantly characterized by the identifying properties it derives from the genre and imprint to which it belongs is most elaborate on the book's **front cover**. As we can see in the examples below, this space is dominated by elements that perform these generic and line-related identities.

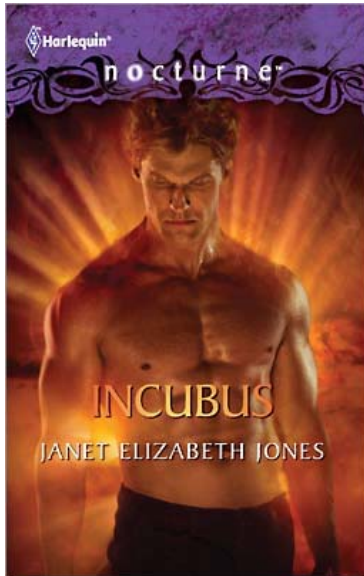


As we can see in these (and various other) examples, the category romance's front cover is dominated by a (photographic) image, which takes up the focal point in the composition. Very often this is an image of a (scantily clad) man and woman in a passionate embrace. This image, known in romance jargon as the *clinch*, graces the front cover of a nigh endless series of romance novels in always changing but essentially similar variations. It is a very strong, unambiguous and effective visual that is very powerfully associated in our culture with the generic identity popular romance; as a nearly universally recognized icon of the popular romance genre the clinch image is then very effective in performatively constructing the book's generic identity as popular romance. Notwithstanding the clinch's semiotic efficiency as genre marker, some category romance front covers feature other types of images.

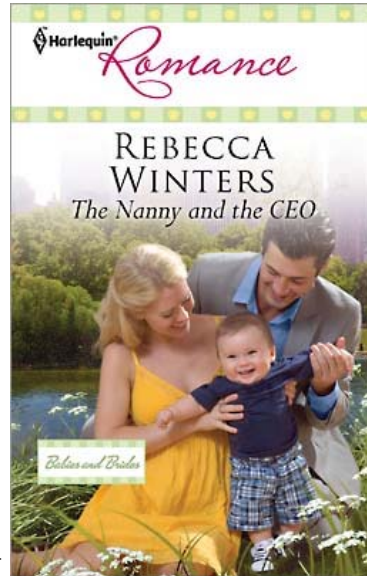
<sup>11</sup> Front cover of *Irresistible Fortune* by Wendy Etherington, published in the Harlequin Blaze line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22968&cid=192>

<sup>12</sup> Front cover of *Lone Wolf* by Karen Whiddon, published in the Harlequin Nocturne line, January 2011. Source of cover image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22903&cid=2577>

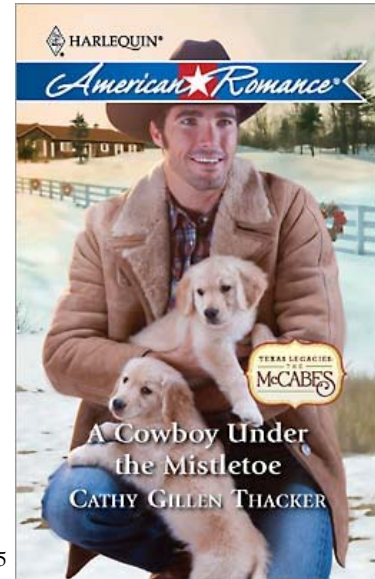
<sup>13</sup> Front cover of *In His Protective Custody* by Marie Ferrarella, published in the Silhouette Romantic Suspense line, February 2011. Source of cover image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=23039>



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The most important types are what I call the “solo” cover – i.e. an image of a single man, often also quite scantily clad (see the Jones and Thacker example above) – and the “domestic” cover – i.e. an image in which domestic elements, such as children, dogs, pregnant women or other wholesome images, feature prominently (see the Winters and Thacker examples above). Despite their significant differences in tone, each of these images in their own way performs popular romance as a basic generic identity. As we can see on the cover examples above and below, differences in tone between front cover images can be substantial as these images are geared towards peritextually representing the particular kind or subgenre of romance their line offers. Thus, the Harlequin Blaze novel is graced with an erotic cover image (see the suggestive pose, visual focus on naked skin and dominant red colour in the Etherington example), the Silhouette Romantic Suspense novel features a suspenseful, tense romantic image (see the cop uniform, dark blue colours and looming cityscape on the Ferrarella cover) and the Harlequin Romance novel cover depicts a rather wholesome and domestic scene in keeping with the line’s sweet profile (see the Winters example cover image).

The category romance cover is further often visually dominated by the name, logo and dominant colour scheme of the line in which the novel is published.

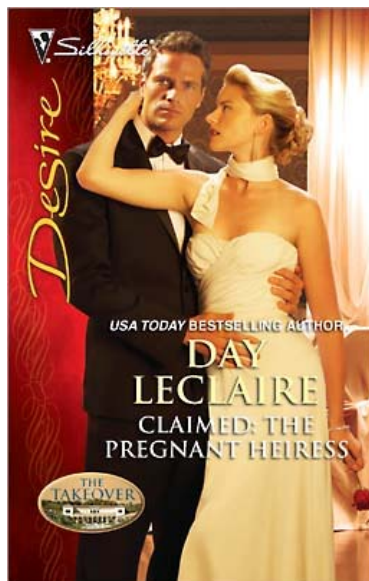
<sup>14</sup> Front cover of *Incubus* by Janet Elizabeth Jones, published in the Harlequin Nocturne line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22904&cid=2577>

<sup>15</sup> Front cover of *The Nanny and the CEO* by Rebecca Winters, published in the Harlequin Romance line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?cid=227&iid=23021>

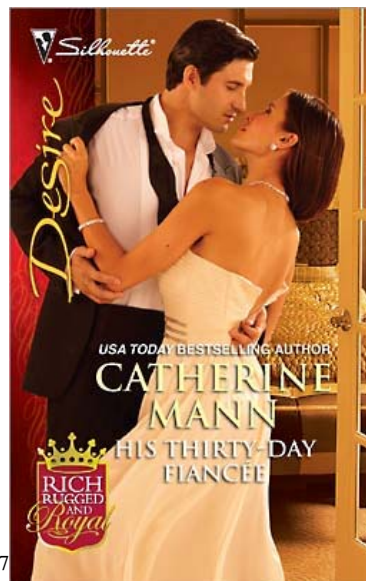
<sup>16</sup> Front cover of *Cowboy under the Mistletoe* by Cathy Gilen Thacker, published in the Harlequin American Romance line, December 2010. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?cid=244&iid=22788>



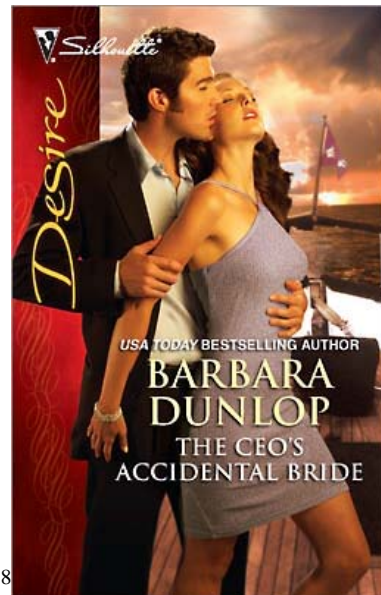
These elements, which often take up a more prominent place on the front cover than the novel's title or the name of its author, most obviously perform and represent the book's membership to a particular romance line. They thus provide additional cues of the book's overall generic identity as popular romance and more specific information about the particular narrative features that (supposedly) characterize the romance story within the cover. The line's name ("Blaze", "Desire", "Intrigue", "Romantic Suspense") and/or the visual design of its logo often provide information about the text as well. On a more abstract level the presence of the line's logo and name on the front cover of the book also firmly performs the romance novel's genre-internal identity as a category romance. The novel's line membership is furthermore also established by the overall composition and design of the cover, which is determined on the basis of a style and compositional template that is used for every single novel within a particular line. As a result, category romance novels published within the same line have a very similar cover, as we can see in the examples below.



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<sup>17</sup> Front cover of *Claimed: The Pregnant Heiress* by Day LeClaire, published in the Silhouette Desire line , January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22931&cid=230>

<sup>18</sup> Front cover of *His Thirty-Day Fiancée* by Catherine Mann, published in the Silhouette Desire line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22932&cid=230>

<sup>19</sup> Front cover of *The Ceo's Accidental Bride* by Barbara Dunlop, published in the Silhouette Desire line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22933&cid=230>





Indeed, as appears from these examples the cover of category romance novels of the same line are strikingly similar. Each element – the image, the logo, the title, the name of the author, etc. – is placed in exactly the same spatial position in the overall design. While the execution of the elements might vary – the concrete image, the name of the author and the title of the

<sup>20</sup> Front cover of *The Bride Thief* by Jennie Lucas, published in the Harlequin Presents line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22853&cid=226>

<sup>21</sup> Front cover of *The Last Kolovsky Playboy* by Carol Marinelli, published in the Harlequin Presents line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22854&cid=226>

<sup>22</sup> Front cover of *Reckless in Paradise* by Trish Morey, published in the Harlequin Presents line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22856&cid=226>

<sup>23</sup> Front cover of *Guns and the Girl Next Door* by Helenkay Dimon, published in the Harlequin Intrigue line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22921&cid=225>

<sup>24</sup> Front cover of *Mountain Midwife* by Cassie Miles, published in the Harlequin Intrigue line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22922&cid=225>

<sup>25</sup> Front cover of *Solid as Steele* by Rebecca York, published in the Harlequin Intrigue line, January 2011. Source of image: <http://www.eharlequin.com/storeitem.html?iid=22923&cid=225>

novel are different for each cover – their spatial placing and style (font, type size) is exactly the same. The similarities in basic look and style of the cover further contribute to the visual dominance of the book’s line-identity.

This dominance reverberates in the perception and conceptualization of the category romance’s identity. It performs an identity that is dominated by the line and genre in which the book is published and encourages, consequently, the perception that the narrative enclosed by this cover extensively derives its main characteristics – identity – from the line and genre that are so ever-present on the book’s outside. In other words, the prevalent presence of the line on the category’s front cover performatively suppresses, maybe even negates, the book’s individual identity. Indeed, those elements that traditionally most explicitly represent a book’s idiosyncrasy – that is, the combination of the title and the name of the author - are here slipped into, and effectively subjected to, the ever-dominant line template. Taking on the compositional place, font, type size and often also color the line imposes, they appear as (potentially inconsequential) variations upon an already-existing pattern that in effect appears more significant. Indeed, on the category romance’s front cover the title of the book and the name of the author can essentially be swapped for another title and a different author name without fundamentally changing the core identity that is being performed. The book’s traditionally individuating elements are thus to a certain extent transformed from elements that indicate and peritextually perform the book’s uniqueness – no other book with this title and by this author exists – into elements that contribute to the construction and perception of the book as being most dominantly determined by the line and genre to which it belongs. An important consequence of this (strategic) construction is the emphasis it puts on the (supposed) similarities between the books published within one line; indeed, the category romance novel’s front cover actively contributes to the coming into being and the further perpetuation of the (now widespread) notion that (category) romance novels are essentially all the same. Who could imagine, after all, that books with such exceptionally similar covers offer anything but exceptionally similar texts?

That the category romance novel’s title is not a particularly strong force in the construction of the novel’s idiosyncrasy is not only due to the visual and spatial dominance of the line’s design on the front cover, but also to the title’s semantic characteristics. As we can derive from the numerous examples above, the category title often uses words from the semantic fields of love, romance, seduction and desire and, consequentially, often performatively evokes strong generic connotations of popular romance – it does not take much imagination to associate titles such as “irresistible fortune” or “reckless in paradise”

with the generic notion of romance. Sometimes category titles provide more specific cues of the novel's subgeneric identity – phrases such as “in his protective custody” and “guns and the girl next door” quite explicitly reference the romantic suspense subgenre. Some category titles even reveal a classic, convention-driven plot line or device used in the narrative; a popular romance novel entitled “the thirty day fiancée” very likely includes the classic marriage of convenience plot line, while “the ceo's accidental bride” presumably incorporates the well-known mistaken identity plot twist. Although it could be argued that these latter example titles individualize the novel to some extent – these titles reveal, after all, at least part of the individual book's particular plot line – this individualization takes shape in generic and conventional terms and remains firmly located within the generic sphere of popular romance. Even in the rare cases the category romance novel title does explicitly refer to the unique, individual aspects of the narrative it (re)presents – as is the case, for example, in “the last kolovsky playboy”, which includes the (presumably unique) last name of the hero – it traditionally does so in a phrase that still heavily depends on words evoking romance associations (such as “playboy” in the example). Like the rest of the elements of the category romance's front cover, the category title is then mainly geared towards identifying the text it (re)presents in terms of genre and line.

Finally, every category romance novels bears the logo and the name of its publisher on its front cover. In North America this is the emblem of either Harlequin or Silhouette.



The publisher's emblem is usually rather small and tends to take up a relatively inconspicuous place on the upper left corner of the category front cover. Although it hardly stands out, then, amongst the colourful and eye-catching images and logos that dominate the front cover as a

<sup>26</sup> Source of image:  
[http://images.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://www.examiner.com/images/blog/wysiwyg/image/Harlequin\\_logo\(1\).png&imgrefurl=http://www.examiner.com/publishing-industry-in-washington-dc/romance-the-recession-proof-genre%3Frender%3Dprint&usq=\\_hac9sh\\_si4v-VohFRcyiPERw1LU=&h=81&w=285&sz=38&hl=nl&start=3&zoom=1&itbs=1&tbnid=NOZZT-3Ud5D27M:&tbnh=33&tbnw=115&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dharlequin%2Blogo%26hl%3Dnl%26rlz%3D1T4SKPB\\_enBE388BE388%26tbs%3Disch:1&ei=251BTaXaDIOI8QPB8bT4Dw](http://images.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://www.examiner.com/images/blog/wysiwyg/image/Harlequin_logo(1).png&imgrefurl=http://www.examiner.com/publishing-industry-in-washington-dc/romance-the-recession-proof-genre%3Frender%3Dprint&usq=_hac9sh_si4v-VohFRcyiPERw1LU=&h=81&w=285&sz=38&hl=nl&start=3&zoom=1&itbs=1&tbnid=NOZZT-3Ud5D27M:&tbnh=33&tbnw=115&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dharlequin%2Blogo%26hl%3Dnl%26rlz%3D1T4SKPB_enBE388BE388%26tbs%3Disch:1&ei=251BTaXaDIOI8QPB8bT4Dw)

<sup>27</sup> Source of image:  
[http://images.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/a/a3/Silhouette\\_logo.PNG&imgrefurl=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Silhouette\\_logo.PNG&usq=\\_tLDWie-tyjX\\_zjzen0u1qrDvHU=&h=94&w=278&sz=45&hl=nl&start=3&zoom=1&itbs=1&tbnid=qFQOTEI\\_Cmr6DM:&tbnh=39&tbnw=114&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dsilhouette%2Bharlequin%2Blogo%26hl%3Dnl%26rlz%3D1T4SKPB\\_enBE388BE388%26tbs%3Disch:1&ei=cJ5BTejFD4Ku8QPG9rH8Dw](http://images.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/a/a3/Silhouette_logo.PNG&imgrefurl=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Silhouette_logo.PNG&usq=_tLDWie-tyjX_zjzen0u1qrDvHU=&h=94&w=278&sz=45&hl=nl&start=3&zoom=1&itbs=1&tbnid=qFQOTEI_Cmr6DM:&tbnh=39&tbnw=114&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dsilhouette%2Bharlequin%2Blogo%26hl%3Dnl%26rlz%3D1T4SKPB_enBE388BE388%26tbs%3Disch:1&ei=cJ5BTejFD4Ku8QPG9rH8Dw)

whole, its consistent presence on the front cover of every single category romance novel does potentially play an important role in the peritextual performance of the book's identity. This role is twofold. For the public at large the emblem signals and performs the popular romance generic identity of the book on which cover it appears. This somewhat peculiar functioning of the publisher emblem and name as a genre marker is due to the very strong metonymic association that exists in contemporary North America (and other parts of the world) between the proper names "Harlequin" and "Silhouette" and the generic notion of popular romance novels.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Harlequin's and Silhouette's name and fame as popular romance publishers is so well-established in large parts of the English speaking world that the mere presence of their name and logo on the cover of a book is enough to brand that book as a popular romance novel. The emblem fulfils an additional semiotic function for the experienced romance reader – that is, the reader familiar with the internal organization of the popular romance genre. For this more knowledgeable reader the emblem also indicates a general and today often somewhat indeterminate difference between the romance narratives published under the Harlequin and the Silhouette brand respectively.

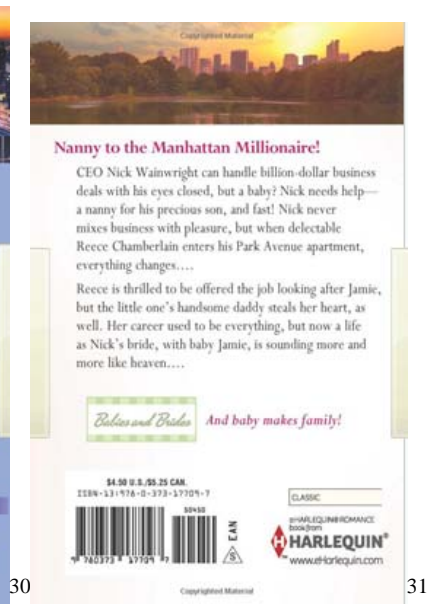
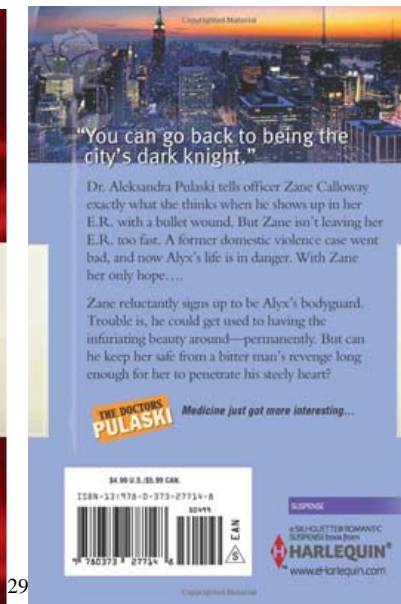
Although today this difference is no longer very pertinent – indeed, Harlequin recently announced it will discontinue the Silhouette brand in 2011, thus effectively putting an end to the in-house brand breakdown – there have been times in the history of popular romance publishing that this distinction was much more fundamental. In the early 1980s when Silhouette was launched as the first serious competitor for Harlequin in popular romance publishing, the different narrative profiles of the two competing publishing houses working in the same, highly conventional genre was important to romance readers and writers alike. Since Harlequin bought up Silhouette in 1984 and effectively ended the economic competition between the two romance publishing giants, the pertinence and function of these narrative differences have much abated. But to an extent their effect and function still make themselves felt today, as we can deduce from the fact that for twenty-six years (1984-2011) Harlequin choose to continue publishing under two separate brands. This is a history I discuss

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<sup>28</sup> This association is obviously culturally determined; it is certainly in place in North-America (the United States and Canada), where Harlequin publishes under both the Harlequin and Silhouette name. Interestingly, in other parts of the world the same metonymic phenomenon occurs between the different names under which Harlequin publishes and the generic notion of popular romance. In Great-Britain, Ireland, Australia and India, for example, Harlequin publishes under the name Mills & Boon and a strong association exists between the proper name Mills & Boon and the popular romance genre. In fact, the term "Mills & Boon" is even included in the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines it as a noun and adjective, respectively referencing "A proprietary name for: a (type of) popular romantic novel published by Mills & Boon Limited" and "Denoting idealized and sentimental romantic situations of a kind associated with the fiction published by Mills & Boon Limited." ("Mills & Boon, n. and adj.")

more elaborately in the first chapter of second part of this dissertation. For now we remember that the consistent presence of the Silhouette or Harlequin emblem on the front cover of every category romance novel functions both as a popular romance genre marker for the public at large and as a genre-internal profiling device for the experienced romance reader.

The dominant performance of genre and line identities that marks the category romance's front cover is also present on the book's **back cover**, where these identities are further refined. As on the front cover, the back cover's overall design and organisation is mainly determined by the line in which the novel is published.



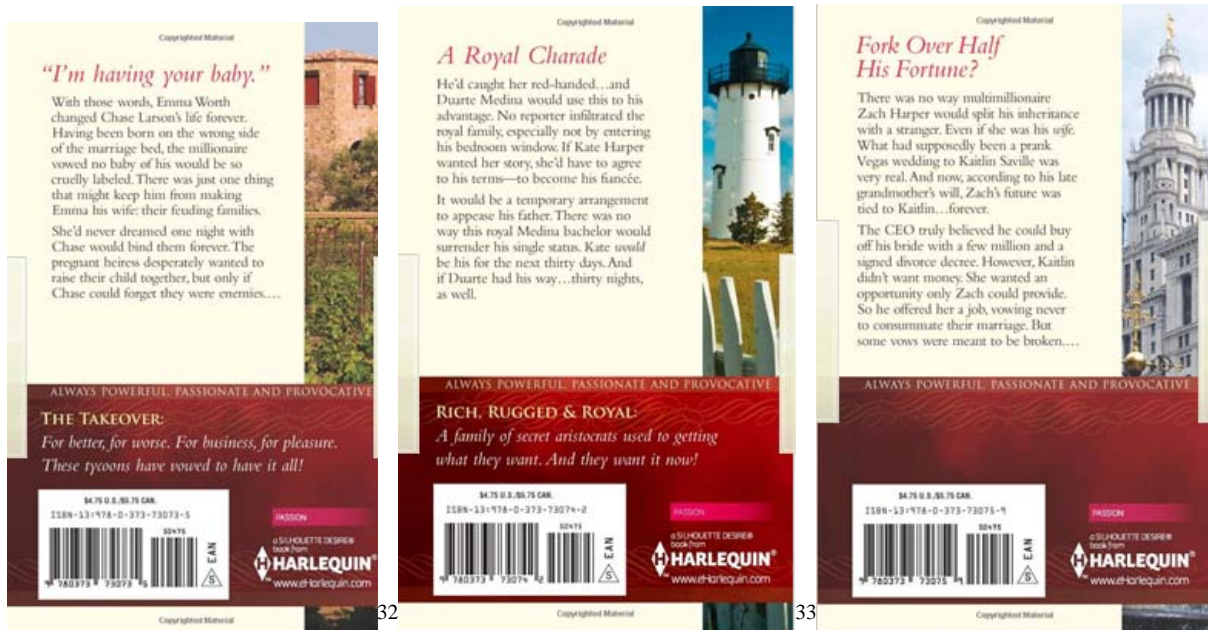
While the line design can have a strong or more muted visual impact (compare the Blaze (above) and Nocturne (below) examples with the Desire examples below), the line-driven compositional logic that underlies the composition of the category front cover is always also at work on the category back cover. That is, much like the front cover, the back cover is composed on the basis of a recurring, line-specific template. Individually varying elements – titles, tag lines, summaries, images, etc. – are slipped into this basic mould, which tends to

<sup>29</sup> Image of back cover from *Irresistible Fortune* by Wendy Etherington, published in the Harlequin Blaze line, January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Irresistible-Fortune-Harlequin-Blaze-Etherington/dp/0373795912/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296315195&sr=1-1-spell#reader\\_0373795912](http://www.amazon.com/Irresistible-Fortune-Harlequin-Blaze-Etherington/dp/0373795912/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296315195&sr=1-1-spell#reader_0373795912)

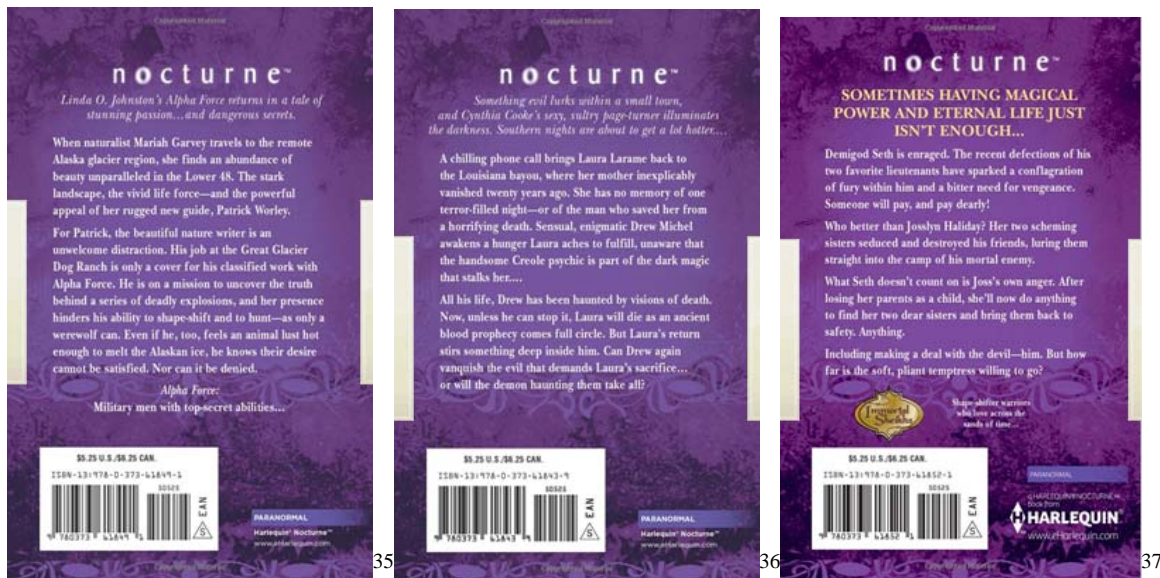
<sup>30</sup> Image of back cover from *In His Protective Custody* by Marie Ferrarella, published in the Silhouette Romantic Suspense line, February 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Protective-Custody-Harlequin-Romantic-Suspense/dp/0373277148/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296314415&sr=1-1-spell#reader\\_0373277148](http://www.amazon.com/Protective-Custody-Harlequin-Romantic-Suspense/dp/0373277148/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296314415&sr=1-1-spell#reader_0373277148)

<sup>31</sup> Image of back cover from *The Nanny and the Ceo* by Rebecca Winters, published in the Harlequin Romance line, January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Nanny-CEO-Harlequin-Romance/dp/0373177097/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296314783&sr=1-1#reader\\_0373177097](http://www.amazon.com/Nanny-CEO-Harlequin-Romance/dp/0373177097/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1296314783&sr=1-1#reader_0373177097)

mute their idiosyncrasy. The back covers of category romance novels published in the same line then share the same basic look and composition.



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<sup>32</sup> Image of back cover from *Claimed: The Pregnant Heiress* by Day LeClaire, published in the Silhouette Desire line, January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Claimed-Heiress%5CRafe-Sarah---Beginning-Harlequin/dp/037373073X/ref=sr\\_1\\_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296315725&sr=1-7#reader\\_037373073X](http://www.amazon.com/Claimed-Heiress%5CRafe-Sarah---Beginning-Harlequin/dp/037373073X/ref=sr_1_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296315725&sr=1-7#reader_037373073X)

<sup>33</sup> Image of back cover from *His Thirty-Day Fiancée* by Catherine Mann, published in the Silhouette Desire line, January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/His-Thirty-Day-Fiancee-Silhouette-Desire/dp/0373730748/ref=sr\\_1\\_fkmr2\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1296315964&sr=1-1-fkmr2#reader\\_0373730748](http://www.amazon.com/His-Thirty-Day-Fiancee-Silhouette-Desire/dp/0373730748/ref=sr_1_fkmr2_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1296315964&sr=1-1-fkmr2#reader_0373730748)

<sup>34</sup> Image of back cover from *The CEO's Accidental Bride* by Barbara Dunlop, published in the Silhouette Desire line, January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/CEOs-Accidental-Bride-Silhouette-Desire/dp/0373730756/ref=sr\\_1\\_fkmr2\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1296316094&sr=1-1-fkmr2#reader\\_0373730756](http://www.amazon.com/CEOs-Accidental-Bride-Silhouette-Desire/dp/0373730756/ref=sr_1_fkmr2_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1296316094&sr=1-1-fkmr2#reader_0373730756)

Indeed, these back covers are visually strikingly alike, – to such an extent that it might be difficult to differentiate one book from another without reading the text. The colors, design style, line name and logo that are used to perform and establish line-identity on the front cover often recur in some way on the category's back cover. This recurrence firmly establishes the conceptual connection with the front cover from which the back cover is spatially and materially divided and thus enables this semiotic space to both perpetuate and further develop the basic identity of the book that is performatively set up on the front cover.

This further development of the book's particular identity – one of the core functions of the back cover – is mainly carried out by the text that visually and spatially dominates the category back cover. As is conventional, this text offers a particular kind of summary of the text inside the cover – a particular kind of summary since it does not summarize the narrative as a whole from beginning to end, but briefly sketches only a first part of the story. Here are two examples:

Saving the past... one hot night at the time!

Notorious womanizer and treasure hunter Gavin Fortune is after a local sunken ship – and Brenna McGary is determined to stop him. History shouldn't be sold off by the piece! Unfortunately, the infuriating Gavin knows how to use his best assets to get his way ... and Brenna's fury is looking a lot like sweet, sweet lust.

Brenna could use that sizzling attraction to get *her* way, though. Until Gavin's scheming former mentor arrives to cause trouble for everyone! Now Brenna must join forces with Gavin, and if she's not careful, she'll be the next to fall for the irresistible charms of Gavin Fortune... (original emphasis, back cover of *Irrisistible Fortune*)

*Linda O. Johnston's Alpha Force returns in a tale of stunning passion ... and dangerous secrets.*

When naturalist Mariah Garvey travels to the remote glacier region, she finds an abundance of beauty unparalleled in the Lower 48. The stark landscape, the vivid life force – and the powerful appeal of her rugged new guide, Patrick Worley.

For Patrick, the beautiful nature writer is an unwelcome distraction. His job at the Great Glacier Dog Ranch is only a cover for his classified work with Alpha Force. He is on a mission to uncover the truth behind a series of deadly explosions, and her presence hinders his ability to shape-shift and to hunt – as only a werewolf can. Even if he, too, feels an animal lust hot enough to melt the Alaskan ice, he knows their desire cannot be satisfied. Nor can it be denied. (original emphasis, back cover of *Alaskan Wolf*)

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<sup>35</sup> Image of back cover from *Alaskan Wolf* by Linda O. Johnston, published in the Harlequin Nocturne line, November 2010. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Alaskan-Harlequin-Nocturne-Linda-Johnston/dp/0373618492/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-3#reader\\_0373618492](http://www.amazon.com/Alaskan-Harlequin-Nocturne-Linda-Johnston/dp/0373618492/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-3#reader_0373618492)

<sup>36</sup> Image of back cover from *Black Magic Lover* by Cynthia Cooke, published in the Harlequin Nocturne line, September 2010. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Black-Magic-Lover-Harlequin-Nocturne/dp/0373618433/ref=sr\\_1\\_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-5#reader\\_0373618433](http://www.amazon.com/Black-Magic-Lover-Harlequin-Nocturne/dp/0373618433/ref=sr_1_5?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-5#reader_0373618433)

<sup>37</sup> Image of back cover from *Vampire Sheikh* by Nina Bruhns, published in the Harlequin Nocturne line in January 2011. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Vampire-Sheikh-Harlequin-Nocturne-Bruhns/dp/0373618522/ref=sr\\_1\\_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-7#reader\\_0373618522](http://www.amazon.com/Vampire-Sheikh-Harlequin-Nocturne-Bruhns/dp/0373618522/ref=sr_1_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1296316212&sr=1-7#reader_0373618522)

As is illustrated in these randomly chosen examples, the summary on the category's back cover usually follows a specific pattern: the story's protagonists are identified by name, the (sexual) attraction between them is (repeatedly) referred to and a first layer of the barrier between them is detailed. Often the time and/or spatial setting of the story are also established. The partial summary usually ends with a final, explicitly contrasting recapitulation of the two fundamental forces that drive the romance narrative: the attraction and the conflict (see final sentences in the examples above). In other words, this partial summary follows a pattern that consists of the conventional narrative elements of the romance genre. While these abstract narrative generic features are concretized – the protagonists are named, the barrier takes on a particular form, etc. – the romance generic narrative structure is dominant. The narrative is concretized – individualized, if you will – in a manner or a format that simultaneously emphatically inscribes it in the generic traditions, conventions and structures of the romance genre. Indeed, these partial summaries always focus particularly on those elements of the story that are narrative embodiments of generic conventions. For category romance novels the conventions that dominate the summary are those of the romance genre, but often references are also made to the particular subgenre that is also performed in the text, often in compliance with the line's identity. For example, the summary of the Blaze novel *Irresistible Fortune* repeatedly refers to the story's highly erotic character (“hot night”, “sweet, sweet lust”, “sizzling attraction”); likewise, the summary of the Nocturne novel *Alaskan Wolf* explicitly establishes the narrative's paranormal features (“shape-shift”, “werewolf”). In short, as is the case with the rest of the category front and back cover, this aspect of the performance of the text's identity is mainly focused on the book's generic and line-induced features and less on its idiosyncrasy.

The subgeneric profiling of the text's identity that is often rather indirectly or suggestively construed in the rest of the category's cover is established in no uncertain terms in the bottom right corner of the category back cover via a label that indisputably identifies the subgenre or type of romance narrative offered by the text on the basis of its line membership. Examples of such labels are “passion”, “suspense”, “paranormal” and “classic.”





These labels pinpoint the type of romance narrative the book (supposedly) offers, but do not necessarily differentiate between lines. Thus books in both the Harlequin Blaze and the Silhouette Desire line are typified by the term “passion” and those in both the Silhouette Romantic Suspense and the Harlequin Intrigue line are labeled as “suspense”. Underneath this subgeneric label the publisher’s official name Harlequin is printed (even when the book is published under the Silhouette brand.) Like on the front cover, the name performatively functions as a genre marker for popular romance. Thus, in this small space a subgeneric identity is efficiently, effectively and transparently performed, even for readers unfamiliar with the particular narrative profile of a line.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, at the bottom left corner of the category back cover an often starkly white area gathers what I consider the pragmatic elements of the book’s cover. Most noticeably here is probably the bar code, which is a unique sequence of vertical stripes that makes it technically possible to buy and sell the book; above the bar code the book’s list price is often printed. Together the bar code and the price perform the book’s status as a commodity as they establish that the book is an article that is worth a particular monetary value in our economic exchange system. This area of the cover furthermore also features the International Standard Book Number (ISBN); this ten or thirteen digit number is a unique code that individually identifies each book. In fact, each edition of a book (except exact reprints) is assigned a

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, on the basis of the terms “Harlequin” and, for example, “paranormal” almost everybody is able to identify the book as a paranormal romance, while the line-name “Nocturne” might not identify the paranormal element to readers unfamiliar with the line.

separate ISBN number. The ISBN- number, which is made up of a combination of digits that in a coded way identify the type of book, is mainly used by publishers, libraries and bookstores to identify the book. While its presence on the book is then a necessary tool for the book to function as a commodity, in a way the ISBN-number then also establishes and performs the book's fundamental singularity.

This singularity, however, is not an identity that is overall very strongly or elaborately performed on the category romance novel's standard back cover. Indeed, as the preceding discussion has established, the collective identities of genre(s) and line are the parts of the category's identity that the category's back cover is prevalently preoccupied with. The rather exceptional extent of this preoccupation appears from the fact that on the back cover of many a category romance novel the title of the book and the name of the author are as such not mentioned. Although this is not a universal practice – indeed, in one of the examples above the summary starts with a mentioning of the author's name – the vast majority of category romance novels identify neither the title nor the author on their back covers. This contrasts sharply with the more conventional use of the back cover as space in which (bio)bibliographical information about the author (often including a picture) is provided. The (nearly) complete lack of authorial presence on the category's back cover is an additional indication of the format's extensive preoccupation with genre and line at the expense of author and title.

The identification of the category romance novel set up by the third part of the cover, the **spine**, simultaneously contrasts with and continues the preoccupation with genre and line that dominates the rest of the category's cover space. The category's spine is a relatively small space – remember, the category novel is conventionally only about two hundred pages long (=thick) – so the few semiotic signs that it features are often efficiently and effectively organized. While each line has its own particular design that spatially orders these signs in various ways, virtually all category romance spines contain the same basic items.



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The two most dominant items are the name of the author and the title of the book. Although these elements are, like the rest of the cover, adapted to the house style of the book's line – i.e. they take on its font, type size, possibly color, etc. – they are usually printed in the biggest type size and are therefore the visually and semiotically most dominant elements in this space. While with this organization of the spine space the category romance novel simply follows the strongly conventionalized use of the spine cover space in book printing – indeed, the lack

<sup>39</sup> Scanned image of the spine of *Taming Natasha* by Nora Roberts, published in the Silhouette Special Edition line in March 1990 by Silhouette.

<sup>40</sup> Scanned image of the spine of *A Man for Amanda* by Nora Roberts, published in the Silhouette Desire line in July 1991 by Silhouette.

<sup>41</sup> Scanned image of *Suzanna's Surrender* by Nora Roberts, published in the Silhouette Intimate Moments line by Silhouette in September 1991.

of the author name and the title in this space would probably be perceived as transgressive - the individualized identification of the book the title and author name perform does contrast with the prevalent identification strategies pursued in the rest of the category cover. These strategies, however, are not entirely absent from the spine. Indeed, the overall design, style and composition of the spine are, like the rest of the cover, determined by a recurring, line-specific template. The background often takes on, for example, the line's typifying color (e.g. dark red for the Blaze line, dark purple for Nocturne, etc.) and the line's name, its logo and the publisher's logo are usually printed in some form on the spine as well, be it in a much smaller type size than the author's name and the book's title.



There are, furthermore, several numbers on the category romance novel's spine; these reveal a wealth of information about the book in the very brief space that is available on the spine. Often at the very top of the spine the month and year of publication is printed. As I mentioned above, category romance novels are released at set intervals, often monthly or bimonthly. These numbers identify the novel's date of publication, which is unusual on the outside of the book. In a more indirect manner this date also indicates the "batch" of other category novels to which this particular book belongs – that is, the other novels with which it was simultaneously released. These novels are the first, most immediate intertext in which this individual category romance novel is situated and might make up an important part of the intertextual horizon against which the individual novel is read.<sup>42</sup>

Another number that is printed on the category's spine (often in bold and a slightly bigger type size) in various places (top, bottom or middle) is the book's line number.

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<sup>42</sup> Due the subscription system via which category romance novels are often sold, it is indeed often quite likely that the reader reads the other novels released in the line that month as well.



This number, perhaps more fundamentally than any other element on the romance cover, performs and cements the book's membership to the line. Novels published in a line are numbered sequentially and each category romance novel that is published is given such a line number. The significance of this number is manifold: the number places the book within the line, thus performing its membership, its belonging to that line. The logical sequentiality of the numbers moreover explicitly assigns the book a well-determined place within a larger, structured whole. The category novel isn't just any member of a vast and unstructured group of books that together make up the line; to the contrary, the line is a well-structured whole in which each member by way of its number has a specific, well-determined place. The book is then assigned both a function within that whole – without this part, the whole is no longer complete – and derives an identity from this function. *Suzanna's Surrender*, for example, is not only Nora Roberts' novel known by the title *Suzanna's Surrender* (which is the traditional way of identifying an individual book) but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is Silhouette Desire number 649, published in July 1991. Even as, however, the line number signals and performs the book's unique place within the line, it also gestures towards the category romance novel's (supposed) similarity to all the other novels within the line as it suggest, in a way, an interchangeability between the books. Whether this book has the number 648 or 649 is less relevant, within the system, than the fact of it having a number (= a line identity, a place within the line) at all. The number then also denotes that the system of the line as a whole trumps the individuality of the book.

The line number contains and constructs still other information: it not only establishes the book's position within the line, but also provides information about the line as a whole. The higher the book's number, the longer the line has existed. Longevity on a line's part might indicate the strength of its brand – its enduring popularity amongst readers – and the firmness of its conventions and traditions (long-existing lines are, perhaps, more firmly established than newer lines). A lower number might, reversely, indicate that a line is relatively new – and thus, perhaps, hip, contemporary, a representation of the newest trends and contemporary reader desires and expectations. Finally, the line number potentially has a latent commercial effect as it might encourage some readers to strive towards completeness –

no missing numbers – in their collection of romance novels. The category spine furthermore usually also displays the novel's ISBN-number, which here too references and performs the singularity of the book in economically pragmatic terms. It probably mainly serves the pragmatic function of enabling people in the book business (librarians, publishers, booksellers, etc) to uniquely identify the book when it is shelved; for laymen readers it is probably a more abstract semiotic sign that might vaguely signal the book's commodity status but is, likely, otherwise semiotically mute.

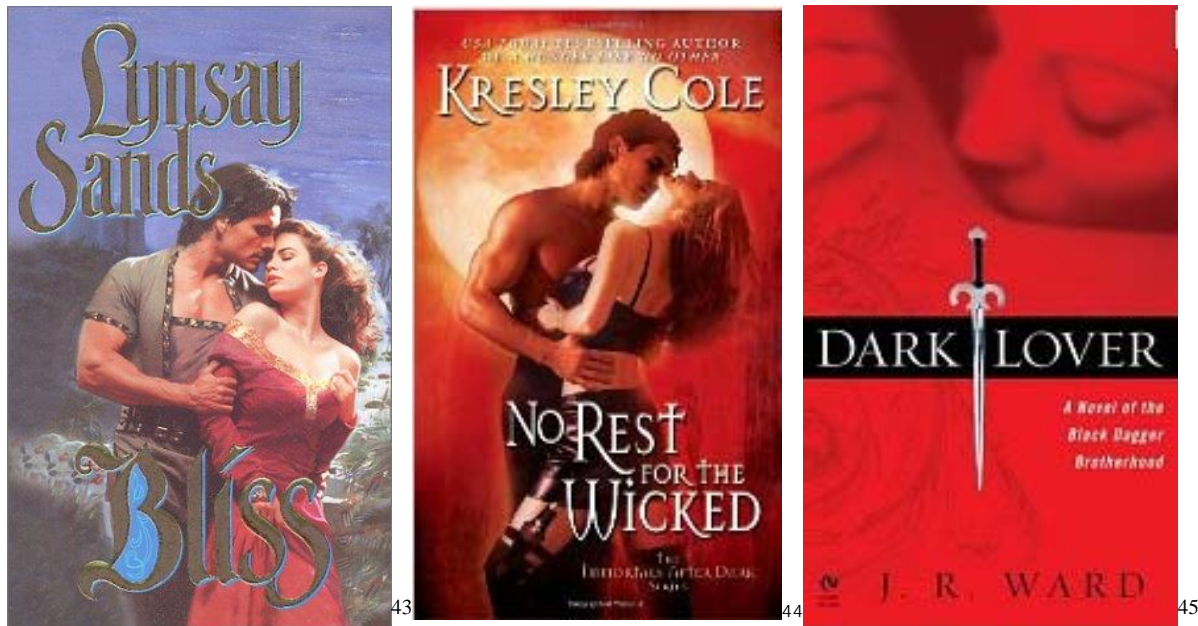
This description and analysis of the standard category romance cover has established almost every category romance novel cover is composed in a very similar manner. The category romance cover enjoys a rather high degree of typicality and it is this persistent adherence to type that constructs the book's "categoriness" – i.e. its being a category romance – in such a strong and clear manner. Despite the many surface variations that exist between particular lines and even books, the type (that is, the genre-format) always shines through. This compositional consistency on the part of the category cover makes for instant recognizability on the one hand (indeed, it is easy to recognize and identify books with this type of cover *as* category romances), but for a visual and compositional downplaying of individual variation on the other. The category cover mould – determined both by the book's category and line identity – is so strong and compositionally dominant that books published as category romance novels do conventionally not significantly develop and perform a real sense of idiosyncrasy or singularity on their covers. In this the category cover differs from its single title counterpart that is discussed in the next section.

### **3.2 The Single Title Romance**

The cover of the single title romance is essentially composed on an individual basis, although certain generic conventions do play a role in this space. There are three elements that tend to take up an important position on the single title romance cover: the name of the author, the title of the novel and some form of (often generically associative) imagery. The extent to which these elements are developed and featured prominently on any one particular cover differs considerably between the covers of individual single titles and is essentially determined on a book-by-book basis. The main considerations that seem to play a role in determining the prominence of any one of these elements are first the status of the author in the romance genre in particular and the cultural landscape at large and second the book's

particular relation to popular romance and other genres. Since both of these are determined individually for each novel, there is no such thing as a standard single title romance cover type. Although to the extent that the cover of each single title romance novel is determined individually it is a useless exercise to try to describe it in general terms, in these individual compositions there are certain principles and elements that recur with some regularity. These are described and briefly analyzed in this section. However, unlike the previous discussion of the category romance novel cover, this is not a description of a standard type, but of tendencies and principles that are often but neither necessarily nor universally used in the composition of the cover of a single title romance novel.

Let us begin by focussing on the occurrence of (generically associative) imagery on the single title's **front cover**. As we have already determined in our discussion of the category romance's front cover, imagery can play an important, even decisive role in the performance of the text's identity on the cover. Images are often eye-catching, potentially rich in meaning and, not unimportantly, semiotically accessible for a huge audience – that is, images on the cover of books (particularly books targeted at large audiences) can often be interpreted without the need for any kind of particular or specialized knowledge. This wide usability is a significant advantage of imagery and probably one of the reasons popular literature often features it dominantly on its (front) covers. The popular romance novel – both in its category and single title guises – is no different. There are, by and large, three main types of imagery that is used on the single title front cover: clinch images (with variations), domestic images and abstract images. The clinch type – including the “solo” and the “body parts” cover (cf. below) that I consider variations of the clinch type – is the most frequent type and, as we already discussed earlier, tends to strongly perform the romance generic identity.



As we can see here, the clinch appears in various versions on the front cover of single title romances. While the type of image performs the general notion of popular romance, each individual variation also provides more information about the particular kind of romance (supposedly) enclosed within the covers of the book. The obviously historical attire and period hairdos worn by the cover models on the Sands example performatively constructs the book's identity as historical romance. The generic associations other than romance of the Cole example are perhaps a little vague, but suggest elements of adventure (the knife hidden in the woman's garter), paranormal (the full moon and the leather clothing, which is an often recurring visual element on the covers of paranormal romances (see for example also the cover image of Karen Widdhon's *Lone Wolf* above)) and erotica (a lot of naked skin and suggestive body poses). The particular positioning of the cover models and the visual suggestion that, in a vampirically-inspired variation upon the clinch's near-kiss, the woman is biting the man's neck on the Ward cover rather clearly performs the vampire - paranormal romance subgeneric identity.

A variation on the clinch image that frequently graces the front cover of a single title romance novel and (equally) strongly performs a romance genre identity is that of the single, often semi-naked man. Interestingly, the female version of this cover – that is, an image of a

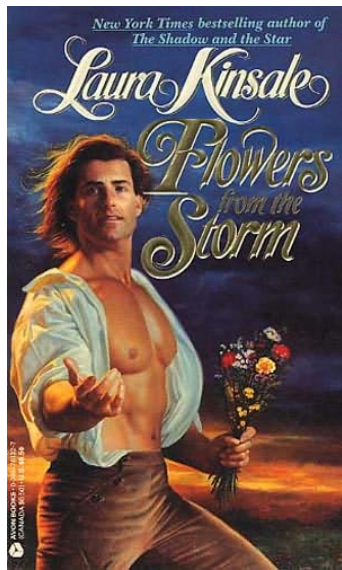
<sup>43</sup> Image front cover *Bliss* by Linsay Sands (Leisure Books, 2001). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/s/lynsay-sands/bliss.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Image front cover *No Rest for the Wicked* by Kresley Cole (Pocket Star, 2006). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=1416509887>

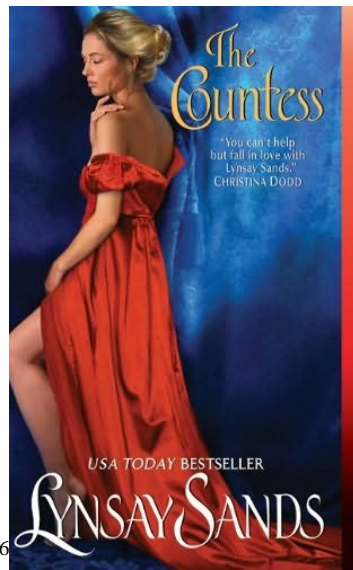
<sup>45</sup> Image front cover *Dark Lover* by J.R. Ward (Signet, 2005). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0451216954>



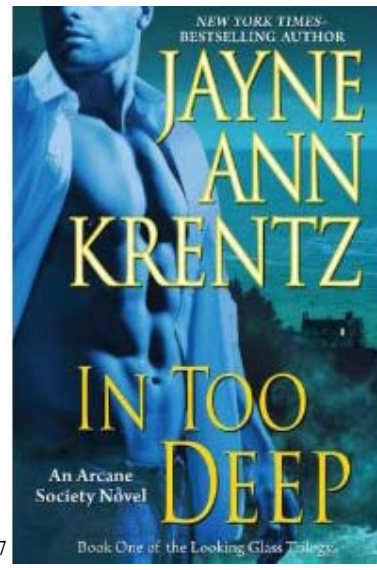
beautiful, partly undressed, single woman – is very rare on the category cover but increasingly popular on the single title front cover.



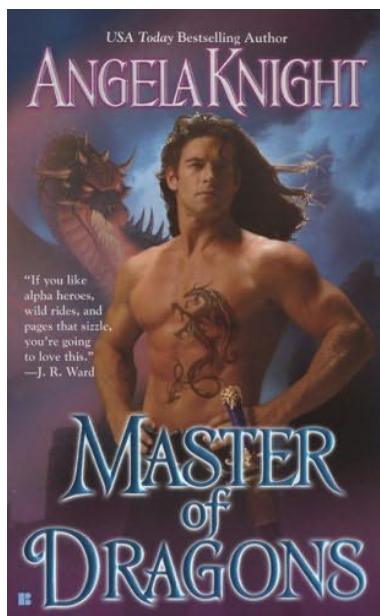
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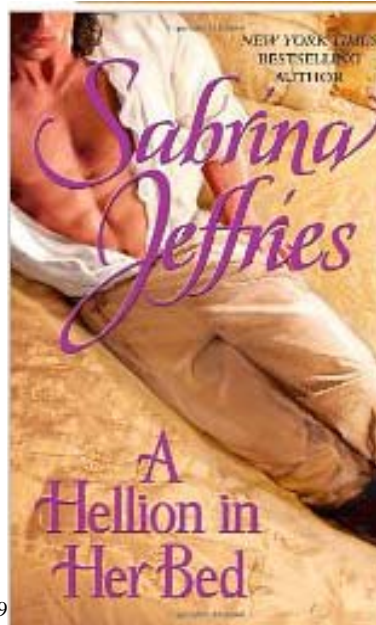
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<sup>46</sup> Front cover image of *Flowers from the Storm* by Laura Kinsale, published by Avon in October 1992. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/k/laura-kinsale/flowers-from-storm.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Front cover image of *The Countess* by Lindsay Sands, published by Avon in February 2011. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/s/lynsay-sands/countess.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Front cover image of *In Too Deep* by Jayne Ann Krentz, published by Putnam in December 2010. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/series/arcane-society/in-too-deep.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Front cover image of *Master of Dragons* by Angela Knight, published by Berkley in June 2007. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/k/angela-knight/master-of-dragons.htm>

<sup>50</sup> Front cover image of *A Hellion in Her Bed* by Sabrina Jeffries, published by Pocket Star in September 2010. Source of image: [http://www.amazon.com/Hellion-Her-Hellions-Halstead-Hall/dp/1439167540/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297004598&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Hellion-Her-Hellions-Halstead-Hall/dp/1439167540/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297004598&sr=8-1)

<sup>51</sup> Front cover image of *Lord of Scoundrel* by Loretta Chase, published by Avon in January 1995. Source of image: <http://www.amazon.com/Lord-Scoundrels-Loretta-Chase/dp/0380776162>

Like the clinch, this image also triggers strong generic associations of popular romance, not in the least because, as we can see in the examples above, often large parts of the cover models' bodies are unclothed. Indeed, romance novel covers adorned with bare, male torsos, a suggestively uncovered female shoulder or a seductively posed naked female leg abound. There are few images on the cover of a book which perform the popular romance generic identity as effectively, apparently, as scantily clad, outrageously beautiful men and women. This focus on the naked, sexualized body is even more present in a third type of generically associative image that I discern here, and that is the somewhat curious but increasingly used variation upon the clinch image in which only part of the cover models' body is depicted.



The effect, as we can see in these example images, is that the reader's attention and gaze is drawn to the cover model's semi-naked bodies. By beheading the models or only representing certain parts of their bodies – parts which are, moreover, often arranged in a deliberately seductive pose – the sexuality of the image is played up. While such images carry rather strong generic associations of romance (indeed, it seems to me few people will hesitate to label the examples above as covers of popular romance novels), they play upon a very clichéd image of the popular romance genre as a kind of literature preoccupied with sexuality and seduction.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Front cover image of *Lessons in French* by Laura Kinsale, published by Sourcebook Cassablanca in 2010. Source of image: <http://www.amazon.com/Lessons-French-Laura-Kinsale/dp/B003BVWZV2>

<sup>53</sup> Front cover image of *In The Bed of a Duke* by Cathy Maxwell, published by Avon in October 2008. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/m/cathy-maxwell/seduction-at-christmas.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Front cover image of *Not Quite a Husband* by Sherry Thomas, published Bantam in May 2010. Source of image: <http://www.amazon.com/Not-Quite-Husband-Sherry-Thomas/dp/0553592432>

<sup>55</sup> A more thorough discussion of the implications of this construction and the particularities of the functioning of the clinch and other sexually suggestive imagery on the cover of popular romance novels follows later in this chapter.

All of these images trigger strong generic associations of romance and unambiguously perform the popular romance generic identity. While these images then suggest a dominant romance identity, they often also establish secondary generic identities of another kind. The fashion worn by the cover models is, for example, often indicative of the time period in which the romance is set – indeed, as we can see in these images, historical romance covers are often adorned with models in costumes that are very easily recognizable as historical attire. The colour scheme might create a rather vague but still informative sense of tone: the dark blue-ish hue of the Jayne Ann Krentz cover for *In Too Deep* creates a rather tense atmosphere, which is reinforced by the mysterious background image of a dark house with a single lit window. In combination with the prominent visual of the naked and very muscular chest of the (partially decapitated) man this cover imagery strongly performs a romantic suspense identity. Likewise, the cover of Angela Knight's *Master of Dragons* clearly performatively constructs the paranormal romance identity. The conventional image of the exceptionally handsome, very masculine man – complete with naked torso, muscular chest, and seductively waving hair – triggers romance connotations while the smaller images of the dragon tattooed the man's chest and the “actual” dragon in the background – in combination with the prominently printed title “Master of Dragons” – efficiently constructs the paranormal part of this text's narrative identity.

While scantily clad, solo or passionately embracing cover models are then the cover hallmark of the popular romance genre and are indeed one of the strongest visual cues for the genre in use today, not all single title front covers feature images of this kind. A second way of imagery use on the single title front cover that I discern here is the use of images that do not strongly or straightforwardly trigger popular romance associations.



While these examples are front covers of novels that on the narrative level strongly perform the romance identity via the use of its conventional narrative elements, the imagery that is used on these covers does not construct this identity to the same extent or in the same manner as the clinch image and its “solo” and “body parts” variations do. Featuring neither sexually suggestive nor emphatically romantic images, these front covers instead include images that perform either a generic identity of a different kind – see for example the Brockmann cover, which features an image and colour scheme that sets up notions of suspense, adventure, and maybe even thriller instead of romance – or that perform a less determinate notion of generic identity. Both the Kinsale and Deveraux cover examples fall into this latter category: these covers feature images and colour schemes that, it seems to me, suggest a rather feminine tone<sup>59</sup> (indeed, these do not seem to be books mainly directed at a male readership) but that otherwise remain quite vague about particular generic notions. While they do not (as the imagery on the Brockmann cover might) counteract a romance identity, they neither specifically suggest it.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Front cover image of *Out of Control* by Suzanne Brockmann, published by Ballantine Books in February 2002. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/b/suzanne-brockmann/out-of-control.htm>

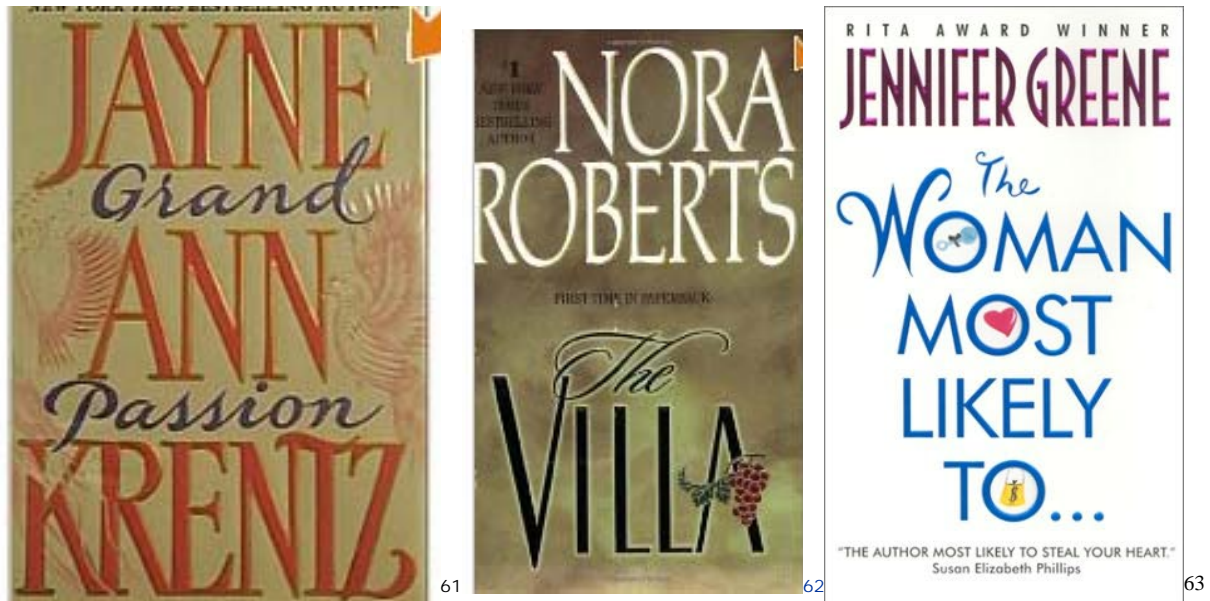
<sup>57</sup> Front cover image of *Flowers from the Storm* by Laura Kinsale, published by Avon in May 2003. Source of image: <http://www.amazon.com/Flowers-Storm-Laura-Kinsale/dp/0380761327>

<sup>58</sup> Front cover image of *Sweet Liar* by Jude Deveraux, published by Pocket in May 1993. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/d/jude-deveraux/sweet-liar.htm>

<sup>59</sup> The script-like font in the Kinsale and Deveraux covers play a role in this, especially in their conjunction with words that have generic connotations: “flowers” and “sweet.” I also note the domestic iconography in those two covers, which suggest that these will be books about home life or marriage.

<sup>60</sup> The explanation for why such different covers are used for single title romance novels is complex and, in part, the very subject of this dissertation. It is therefore a matter that we will discuss at length later in part II of this dissertation. For now, let me note that while we can correctly assume cover imagery and composition is related to the content of the novels – for example, Suzanne Brockmann’s *Out of Control* does indeed feature a romantic suspense narrative in which the suspense part of the plot is extensively developed – it is too simplistic to claim that these covers are direct or straightforward visual or peritextual translations of the novels’ narrative content.

The final manner of using imagery on the single title front cover that I discern here is what I refer to as the “abstract” cover; this is, in a way, an extrapolation of the second, domestic type. The abstract cover does not simply avoid imagery that strongly suggests a popular romance generic identity, but it in fact refrains almost completely from using images. Instead, these front cover compositions are nearly entirely taken up by the name of the author and the title of the novel.



This kind of cover is relatively rare for popular romance novels and is reserved only for the genre’s biggest stars – its most famous authors who identify and sell novels by grace of their name alone. Although these covers feature very little or no concrete imagery, this does not mean that visual elements are unimportant here. Colours and fonts, for example, also suggest certain tones or styles – in the Greene front cover above the font in which the title is printed vaguely performs a women’s literature kind of identity. These suggestions, however, remain rather vague and indeterminate and often, it seems to me, function more to support or reinforce interpretations that are set up by other elements on the cover than to actually set up interpretations by themselves. Indeed, this latest kind of imagery use indicates perhaps more

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Indeed, the attentive reader might have noticed that Laura Kinsale’s *Flowers From The Storm* is used as an example here twice: once, immediately above, with a demure, generically vague cover (which is the cover of a relatively recent edition (2003) of the novel) and once with a steamy cover featuring an image of bare-chested, windblown, flower-carrying Fabio – the most famous romance novel cover model – this is the cover of the novel’s original 1992 edition. It goes without saying that the content of the novel did not change between its 1992 and 2003 versions, but for various reasons the cover did.

<sup>61</sup> Front cover image of *Grand Passion* by Jayne Ann Krentz, published by Pocket in October 1997. Source of image: [http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Passion-Jayne-Ann-Krentz/dp/0671019619/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297006966&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Passion-Jayne-Ann-Krentz/dp/0671019619/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297006966&sr=8-1)

<sup>62</sup> Front cover image of *The Villa* by Nora Roberts, published by Putnam in March 2001. Source of image: <http://www.amazon.com/Villa-Nora-Roberts/dp/0399147128>

<sup>63</sup> Front cover image of *The Woman Most Likely To...* by Jennifer Greene, published by Avon in October 2002. Source of image: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/g/jennifer-greene/woman-most-likely-to.htm>

strongly than the other two types that the construction of the book's identity on the front cover is a matter of constant interaction between several elements. While some elements are more dominant than others and consequently play a more determining role in the identities that are being performed, in the end those identities are of course determined by all elements on the cover.

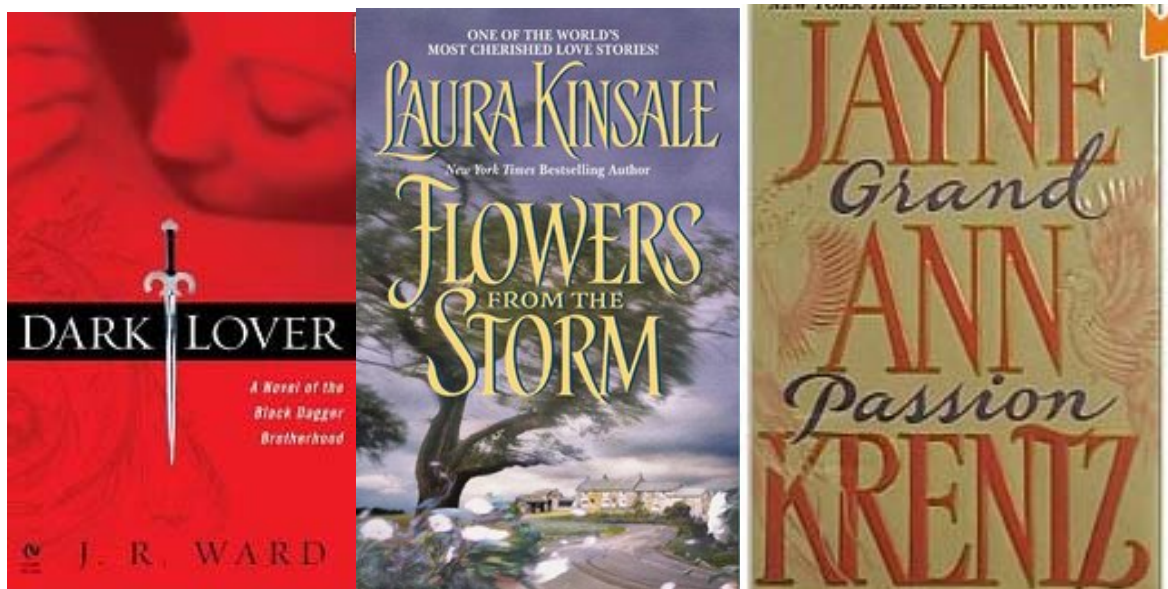
One of these elements is the novel's title. The importance of the title in the identity performance that takes place on the front cover is often determined by its size and place in the cover composition. As these examples demonstrate, this can vary significantly.



On the Kinsale cover the title is printed in small type size and overshadowed by both the name of the author and the imagery; it then seems quite inconsequential or incidental to the book's identity. The title on the Cole example is printed in a bigger type size, has a color and particularly a font that catches the eye and is placed quite centrally in the cover composition. It then seems quite important to the book's identity, although in the overall composition of the cover the clinch image is even more dominant. Finally, on the Brockmann cover the title is arguably the most dominant element; its stark white color and big type size make it stand out from the rest of the cover and indicate its apparently vital importance to the identity of this book. While the significance of the title to the book's identity performance is indicated by its appearance – size, color, placing, font, etc. – the title's contribution to the content of that identity is determined by what it signifies. Like category romance titles, the titles of single title romance novels have various meanings and effects. Some titles reference romance in quite a clichéd manner (“grand passion”), others invoke romance via sexually suggestive phrases (“dark lover”, “a hellion in her bed”, “in the bed of the duke”) and still others play

upon their subgeneric or other generic identity (“master of dragons”, “out of control”). Many titles of single title novels have no or rather vague generic associations (“lessons in French”, “the countess”, “the villa”). These titles tend to refer to some element that plays a role in their particular narrative (*The Villa*’s narrative is actually largely set at a villa, *Lord of Scoundrels*’ hero is repeatedly referred to as the lord of scoundrels and *Master of Dragons* is about a hero who shapeshifts into a dragon).

The third and final element that plays a significant role in the construction and performance of the book’s identity that takes place on the single title’s front cover is the name of the author. Like the book’s title, the author’s name appears in various sizes, guises and places on the single title front cover and its appearance is indicative of its significance to the construction of the book’s identity.



As we can see in these examples, the appearance and prominence of author names on the cover of single title romances differs greatly. J.R. Ward’s name, printed in relatively small type size and a rather inconspicuous color and font, does not appear to be particularly important to the book’s identity on a front cover that is dominated by color and imagery. Jayne Ann Krentz’s name, to the contrary, is represented as being the most important factor in this book’s identity and completely dominates this cover composition. The Kinsale example is situated somewhere in between the two other examples: while the author’s name is smaller than the book’s title, it’s bright, contrasting color and eye-catching font do make it stand out somewhat. The authorial identity is thus performed in different degrees on each of these covers.

As with the title, the author name’s importance to the book’s identity is indicated by its visual appearance on the front cover, while its contribution to the content of that identity

depends upon its meaning. However, while titles can be signified by all users of the language – everybody who speaks English understands the terms “dark lover” – the semantic signification of the author’s name depends much more upon the particular knowledge each individual reader has. That is, for some readers the signifier “Jayne Ann Krentz” only has formal significance but little or no semantic content; they recognize it as a proper name and, applying the conventions of our publishing culture, they interpret a proper name on the front cover of a book as an author’s name and assign it the appropriate formal meanings, but since they do not know anything specific about Jayne Ann Krentz, they have no access to the signifier’s more specialized semantic content. For these readers, the signifier does not denote anything more specific than its formal, conventionally determined meaning “author’s name” (and perhaps a gender identity). Other readers have heard of Jayne Ann Krentz and know, for example, that she is an author of popular romance novels; these readers interpret the signifier “Jayne Ann Krentz” as “author of popular romance novels” and integrate that meaning into the identity of the book that is performed on the front cover. Still other readers are huge fans of Krentz’s work, have read all of her novels and are familiar with her career; for these interpreters the signifier “Jayne Ann Krentz” signifies a layered set of meaning. They are familiar with her writing style, her voice and the kinds and subgenres of romance she writes, they are knowledgeable about her pseudonyms, the awards she has won, her place in the romance community and when she started writing; from interviews, websites or blurbs they might know how old she is, where she lives, what she likes and dislikes – in short, they might have the illusion they know something about her personally. For these readers, the signifier “Jayne Ann Krentz” denotes all of these signifieds and, on the basis of the mechanism triggered by the signifier here appearing as an author’s name, they integrate all of these meanings into the identity of the book as it is constructed and performed on its front cover. The extent to which and the way in which the author’s name contributes to the performance of the book’s identity is then significantly different for each reader and is in large part dependent on the individual reader’s particular knowledge about the author. In this regard the author’s name functions somewhat differently from both the title and the imagery in the construction of book’s identity since the interpretation of the latter two depends much less on user-specific knowledge.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> One of the (indirect) consequences of this fact is that the prominence of the author’s name on the cover of a book is often indicative of the book’s target audience and of the author’s status within the contexts in which the book figures.



Sometimes the name of the author on the front cover is accompanied by a label-like phrase referring to the author's status as a bestselling writer.



These phrases refer to the fact that at least one of this author's books has made it to the particular bestseller list that is mentioned, which means it ranked anywhere on that particular list. If a book makes it the top spot of the list, the label is often changed to include a reference to the number one spot (see for example the cover of Nora Roberts' *The Villa* above). There are numerous publications that compile bestseller lists; amongst these the list compiled by the American newspaper *The New York Times* is the most prestigious. Indeed, the label "a *New York Times* bestselling author" is coveted in the publishing industry and once an author has "made the list" the label is likely to become a fixture on their books' covers, despite the fact that research has indicated its actual effect on sales is often minimal (McAteer 19). On the front cover of a book this kind of label nonetheless establishes the author's commercial success and emphasizes his or her status as a generally popular writer; it thus contributes to the performative construction of the author (and by proxy the book) as popular and appealing to a large audience.

The single title's front cover furthermore occasionally features a praising quote from another author.



<sup>65</sup> The quote reads: "If you like alpha heroes, wild rides, and pages that sizzle, you're going to love this." – J.R. Ward"

The significance of such a quote is not only its endorsing content, but also (and often more importantly) that it performatively places the book within a particular (generic) context. This can happen straightforwardly via the content of the quote – as in the Loretta Chase example above, where the quote explicitly refers to Chase as one of the best “romance authors” – but more often, and more importantly, via the name of the author who is quoted. The presence of this name on the front cover of the book intertextually associates that book with the writings of the author who is quoted; indeed, normally the quoted author is a (more) famous and successful writer who produces novels in a similar (generic) vein than the book on which cover the quote appears. For example, both J.R. Ward and Angela Knight write erotic paranormal romance novels; Ward is the more famous of the two authors and her quote on the cover of Knight’s *Master of Dragons* both endorses the book and signals to readers familiar with Ward’s writing that *Master of Dragons* is a book that is similar to Ward’s own writing and/or that it probably appeals to readers who like Ward. The quote, and Ward’s name, thus implicitly contribute to the performance of the (sub)generic identity of *Masters of Dragons* as it is constructed on its front cover. Note here that the name of the quoted author semantically functions in a similar manner as the author’s name. It is semantically mute to readers who are unfamiliar with Ward – a muteness that itself is meaningful as it signals that the reader unfamiliar with Ward does probably not belong to the primary target audience of the Knight novel – while it signifies Knight’s novel to quite a specific extent to readers who are extensively familiar with Ward’s work.

This brief discussion of the major conventions and trends in single title front cover composition has established the different ways in which the book’s identity is constructed on single title front covers. All single title front covers construct and perform the book’s identity via imagery, title and author’s name, but the extent to which one or the other element dominates this construct differs on an individual basis. Some single titles are identified mainly via generically associative imagery, other front cover identity constructions rely more on the power of the author’s name and/or the book’s title. These tendencies are continued on the **single title’s back cover**, which builds on and specifies the book’s basic identity as it is constructed on the front cover. Unlike the front cover, where imagery often plays a major role, the single title’s back cover is usually dominated by text.

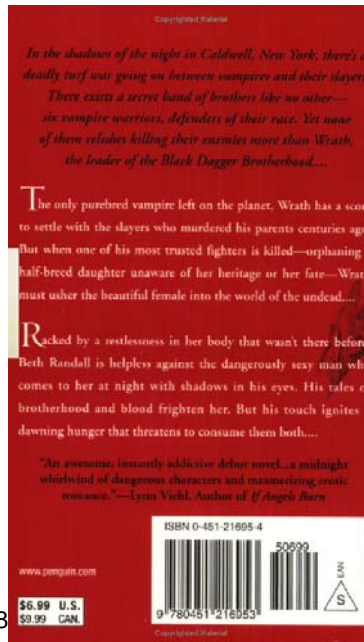
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<sup>66</sup> The quote reads: ““One of the finest romance authors of all time. Julia Quinn”

<sup>67</sup> The quote reads: ““I love this book ... Suzanne keeps getting better and better.” – LINDA HOWARD”



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As is conventional, this text usually provides more detailed information about the novel's narrative and its author. As with the category romance, the majority of the text consists of a summary of the first part of the story. Such a partial summary in the first place individualizes the novel as it specifies and transforms the rather general identification set up on the book's front cover into a concrete, singular story; by e.g. mentioning the (presumably) unique names of the main characters the story's singular identity is performed: there is no other story exactly like this one. In the second place, however, the summary also references the story's adherence to uniform generic structures by relating its unique content in the form of recognizably generic elements. While this mechanism is very similar to the one that is at work in the summary on the category romance novel's back cover, the main difference between the category and the single title back cover summary is that the latter does not necessarily rely on the popular romance generic structure in concretizing part of its narrative. Instead, structures, elements or tones from recognizably other genres are sometimes dominant in the single title summary. Consider for example these back cover summaries of Jayne Ann Krentz's *Grand Passion* and J.R. Ward's *Dark Lover*, two single title romance novels which include all the conventional narrative elements of the popular romance genre.

<sup>68</sup> Back cover image of *Grand Passion* by Jayne Ann Krentz. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Passion-Jayne-Ann-Krentz/dp/0671019619/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297008560&sr=8-1#reader\\_0671019619](http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Passion-Jayne-Ann-Krentz/dp/0671019619/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297008560&sr=8-1#reader_0671019619)

<sup>69</sup> Back cover image of *Dark Lover* by J.R. Ward. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Lover-Black-Dagger-Brotherhood/dp/0451216954/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008730&sr=1-1#reader\\_0451216954](http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Lover-Black-Dagger-Brotherhood/dp/0451216954/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008730&sr=1-1#reader_0451216954)

<sup>70</sup> Back cover image of *Lessons in French* by Laura Kinsale. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Lessons-French-Laura-Kinsale/dp/1402237014/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008798&sr=1-1#reader\\_1402237014](http://www.amazon.com/Lessons-French-Laura-Kinsale/dp/1402237014/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008798&sr=1-1#reader_1402237014)

Cleopatra Robbins has imagined the moment when she'll meet the man of her dreams. But when Max Fortune strides into the Robbins' Nest Inn, a devastating sensation sweeps through her. She knows it's *him*. And he's *all wrong!*

Head of the giant Curzon Hotel chain, a cynical man whose only passion in life has been for rare works of art, Max is looking for five priceless paintings left to him by his mentor, Jason Curzon. Max takes one long look at Cleo Robbins and feels fierce desire sweep through him...a feeling so powerful that he soon starts helping to fix everything from the plumbing to the fractured lives of the inn's quirky denizens.

Despite their mutual attraction, Max senses that Cleo is hiding something – and by the time he realizes it's not the paintings, it's almost too late to save her from the danger rising out of her past. As suspense and desire intensify, this delightful duo sweeps us toward a dramatic ending in a love story beyond compare ... GRAND PASSION. (original emphasis, back cover of *Grand Passion*)

*In the shadows of the night in Caldwell, New York, there's a deadly turf war going on between vampires and their slayers. There exists a secret band of brothers like no other – six vampire warriors, defenders of their race. Yet none of them relishes killing their enemies more than Wrath, the leader of the Black Dagger Brotherhood...*

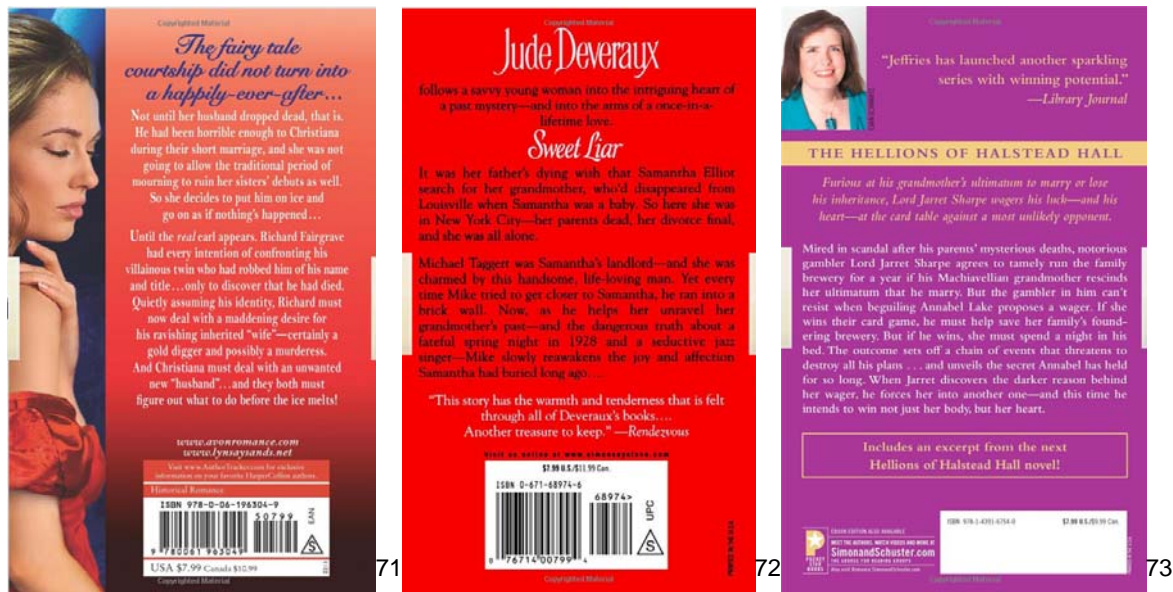
The only purebred vampire left on the planet, Wrath has a score to settle with the slayers who murdered his parents centuries ago. But when one of his most trusted fighters is killed – orphaning a half-breed daughter unaware of her heritage or her fate – Wrath must usher the beautiful female into the world of the undead...

Racked by a restlessness in her body that wasn't there before, Beth Randall is helpless against the dangerously sexy man who comes to her at night with shadows in his eyes. His tales of brotherhood and blood frighten her. But his touch ignites a dawning hunger that threatens to consume them both.... (original emphasis, back cover of *Dark Lover*)

The Krentz summary concretizes a number of the conventional narrative elements of the popular romance novel – hero and heroine are named, their attraction is established and part of the barrier between them is identified – and briefly alludes to suspense elements (“danger rising out of her past”), thus effectively performatively constructing the generic identity of the narrative as primary romance and secondary suspense (“suspense and desire”). The Ward summary takes a rather different approach, focussing strongly on the paranormal-vampire and suspense generic elements in its narrative and alluding to its romance elements only briefly and mainly in sexualized terms. The generic identity that is performed here is then not necessarily predominantly the popular romance one. While this is of course to a large extent a reflection of the actual narrative situation – as I remarked above, the single title narrative is often generically mixed – we should, I think, not underestimate the deliberateness of the decision to generically position the narrative in a particular way.

The back cover text furthermore usually also provides information about the author. Although there are some single title back covers from which the author is, much like on the category romance back cover, conspicuously absent (see for example J.R. Ward's *Dark Lover* back cover above and Linsay Sands' *The Countess* back cover below), this is more the

exception than the rule. Usually the author is a more or less firm presence on the single title back cover.



Much as on the single title's front cover, the extent of this presence differs from book to book and author to author. The author's name is nearly always mentioned in some form, but its visual dominance and, accordingly, the force of its impact on the identity performance differs on a book by book basis. In the examples above, Jude Deveraux's name is more visually dominant in the composition of the back cover of her novel than Linsday Sands' or (example higher up) Jayne Ann Krentz's name on their respective back covers; accordingly, Deveraux is represented and supposedly (initially) perceived as more important to the identity of her novel than Sands or Krentz' to theirs. Authors can, in quite rare cases, also be present on the single title back cover in the form of a photo (see the Sabrina Jeffries example above). Obviously, as we can see in the example above, such a picture renders the person of the author into a visually strong presence on the book's back cover and strongly establishes the link between the individual person and the particular book on which cover the person is

<sup>71</sup> Back cover image of *The Countess* by Linsay Sands. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Countess-Lynsay-Sands/dp/0061963046/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297008871&sr=1-1#reader\\_0061963046](http://www.amazon.com/Countess-Lynsay-Sands/dp/0061963046/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1297008871&sr=1-1#reader_0061963046)

<sup>72</sup> Back cover image of *Sweet Liar* by Jude Deveraux. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Sweet-Liar-Jude-Deveraux/dp/0671689746/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008961&sr=1-1#reader\\_0671689746](http://www.amazon.com/Sweet-Liar-Jude-Deveraux/dp/0671689746/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297008961&sr=1-1#reader_0671689746)

<sup>73</sup> Back cover image of *A Hellion in Her Bed* by Sabrina Jeffries. Adapted image from this source: [http://www.amazon.com/Hellion-Her-Hellions-Halstead-Hall/dp/1439167540/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297009034&sr=1-2#reader\\_1439167540](http://www.amazon.com/Hellion-Her-Hellions-Halstead-Hall/dp/1439167540/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1297009034&sr=1-2#reader_1439167540)

visually represented. Author pictures then generally increase the authorial presence in and its impact on the peritextual performance of the book's identity.<sup>74</sup>

The text on the single title back cover often also includes some quotes from another author and/or (reviews or articles in) newspaper, magazines or online publications such as blogs or review sites.



Such quotes function in a generally similar manner as the (often briefer) quotes on the front cover do. They usually identify the book's author by name and always praise her. The quote is explicitly attributed to an outside source – that is, a source other than the producers of the book – which creates an impression of objectivity and accordingly increases the credibility of the praise. Even more than the quotes on the front cover, quotes on the back cover of a single title romance novel play a role in the cultural placing and construction of generic identity that is performed in this space. Sometimes this happens quite straightforwardly, for example when a genre is explicitly named. See e.g. the quotes from the Krentz and Kinsale back covers above:

“[Laura Kinsale is] one of the best writers in the history of the romance genre” *All About Romance*

“Laura Kinsale delivers powerful, unique romance” – Amanda Quick (back cover of Laura Kinsale's *Lessons in French*)

“Jayne Ann Krentz is one of the hottest writers in romance today” – *USA Today*

“There is no finer exponent of contemporary romance.” *Romantic Times*. (back cover of Jayne Ann Krentz' *Grand Passion*)

<sup>74</sup> There are, however, important and very interesting differences between the semantic functioning of the author's name and the author photograph on the cover of a book which we discuss in greater detail later in this dissertation.

The repeated and explicit mentioning of the term “romance” in these quotes plainly identifies and names a genre and thereby very strongly performatively contributes to the construction of the romance generic identity on the back cover of these books.

Quotes also contribute to the (generic) identity construction and performance in a more indirect way via their source, which generically and/or culturally places the book in the contemporary literary and cultural system. This mechanism is essentially very similar to the one described above regarding the functioning of the name of the quoted author on the front cover, but has a somewhat wider scope because newspapers, magazines and/or websites can often be culturally placed by a larger group of readers than (generically specific) author names. Compare for example the impact of the praising quotes on the Jeffries, Kinsale and Krentz back covers above. The Jeffries back cover features a quote from *Library Journal*, a professional trade publication for librarians. The Kinsale cover features quotes from *Romantic Times*, a speciality magazine about the popular romance genre targeted at romance readers, from *All About Romance*, a romance review blog that is well-known within the romance community and from Amanda Quick, one of the popular romance genre’s most popular authors. The Krentz back cover, finally, features quotes from *USA Today*, one the most read daily newspapers in the United States and from *Romantic Times*. These different quotes, even regardless of their actual content, performatively construct slightly different cultural and/or generic identities for the novels on which back covers they are printed. The *Library Journal* quote implicitly represents Jeffries’ novel as one which is read (and enjoyed) by librarians, that is, people with a professional, higher-than-average interest in books. The *Romantic Times*, *All About Romance* and Amanda Quick quotes place the Kinsale novel very explicitly in the generic system of popular romance.<sup>75</sup> Finally the *USA Today* quote on the Krentz cover places the novel in the general pop culture scene as this is the scene that a newspaper like *USA Today* writes about; unlike *Library Journal* and *Romantic Times*, *USA Today* is not a specialized publication that targets a specific professional or niche audience, but is a national newspaper with a mainstream popular profile that targets an audience existing of, more or less, the average American. The cultural and generic scope of the USA Today quote is noticeably wider than that of more generically specialized niche publications such as

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<sup>75</sup> Note that, unlike the Amanda Quick quote, the *Romantic Times* and *All About Romance* quote manage this performative generic placing regardless of whether the reader is in fact familiar with these publications or not – even if he/she is not, on the basis of the publications’ revealing names the reader can determine the genre with which they are predominantly occupied. Much like the author’s name, for the reader who is familiar with the actual publication the quotes’ generic and cultural placing is (potentially) more extensive as he/she might know more about what kind of romances these publications usually review, what their discourse is like, etc. – in short, this generically knowledgeable reader is able to culturally signify the source in more detail.

*Romantic Times* and *All About Romance*; to an extent the *USA Today* quote then distracts the novel from the specific, niche generic system of romance and places it in the wider, more general context of popular literature at large. It constructs, in other words, the novel not as mainly or only a popular romance novel but also as a popular literature novel. The fact that the Krentz cover also features a quote from *Romantic Times* does not negate the effect asserted by the *USA Today* quote but might work as a reconfirmation of the book's romance generic identity.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, the bottom quarter of the single title back cover often consists of pragmatic elements that technically enable the book to function as a commodity; here we find the bar code, the ISBN number (which, like for the category, establishes and performs the undeniable economic singularity of the book) and the novel's list price (adapted to currency of the county or countries in which the book is distributed)



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<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the simultaneous printing of these quotes on this cover and their particular spatial distribution – the *USA Today* is printed at the top of the back cover space, the *Romantic Times* quote at the bottom; the former is then likely to be read more and/or prior to the latter – might be a symptom of the insecurity about the novel's romance identity that the *USA Today* quote might cause in experienced romance readers because, by and large, romance novels are not often reviewed in such general publications as *USA Today*. I discuss the review practices of the genre in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Enlarged part of image of back cover from *A Seduction at Christmas* by Cathy Maxwell.

<sup>78</sup> Enlarged part of image of back cover from *Lessons in French* by Laura Kinsale.





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The name of the publisher, its logo and/or his website might be printed here, but this is not always the case. As I've mentioned before, single title romance novels are published by many different publishers, including Harlequin; in some specific instances (such as for Harlequin and to an extent also Avon, for example) the publisher might, like for category romance novels, function as performative genre marker, but this is certainly not always the case as single title romance novels are also published by publishers with a generically very diverse catalogue. Sometimes, as we can see in the examples, the *name* of a genre ("romance", Kinsale cover) or a subgenre ("Historical Romance", Maxwell cover) is explicitly printed in this area of the cover. When this is done, such concrete labels of course very strongly perform a clear and unambiguous peritextual generic identity. There is no hard and fast rule about the appearance of these generic labels or lack thereof: some single title back covers carry them and others simply do not. When such an explicit label is not mentioned, as in the examples with the Ward and the Deveraux covers, the generic identity of the text constructed on the back cover is somewhat less determinate.

The back cover of the single title romance novel then usually picks up the identity threads set up on the front cover of the book and further develops and specifies these. The single title back cover manages, often to a more extensive degree than the necessarily rather rudimentary identification set up on the front cover, to singularize the book. In doing so, however, it always also inscribes the singular book in larger generic and cultural entities from which it derives parts of its identity as well. The extent to which any particular thread of the single title's identity – the author, the individual title/story or the genre(s) – dominates the back cover space is, as the many examples above have hopefully demonstrated, determined largely on an individual, book by book basis.

The final part of the cover space, the single title's **spine**, continues or sets up (depending on when the spine is read) the main identification strategy that characterizes the

<sup>79</sup> Enlarged part of image of back cover from *Sweet Liar* by Jude Deveraux.

single title cover space. It focuses on the book's title and the name of the author while at the same time implicitly or explicitly also performing the generic part of the book's identity.



As we can see in these examples, the author's name and the book's title visually dominate the single title's spine space and thus perform an identity for the book in which these (singular) elements are central. Title and author's name are often printed in the same, often eye-catching font, type size and colour as on the book's front cover, thus not only attracting attention but also visually establishing the connection between these two cover spaces and the consistency

<sup>80</sup> Scanned image of the spine of J.R. Ward's *Dark Lover* (Signet Eclipse, 2005)

<sup>81</sup> Scanned image of the spine of Angela Knight's *Master of Swords* (Berkley Sensation, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> Scanned image of the spine of Loretta Chase's *Mr. Impossible* (Berkley Sensation, 2005).

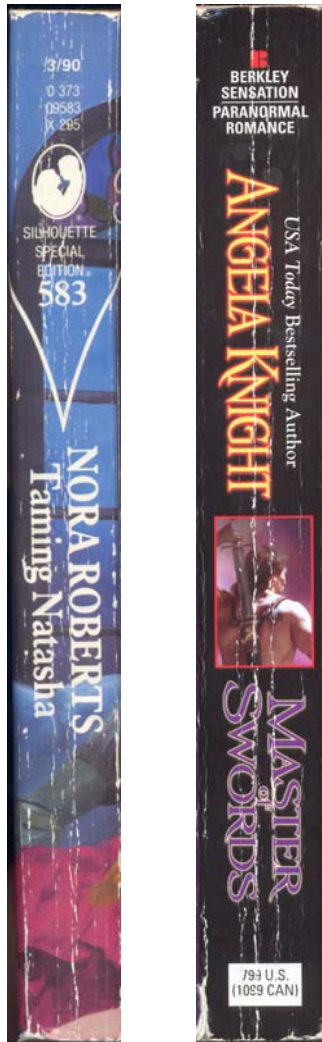
<sup>83</sup> Scanned image of the spine of Suzanne Brockmann's *Out of Control* (Ballantine, 2003).

of the book's identity that is set up in each of them. This consistency is also apparent in the small image that is often printed on the single title spine. As we can see in the examples above, this image is often a partial reproduction of the image that is featured on the book's front cover (see e.g. the front covers of *Dark Lover* and *Out of Control* above). The image further individuates the spine – indeed, the four example spines above do not look much alike, in part because they feature different images – but also, of course, contributes to constructing the generic part of the book's identity via the generic associations it evokes. *Dark Lover*'s vampire-paranormal-romance generic affiliations and *Out of Control*'s suspense elements are referenced by the respective images on their spines. This generic identity is often much more strongly performed on the single title spine by the name of a particular (sub)genre that is printed at the very top of the spine space, (usually) right underneath the publisher's name or logo.



Not all single title spines carry such name – the Suzanne Brockmann spine above does not, for example – but when a (sub)genre name is present, as it is on the other three examples above, this has a strong and, I believe, even decisive impact on the generic identity that is performed on the spine. Finally, at the very bottom of the single title spine the book's list price is usually printed, referencing its commodity status in our economic system.

The way in which the spine of the single title romance novel constructs the book's identity is then consistent with the tendencies that are apparent in the other parts of the book's cover. It focuses on the author's name and title, it establishes to a greater or lesser extent the generic identity of the text as envisioned by its producers and it references the book's commodity status in our economic system. This use of the always limited spine space is in keeping with the conventional use of the spine in contemporary publishing, where an identification of the book in terms of authorship and title is the norm. The single title spine does differ in some respects from the category romance's standard spine which, although also dominated by author name and title, also clearly performs its line-identity.



Although the differences between the single title and category spine appear minimal, we should not underestimate the significance of the fact that they are there at all. Indeed, the fact that even in the smallest cover space available to identify a romance novel – its spine – both space and effort are spent on performing the differences between the two romance formats is an indication of the significance of that distinction within the generic system in which both formats figure.

The preceding description and analysis of the general conventions of the category and single title romance novel covers reveals a certain pattern or tendency with regards to the extent – the explicitness if you will – with which these covers construct and perform their generic identities as popular romance novels. Whereas category romance novel covers straightforwardly and strongly perform the generic romance identity, the covers of single title romances are not always so invested in the romance genre. While on many of these covers the popular romance generic identity is performed quite clearly, there are also numerous single

title romance novels with covers that perform vaguer, more ambiguous or even simply other generic identities. One of the elements that seems to play a decisive role in this process of generic identification on the cover is the clinch image: books with a clinch image tend to construct and perform their popular romance identity in an unmistakable way, while books without it are left with more generic options. The latter books sometimes still strongly perform the popular romance identity in other ways (by e.g. mentioning the genre's name), but often they perform a vaguer or more layered construction of generic identity. Before we move on to the next section and leave the romance cover for what it is (at least for now), I want to take some time to consider in a little more detail what it is about the clinch image that makes it function in such a specific way. How does the clinch image function on the cover of a book? What implications and repercussions regarding the book's identity and cultural status does it have? And why do some romance novels, lines, and publishers seem to so wholeheartedly embrace this iconic image while others shy away from it, seemingly avoiding the image and its associations at all costs?

### **3.3 The Clinch Image as Genre Marker Extraordinaire**

When the clinch image is featured on the cover of a book it usually takes up a focal place and immediately draws the reader's gaze. The image depicts a man and a woman who are completely focused on each other and oblivious to the world around them. They are wrapped in each others' arms (hence the term "clinch") and, the image suggests, about to surrender to an all-consuming (sexual) passion. The clinch image then provides a visual representation of what could be considered the most central elements of the conventionalized romance narrative: the hero, the heroine and their romantic (sexualized) interaction with each other. In a way it also offers a visual representation of what is arguably the core fantasy offered by the genre, namely that of an overwhelming romantic love that is focused absolutely on one other. The clinch's representation of the heterosexual romantic couple is nearly always concentrated upon on a very specific moment in the couple's relationship. Focusing on the instant immediately preceding the highly-anticipated-but-yet-to-be-realized kiss, it essentially depicts unfulfilled romantic and sexual potential. The picture of the almost-kiss exudes anticipation, expectation, seduction and romance and plays upon the fantasy of the unrealized: in this breathless moment of heightened romantic and sexual tension everything is still possible. Yet the immediate future is also always already determined; the image invites the reader to open the book and read the text in order to experience what naturally and inevitably comes next:

the meeting of lips, the abandonment to the hinted-at passion and love, the narrative actualization of the visually promised ecstasy and romance. Considered from this perspective, the clinch image then functions as a kind of safe temptation since the reader knows, almost certainly, that the text will deliver what the cover image promises.

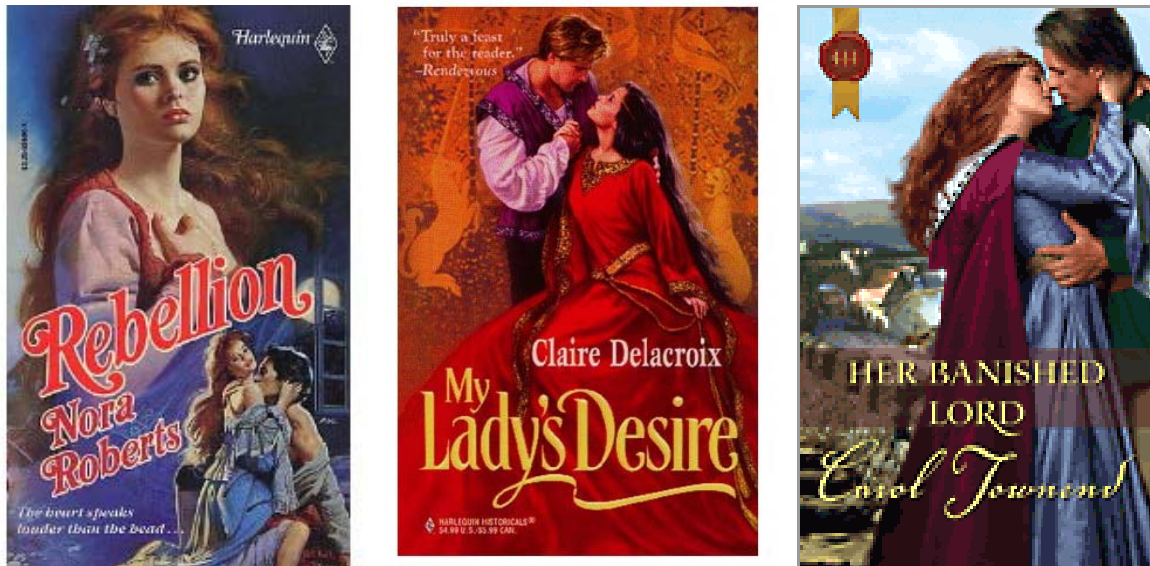
Much like the romance narrative it (seems to) so effectively represent(s), the clinch image is a generic type. It graces the front cover of countless popular romance novels in a nigh endless series of ever-changing but always similar variations; indeed, each clinch image is different but essentially the same. Its effectiveness as a performative genre marker for popular romance is intricately bound to this typicality. In fact, it seems to me that when a novel with a clinch image on its cover is categorized as a popular romance novel – as it nearly invariably is – this interpretative act is based on the perception of, in the first place, the *type* of image and not the actual, concrete, individual execution of this type. The clinch's effectiveness as a genre marker for popular romance is furthermore of course also based on the very strong cultural association that now exists between this image type and the generic notion of popular romance. Indeed, the clinch image could be said to function as a kind of icon for the contemporary popular romance genre. This association, which developed over a relatively short period of time in the course of the 1970s when the use of the clinch image on the front cover of the so-called bodice ripper romance novels gained ground<sup>84</sup>, in part ensures the extreme performative effectiveness of the image as a genre marker for popular romance. More, perhaps, than any other element, the image of a scantily clad, embracing man and woman in the throes of passion conveys to the contemporary mass public the generic notion of popular romance. Indeed, for the past thirty to forty years the clinch image, in various versions and forms, has functioned as the visual shorthand par excellence for the contemporary popular romance genre.

Although the clinch image is then earmarked by its typicality, each individual version of the type is also adapted to the particular book on which cover it is featured. To an extent, these variations and adaptations are coded – that is, via signs they provide additional information about the book's identity. The cover models' degree of dress or undress, for example, is typically a coded information parameter for the degree of sexual explicitness in the book's romance narrative. Although in the past this code seems to have been stricter than it is today, as a rule of thumb we can still assume that the more flesh is visible on the cover,

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<sup>84</sup> For more on the history of popular romance novel's cover imagery, and in particular the first emergence and subsequent wide spread of the clinch image see, amongst others, McKnight-Trontz (2002), Kamble (2008 160-236) and various comments throughout Grescoe (1996) and McAlleer (1999).

the more explicit are the love scenes in the text.<sup>85</sup> The cover models' appearance – their clothing, hairstyle and make-up, for example - also provides information about the text. As I have already pointed out above, the narrative's historical setting is often indicated by cover models dressed in clothes that are instantly recognizable as period costumes and hairstyles that give all appearance of being historically accurate – heroines with long, waiving, often wind-blown hair are a particular favourite of the historical romance cover.

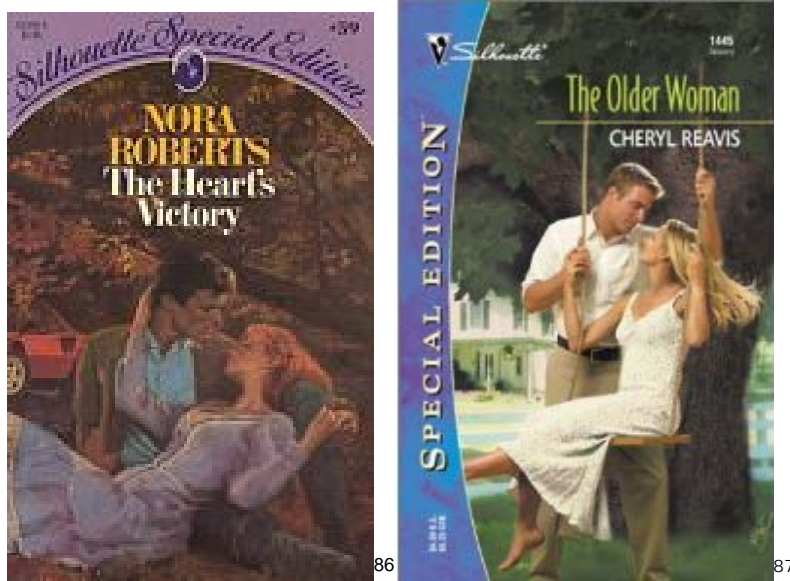


As we can see in these examples the visual codes on the romance novel's cover are anything but subtle. The images above, for example, represent extremely conventional and stereotypical interpretations of historical attire; they do not primarily aim to be historically accurate or realistic, but to be easily and quickly recognizable *as* historical.

The variations of the clinch image not only provide information about the time in which the narrative is set, but also about the time in which the novel is published. That is, the overall look of the romance cover changes over time as it incorporates both recent illustration

<sup>85</sup> In her 1984 study on the popular romance genre Margaret Ann Jensen suggests the category romance cover is composed according to a very strict code which indicates the degree of sexual explicitness in the story. She writes: "The position of the hero and heroine on the books cover is a good indication of how much sex there is in the romance. If they are not touching at all, the story does not have any detailed sex scenes. If they are touching, the degree of sexuality escalates, with different touching positions symbolizing the amount of sexual involvement. "hands above waist = innocent frolic; hands below the waist or on the breast = sexual, prone positions = keep this one in a locked drawer." The pictures also tell the readers how sexually responsive and aggressive the heroine is. There are two types of embrace, the "hesitant heroine's" and the "cognizant heroine's." The first kind is the more traditional portrayal of female sexuality and indicates that the hero pursues the heroine, who resists and perhaps capitulates, against her better judgement. The second kind of embrace is a departure from traditional sexual encounters and indicates that the heroine is responsive and probably even active in the pursuit of romantic-sexual gratification." (62-63 Jensen's first citation comes from Kolb, Elene M. "Checking Out The Categories," *Publishers Weekly* 220 (November 13, 1981), p. 41. The second citation is from Kolb, Elene M. "The Books You Judge By Their Covers," *Publishers Weekly* 220 (November 13, 1981), pp.42, 44, 51. quote p. 42). Although Jensen's and Kolb's observations might have been accurate at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, romance novels are no longer composed according to such strict rules. The observation is, however, still indicative of the highly coded nature of the romance novel cover.

technique and fashion trends. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, romance front covers are often (hand)drawn, while in the 1990s and 2000s photographic images are much more common. And, just as on the cover of the historical romance novel the cover models' clothes are instantly recognizable as historical attire, so the fashion worn by models on the cover of contemporary popular romance novels can at once be recognized as contemporary attire. Since contemporary fashion trends change from decade to decade, the cover models' clothing is often quite a reliable indication of the decade in which a particular romance novel is published. Compare, for example, these Silhouette Special Edition front covers from 1982 and 2001.



Even to the untrained eye – that is, the reader inexperienced in reading romance novel covers – it is clear, I think, that these are covers from books published at different times.

While the clinch image then splendidly fulfils some of the main functions of cover imagery – luring readers and strongly performing generic identity – there are also some more problematic aspects to this image and its pervasive presence on the romance novel cover. Many of these thorny issues have to do with the overall picture or interpretation of the popular romance genre that the clinch cover gives rise to and perpetuates. The clinch image creates and presents to the outside world a (perhaps overly) sexual image of the popular romance genre. That is, the clinch represents the romance narrative in quite sexualized terms and

<sup>86</sup> Front cover image of *The Heart's Victory* by Nora Roberts, published in the Silhouette Special Edition line, November 1982. Source of image: <http://www.fictiondb.com/author/nora-roberts-the-hearts-victory~31910~b.htm>

<sup>87</sup> Front cover image of *The Older Woman* by Cheryl Reavis, published in the Silhouette Special Edition line, January 2002. Source of image: [http://www.amazon.com/Older-Harlequin-Special-Cheryl-Reavis/dp/0373244452/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1298393547&sr=1-3](http://www.amazon.com/Older-Harlequin-Special-Cheryl-Reavis/dp/0373244452/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1298393547&sr=1-3)



constructs it as a literature that is preoccupied, or even dominated, by sex and sexual tension. Indeed, notwithstanding the clinch's effectiveness as a genre marker and its actual connection to the content of the romance narrative, the image offers a reductive and clichéd representation of the romance narrative in which the story is reduced to a single, seemingly all-defining moment of sexual passion. Although, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, sex (or at least sexual tension) is indeed an important narrative convention of the genre, the (over)emphasis the clinch image puts on the notion of sexuality is not necessarily representative of the romance narrative and might in fact be at odds with the genre's preoccupation with romantic love. Indeed, one of the features that is conventionally taken to distinguish even the most sexy romance novels from straight erotica and pornography is that romance novels always revolve around feelings of romantic love and invariably connect sexual interactions to these emotions – unlike in erotic or pornographic literature in which sexual acts are often disconnected from feelings of romantic love. Although one could argue, of course, that the clinch cover equally represents love as well as sex, it seems to me that in many cases the visual emphasis lies on the physicality and sexuality of the visual.

That the association of the popular romance genre with sexualized images has taken hold is, in fact, paradoxically noticeable in the increasing frequency of the romance novel cover featuring a single, often half-naked man or woman. This image became commonplace on the cover of popular romance novels during the 1990s<sup>88</sup> and can be interpreted, it seems to me, as a variation of the sexual theme that was introduced to the cover imagery of romance novels by the clinch. However, while the solo-cover retains the sexual connotations of the clinch by featuring semi-naked models – as we can see in the examples above, very many of the solo cover models are depicted in (advanced) stages of undress – an important shift takes place. The solo cover deletes the represented partner in the sexualized interaction and thus increasingly constructs the remaining model as a sexualized object subjected to the gaze of the cover's reader. When we consider both the decapitated or body-part cover and the solo-cover as further developments of the clinch image, it becomes clear how the clinch lies at the basis of the now wide-spread tendency to represent the generic identity of popular romance via sexualized images on the book's cover. In a way, naked skin on the cover of a (paperback) novel has come to function as quite a reliable genre marker for romance. Note in this regard

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<sup>88</sup> The emergence and rise of, particularly, the solo-man romance novel cover is likely also related to the increasing narrative importance of the hero in the popular romance novel. As I discuss more extensively in part II of this dissertation, at in the course of the 1980s and the early 1990s the hero point of view – previously a rarity in popular romance – becomes more common. Such narrative shifts might stimulate, I think, these peritextual shifts.

that the sex of the depicted body or skin is increasingly variable – that is, in a genre that is explicitly and overwhelming targeted at female readers, both male and female cover models are featured as lust objects on the cover.

A second “problematic” aspect of the clinch’s representation of the popular romance genre regards the image’s often (over)exaggerated character. Indeed, the vast majority of clinch images are overstated, larger-than-life representations that are ridiculous and kitschy rather than truly appealing. This exaggeration begins with the models themselves, who are conventionally adorned with the most stereotypical masculine or feminine physical attributes. The male romance cover model invariably has broad shoulders, narrow hips and an impressive torso with clearly discernable pectorals and abs. The female romance cover model often has long hair, a voluptuous bosom, a narrow waist and long, well-shaped legs. Romance cover models are then perfect embodiments of our culturally determined and strongly gendered beauty ideals. While attractive according to the ruling beauty conventions, these extremely masculine men and exceptionally feminine women are stereotypes, too-perfect embodiments of a for many people unattainable ideal – they are, in short, not real but exaggerated versions of reality. This exaggerative lack of verisimilitude is present in other aspects of the clinch as well. While the pose taken up by many of these supposedly desire-crazed couples might seem very passionate and loving, in reality it is often decidedly unpleasant, if not physically impossible, and would quickly douse the passion and anticipation it is here supposed to convey. The couple’s gazes, which are supposed to be induced by and convey a heady mix of passionate longing, sexual rapture and love, often appear stilted, forced, unnatural and indeed ridiculous.



The cover imagery’s overemphatic attempt to convey passion and love is so over-done that the image loses all sense of verisimilitude, naturalness and authenticity and becomes an inflated gesture that is ridiculous instead of authentic. It is not difficult to see how in the perception of the contemporary mass public this sense of ridicule is easily and almost automatically transferred from the visual image representing the narrative to the outside world to that narrative itself. Indeed, despite the common wisdom that books should not be judged by their covers, this is of course precisely what happens and it then seems very plausible to

me that the popular romance novel's low cultural status – the widespread perception that it is bad, low-quality, ridiculous literature – is in part based upon the often ridiculous tone of its peritextual packaging.

A third and final problematic aspect of the pervasive use of the clinch image on the front cover of popular romance novels is the impression of (excessive) similarity it creates. Indeed, the fact that the same type of image is featured on the front cover of thousands upon thousands of popular romance novels creates, reinforces and perpetuates the impression that these novels are essentially all the same. While, it could be argued that, this is, to a certain extent, perhaps the price the clinch image pays for its exceptional efficiency as a genre marker of popular romance, it seems to me that the perceived similarity effect is exceptionally strong for popular romance novels precisely because of the clinch's high degree of typicality and the relatively little room it leaves for individual variation. Indeed, although individual versions of the clinch image differ from each other to a certain extent, the type is always dominant and clinch images are invariably very similar. This exceptional typicality combined with the pervasiveness with which the clinch image appears on popular romance novels' front covers emphasizes the ways in which these novels are similar and downplays their differences. Is it then so surprising that novels which performatively reformulate the same type of image again and again on their front covers are perceived by the mass public as repetitive, similar and inherently formulaic?

If we take all these considerations into account, we start to understand why the clinch image is, in a way, both a blessing and a curse for the popular romance genre. While it is extremely effective as a genre marker and has provided the romance genre with a sure-fire way of performing its generic identity and efficiently distinguishing its books from other kinds of narratives – a feat that is commercially very interesting –, all this effectiveness appears to come at the cost of creating and perpetuating a perhaps less-than-desirable image in contemporary mass culture of the genre. Indeed, the clinch image – and, by extension but to a lesser extent, the solo and body-part cover types – contributes to the widespread cultural perception of the popular romance genre as a lurid, ridiculous and formulaic kind of literature.<sup>89</sup> From this point of view it is then perhaps not surprising that the clinch image is

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<sup>89</sup> In their book on the popular romance genre romance bloggers and experts Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan remark, for example: "Romance-novel covers are likely 65.9 percent of the reason romance novels take the mockage from the rest of the known world so damn hard. The cover images leave ample room for it. It's not hard to abjectly dismiss a genre when much of it is adorned with mullet-sporting heroes grasping at buxom, open-mouthed heroines, both of whom appear to be caught in a wind storm. Sometimes the couple featured on the cover look as if they are in pain more than any degree of passion ... It's frankly difficult sometimes to defend a love of romance novels when those novels are wrapped up in the visual assault that is some cover art" (168-169).

not universally appreciated within the romance community; on the contrary, it is the object of much mockery, both within and outside of this community.<sup>90</sup> We also come to understand why some novels, even when they fully incorporate the narrative conventions of the genre, even when their authors self-identify as romance writers, and even when several other elements on their cover (straightforwardly) establish the book's generic identity as popular romance, shy away from this most iconic of romance images. The particular interpretation and associations it triggers are not necessarily desirable and might in fact deter readers who do not fully identify as romance readers (and even those who do). Indeed, the rather unfavourable interpretation of the popular romance genre the clinch seems to stand for and the negative cultural associations it is burdened with are quite a high price to pay for the certainty of identifying the popular romance part of the book's identity. It then seems to me that in deciding whether or not to put the clinch image (and its variations) on the front cover of a popular romance novel, the book's producers balance several pros and cons against each other and take a multitude of varying elements, such as the book's format, its narrative content, the name and fame of its author, etc into account. This is a process that we will consider in more detail during our discussion of Nora Roberts' novels and their cover imagery.

#### 4. The In-book Peritext

Our discussion of the popular romance novel peritext now moves from the outside of the book to the inside. The in-book peritext is constituted by all pages and elements that are located in the space between the book's front and back cover and that are not the novel as an aesthetic object. Although in principle this includes elements such as chapter headings, the font, type size and typesetting of the text, etc, my main focus is on the pages that precede and follow the story-text<sup>91</sup> proper. The pages that precede the beginning of the story-text are referred to here as the **introductory pages** and are constituted by all pages located between the front cover

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Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone Wendell and Tan adopt here – a tone that characterizes their blog and book entirely, neither of which are academic or scholarly, but both of which are generally very insightful and perceptive about the popular romance genre – their remark points towards, I believe, the problematic associations of the clinch image and romance cover art more in general.

<sup>90</sup> One of the more famous and amusing instances of community internal mockery of the clinch cover is the so-called Cover Snark feature on the influential and widely read romance blog *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, run by Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan. In these blog posts Wendell and/or Tan makes fun of some particularly ridiculous romance covers, pointing out anatomic impossibilities, illogical elements or inconsistencies on romance covers. It is, according to Wendell and Tan, one of the most popular features of their website. For an example, see [http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/auld\\_lang\\_mantitty](http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/auld_lang_mantitty) and <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/C12>. For a more in depth discussion of the ridiculousness of romance covers see Wendell and Tan 168-189.

<sup>91</sup> The term "story-text" is used in this dissertation to refer to the linguistic text that constitutes a book's narrative

(Genette's cover 1) and the first word of the story-text proper; these include such elements as the title page, the colophon and the author page. The pages that follow after the ending of the story-text are referred to as the **final pages** and are constituted by all the pages located between the final word of the story-text and the book's back cover (Genette's cover 4). These two peritextual zones of the contemporary popular romance novel are, like so many of its elements, rather extensively influenced and determined by both general and generically specific conventions. These conventions – that is, the standards on the basis of which the introductory and final pages of the category and single title are respectively composed – are described, analyzed and illustrated in the following section of this dissertation.

#### 4.1 The Introductory Pages

The introductory pages of a book essentially constitute – i.e. give material form to – the important transition from the outside of the book, where it is in the first place a material object, to the inside of the book, where its capacities as an aesthetic object are most importantly realized. These pages are, moreover, positioned to be read, or at least noticed, right before the story-text proper and then supposedly further prepare the reader for this reading act. Both their material place in the book and their conceptual place in the sequence of the reading act influence the functions and hence the form and content of these pages. The main function introductory pages fulfill is the further performative development and specification of the book's identity. That is, these pages consistently provide more clues about what kind of text the book contains. This identity construction and performance is in line with and builds further on the identity that is performed on the book's outside cover. Indeed, one of the main tasks of the introductory pages is to establish a sense of continuity between the outside and the inside of the book. In order to achieve this, introductory pages are usually predominantly concerned with aspects or threads of the book's identity that have already been set up on the outside cover. Most or all of these identity-constituting elements are repeated in the introductory pages – e.g. the title, the author's name and the publisher are (repeatedly) mentioned in the introductory pages, even though these elements have essentially already been established on the cover. Some particular aspects of the book's identity – often the author – are elaborated upon and developed in more detail in the introductory pages. These pages then provide both a continuation with and a further specification of the book's identity so that by the time the reader reaches the beginning of the story-text proper she has a rather well-determined idea about what kind of text she is about to read.

The particular composition of the introductory pages of the contemporary popular romance novel is furthermore also influenced by some of the characterizing traits of the genre. These pages have, for example, not only a function in the performative development of textual identity, but are also commercial tools. As I note in the discussion that follows they always include both marked and unmarked strategies that aim to convince the reader of the value and appeal of the present as well as other romance novels; such strategies not only validate the present reading act, but also seduce the reader to read – that is, buy – one or more particular other popular romance novels. The distinction between category and single title romance novels that is so fundamental to the popular romance genre furthermore also extensively affects the composition of the introductory pages. Indeed, like almost all other peritextual elements of the contemporary popular romance novel, this zone of the book is composed according to the format-defining principles of a greater or lesser adherence to predefined conventions and templates. As such, the introductory pages of the category romance novel follow a particular, well-defined format and line template, while those of the single title romance novel are to a larger extent composed on an individual, book-by-book basis.

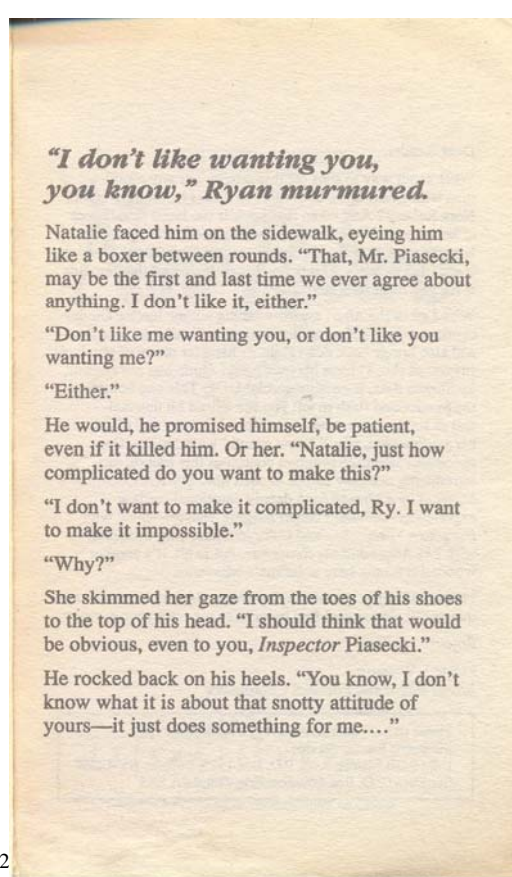
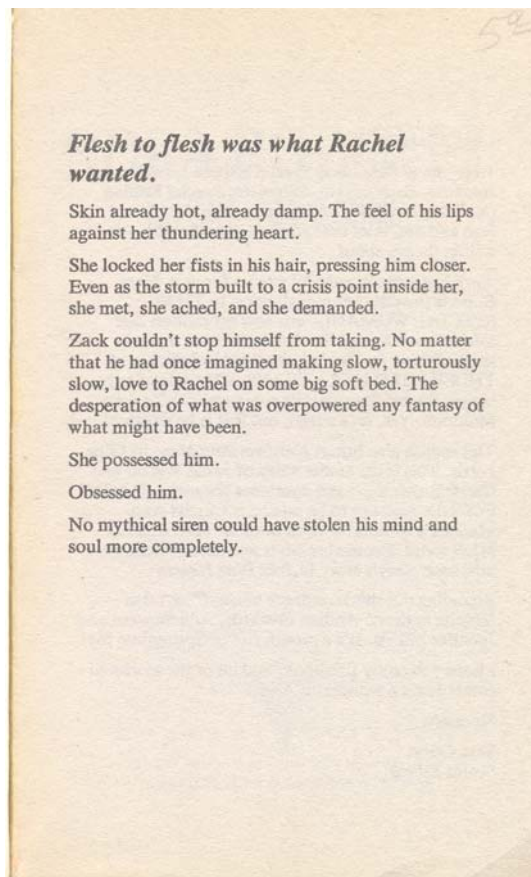
#### **4.1.1 The Category Romance Novel**

Like so many aspects of the category peritext, the introductory pages of the category romance novel are composed according to a template that is determined by the format and the particular line in which a category romance novel is published. The first pages of the book consist of a number of standard elements which not only recur in each category romance novel, but which moreover often also share a basic style and design. While this compositional mechanism obviously gives rise to sets of introductory pages that, despite the fact that they are introducing a singular novel, are very similar to one another, the introductory pages template is slightly less stringent than that of, for instance, the outside cover. Variations exist in terms of, for example, the particular sequence in which certain elements are featured or the extent to which they are (or are not) developed; this then provides a small but not unimportant sense of singularity to the first pages of each individual category romance novel – a sense that is though, I note in the following discussion, often largely overshadowed by the sense of sameness and similarity that pervades even this introductory zone of the category book.

Completely in line with the identity strategies that mark the category romance's cover, the identity that is further developed and specified in these introductory pages is predominantly concerned with the further development and performance of the text's generic

and line identities. The line identity – an identity that always of course automatically implies the popular romance generic identity – is in particular elaborated upon as introductory pages often provide more extensive information about the narrative profile of the line. In this process no questions remain about the generic and line-related parts of the book's identity as the category romance's introductory pages – like the rest of its peritext – strives above all towards clarity and distinctness in all genre-related identity matters. The author, an identity-thread that is only fractionally acknowledged on the book's outside cover, is considerably elaborated upon on the category's first pages. While this does not, as we will see below, change the structurally subordinate position of the individual author in the category romance format, the elaboration does provide interesting clues about the surprisingly intricate ways in which the category romance novel manages to develop its genre-internal identity and concomitantly attract its particular target readership.

The category romance novel opens with a decidedly unusual element; featured on the very first page of the category romance novel is what I call a **preview scene**. This is a brief scene (or part of scene) that is extracted from the novel's main story-text and is reproduced on the very first page of the book. Its first line is often printed in bold and slightly enlarged type size, which immediately draws the reader's attention. The preview scene is usually presented without any form of introduction or commentary. Despite this lack of explicit framing, the text is immediately recognizable as a scene from a romance narrative and, given its prominent position in the book, is likely interpreted as belonging to the book's story-text proper that starts a few pages later in the same volume.



Although the preview scene might initially appear to offer a deceptively simple and straightforward way of opening the category romance novel, further considerations reveal the surprisingly complex and multi-layered ways in which it functions. The preview scene first and foremost provides the reader with a first impression of the narrative. It usually depicts a moment that is in some way central to the story and that is, moreover, rife with easily recognizable romance narrative conventions. The vast majority of preview scenes deal, for example, with representations of moments of (sexual) attraction and/or conflict between a man and a woman; such scenes, as can be noticed in the examples above and below, depict situations that evoke a very stereotypical image of the popular romance genre. They might consist of, for instance, the erotic build-up to the protagonists' first kiss<sup>94</sup> or first time making

<sup>92</sup> Scanned first page of *Falling for Rachel*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Intimate Moments* (1993), p. 1

<sup>93</sup> Scanned first page of *Night Smoke*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Intimate Moments* (1994), p. 1

<sup>94</sup> For example: ““I used to look at you,” Holt said slowly. “A lot.” Wary, Suzanna lifted her head. “Really, I never noticed.” “You wouldn't have.” His hand dropped away from her hair. “Princesses don't notice peasants.” Now Suzanna frowned, not only at the words, but also at the clipped tone. “What a ridiculous thing to say.” “It was easy to think of you that way – the princess in the castle.” “A castle that's been crumbling for years,” she said dryly. “You know, I've thought about kissing you for fifteen years.” Holt watched the faint smile fade away from her face and the alarm shoot into her eyes. “That's a long time to think about anything.” He released her hand, but before she could let out a sigh of relief he cupped the back of her neck. His fingers were firm, and his grip was determined. “I'm just going to get it out of my system.”” (*Suzanna's Surrender*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Intimate Moments* (1991), p.1)



love<sup>95</sup>, a moment of flirtatious banter<sup>96</sup> or a more explicit love scene.<sup>97</sup> While scenes of (sexual) attraction are particularly popular as preview scenes in category romance novels – a trend that further plays into the stereotypical conception of the popular romance novel as preoccupied with (clichéd representations of) sexuality – many preview scenes also feature moments of conflict and tension between the protagonists. Ostensibly more discordant than romantic – the hero and heroine are bickering or even fighting outright – these scenes are nonetheless often also rife with sexual tension.<sup>98</sup> It is rarer, though not unheard of, for preview scenes to focus on deeper-lying issues in the romance narrative, such as the internal conflict that forms the seemingly insurmountable barrier between hero and hero for much of the narrative.<sup>99</sup> Preview scenes are not only emphatically conventional with regards to the moment or situation that they depict, but also in terms of the discourse that is used to

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<sup>95</sup> For example: “He crossed to her slowly, soundlessly. Inevitably. He didn’t touch her. Not at first. He knew that once he did, the time to turn back would be lost, for both of them. A part of him wished desperately that he could walk back, turn away, and continue on the route he had already mapped. She was a detour, a dangerous combination of curves that would only lead him astray. But looking at her, his eyes dark and intense on her face, he knew that his bridges were already smoking behind him. He touched – took – her face in his hands. Cupped it, moulding his fingers to the angles, as if he would mold the shape of it in his mind. To remember her, always, as she was at this one instant, through all the centuries that would keep them apart.” (*Times Change*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Intimate Moment* (1990), p. 1)

<sup>96</sup> For example: “Alex shrugged. “I don’t usually take women to armed robberies.” Now things were getting *interesting*, Bess thought. “Where *do* you take them?” His gaze locked on hers. “To dinner, the flicks, dancing. To bed.” “Well, armed robbery is probably more exciting - at least than the first three.” She rose, placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him lightly on the mouth. “No hard feelings.” When his hands came to her hips and held in place, she lifted a brow. “Was there something else?” His lips twitched. “I haven’t decided yet. Maybe we could start with dinner.” “Start what?” “Working our way to bed. That’s where I want you.” “Oh.” Her breath came out too quickly, and not quite steady. It didn’t help that his eyes were calm, amused and very confident. How had their positions been so neatly reversed? “Well, *that’s* certainly cutting to the chase....”” (*Convincing Alex*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Special Edition* (1994), p. 1)

<sup>97</sup> For example: “Flesh to flesh was what Rachel wanted. Skin already hot, already damp. The feel of his lips against her thundering heart. She locked her fists in his hair, pressing him closer. Even as the storm built to a crisis point inside her, she met, she ached, and she demanded. Zack couldn’t stop himself from taking. No matter that he had once imagined making slow, torturously slow, love to Rachel on some big soft bed. The desperation of what was overpowered any fantasy of what might have been. She possessed him. Obsessed him. No mythical siren could have stolen his mind more completely.” (*Falling for Rachel*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Special Edition* (1993) p. 1)

<sup>98</sup> For example: “ “I know your type, O’Riley,” Amanda said. Sloan rocked back on his heels. “Do you?” Amanda fought to push her arms through the sleeves of her wrap. “You swagger from town to town and fill a few free hours with a quick roll between the sheets with any available woman.” She pulled the tie on the wrap tight. “Well, I’m not available.” “You figured you got me pegged, huh?” He didn’t touch her, but the look in his eyes was enough to have her bracing. “You can take this as a warning, Calhoun. This isn’t finished between us. I’m going to have you.” “*Have* me?” She took one long step toward him. “Why, you conceited – “ “You can save the flattery for later. There *will* be a later, Amanda, when it’s just you and me. And I promise you, it won’t be quick.” He smiled. “When I make love with, I’m going to take my time.” He ran a finger down the collar of her wrap. “And I’m going to drive you crazy.”” (*A Man For Amanda*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Desire* (1991), p. 1)

<sup>99</sup> For example: “She was courting danger. His mouth lowered swiftly to hers, but instead of demand, he used persuasion. He traced his tongue between her lips until they parted in a sigh. Lindsay gripped his arms to keep her balance. “I want to make love with you.” The movement of his lips against hers shot an ache of desire through her, but she struggled against him. “You have to understand, “ she began, then paused for her voice to steady. “You have to understand the kind of person I am. I’m not capable of casual affairs. I need more than that.”” (*Reflections*, Nora Roberts, *Silhouette Special Edition* (1983), p. 1)

linguistically construct the scene. The language used in preview scenes is typically rife with conventional descriptions and clichéd expressions. Although preview scenes depict an array of different types of romance moments – sexual attraction, flirtatious banter, emotional connections, bickering, and even outright conflict – and strike up various tones – from erotic over tense to humoristic -, they consistently represent some of the most conventional and stereotypical narrative situations that stereotype the popular romance genre and often do so in an explicitly conventional, even clichéd discourse.

The extensive and easily recognizable conventionality of the preview scene is no coincidence. Despite the fact that it might further encourage the stereotypical interpretation of the romance novel as an extremely conventional, formulaic and repetitive kind of literature, the strong generic conventionality of this particular scene serves an important purpose. It emphatically and unmistakably inscribes the text into the generic traditions and conventions of the popular romance genre and, in doing so, it performs and reinforces the generic identity of the category romance novel that is set up on the (physically very proximate) front cover. This scene then explicitly makes the connection between the generic identity of the book as it is set up in its peritext – most specifically, its (front) cover – and the identity of the novel as it is developed within its linguistic narrative, its story text proper. The preview scene delivers, as it were, the textual evidence that the generic identity that is constructed on the cover matches the generic identity as it is developed in the text.<sup>100</sup> In connecting the narrative and peritextual levels of the book's identity construction, this scene importantly fulfils one of the main tasks of peritextual elements in the introductory pages of the category romance novel. This is not, however, the only function the preview scene fulfils. It also provides a first sample of how the book's author deals with these conventions. That is, it (very briefly) demonstrates how the author fulfils the creative task that is so pivotal to the category romance of narratively and discursively representing the overall generic conventions in a concrete, singular story. To this extent, the preview scene then does in miniature what the category romance novel does on a much bigger scale and thus effectively functions as a conceptual prefiguration of the entire story-text that is to follow. The preview scene, moreover, also provides a first (again very brief) indication of the author's personal style – of the rhythm, tone, cadence, pace and general quality of her writing. These individual elements and qualities of one's writing – which are often referred to with the term "voice" – are important in the

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<sup>100</sup> This is at least the way in which this scene is constructed and positioned. Whether this representation is in fact accurate – that is, whether the narrative text as a whole does in fact appropriately develop the romance generic narrative identity – is as such not "proven" by this scene.

otherwise extensively conventional category romance novel and might make the difference for an individual reader between appreciating or disliking a particular category romance novel.<sup>101</sup> In this way, the preview scene also has an important commercial function as it might play a crucial role in the reader's decision to read the entire text or to put the book aside and discard it.

Implicit in the discussion above is the notion that the preview scene functions in a metonymic way; that is, that it represents the entire story-text from which it is extracted. Indeed, due to its prominent place on the book's very first page the scene is almost automatically interpreted as a *pars pro toto*: a small part of a larger whole that it represents. This representation, the above discussion of the standard preview scene indicates, tends to play up or emphasize the conventionality of the popular romance genre. In fact, the (partial) scene that is selected as preview scene is often one of the most stereotypical and conventional scenes in the entire story-text and perhaps exaggerates or overemphasizes the conventionality of the text as a whole. This explicit conventionality, however, also makes for an explicit generic characterisation. Even a reader who has no experience reading popular romance novels and solely relies on cultural stereotypes of the genre is likely to recognize the conventions at play in this scene *as* popular romance conventions precisely because they are so emphatically stereotypical. In other words, even for readers who are unfamiliar with the romance genre the preview scene delivers the narrative and textual "evidence" of the novel's popular romance identity. In doing this the preview scene fulfils its main tasks: to unambiguously establish the text's generic identity and to connect that identity to the one performed on the book's (front) cover. As I have indicated above, however, this convention-driven metonymic representation of the text does assort various, somewhat contradictory effects. On the one hand, focussing on highly conventionalized and often sexualized narrative moments, the preview scene confirms and perpetuates a number of stereotypical ideas about the popular romance novel as a lurid, ridiculous and formulaic kind of literature obsessed with sex. On the other hand, establishing generic identity, prefiguring the central creative dynamic of the category romance and exemplifying the author's individual voice, the scene provides the romance reader with the kind of information she likely uses in her decision to continue reading the book or to discard it.

Particularly given the first of these effects, one could wonder why in a genre that is already laden with negative cultural stereotypes the books' producers consistently select as

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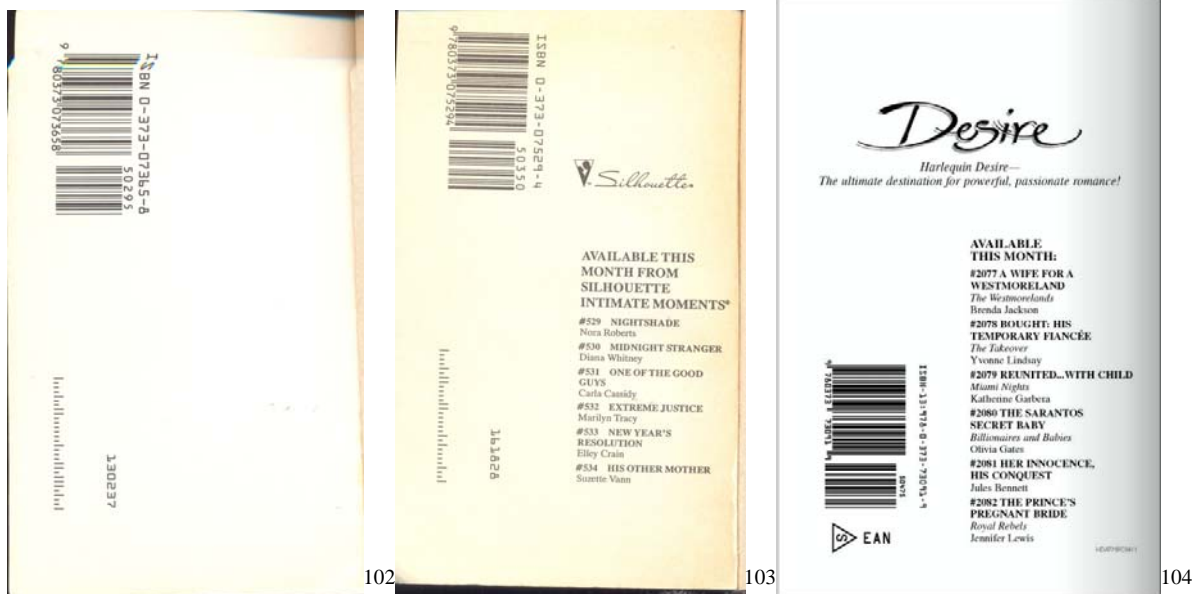
<sup>101</sup> For more on the notion of voice and its functioning in the popular romance genre, see Goris (2011).

preview scenes scenes which (at least ostensibly) appear to further confirm and perpetuate those negative stereotypes. Why, in others words, is precisely a highly conventionalized, often sexually suggestive scene so often selected as preview scene and what, if anything, does this choice reveal about the dynamics underlying the peritextual framing of the category romance novel? The answer to this question reveals, in my opinion, an important basic dynamic of the popular romance genre that is particularly crucial to the reading and functioning of the category romance novel. The choice for this kind of scene as preview scene indicates, first of all, the importance of generic clarity and distinctness. Category romance novels are (sometimes excessively) obvious about their generic allegiance and normally do not develop strategies to be in any way subtle or discrete about their popular romance identity. This principle of the strong and clear performance of the generic identity applies to their narrative as well as to their peritext. This obviousness in performing generic identity is a function of the attempt on the part of the book's producers to successfully locate and reach the category's target readership. The category romance novel is predominantly targeted at romance readers – that is, readers who consciously (though not necessarily openly) identify as readers of popular romance novels and who, consequently, appreciate and even demand all of the genre's core elements and characteristics, including its high level of conventionality. Readers who do not appreciate or tolerate such elements simply do not belong to the main target audience of the category romance novel. It is this dynamic of appealing to a particular audience and, in a sense, warning off another kind of audience that constantly influences the identity construction that is performed in the category's peritext overall and that is indeed also at play in the selection of the preview scene. The selection of an obviously conventional scene as the metonymically representative preview scene explicitly signals the conventionalized aspect of the text and thus constructs the text as one that appeals to readers who appreciate conventions.

However, as I remarked above, for the experienced romance reader the scene does more than simply signal the conventionalized character of the story-text; it also functions as a prefiguration of the category's central creative dynamic and as an exemplification of the author's individual voice. This kind of reading of the scene is, I think, equally anticipated in the selection of this type of scene and in fact functions as a secondary way of appealing to the appropriate target audience. That is, readers with the necessary reading strategies to appreciate the category's story-text have the interpretative strategies and generic experience at their disposal to read, as it were, beyond the explicit conventionality displayed in the preview scene and get at those other aspects that play a key role in determining their potential appreciation for this particular individual text. Anticipating this format particular kind of

reading, the preview scene plays, perhaps in an unexpectedly subtle way, an important role in constructing both the particular identity of the text and the target reader it is aimed at.

Flanking the category romance novel's first page is the reverse side of the front cover, which is the **inside cover** or "cover 2" in Genette's terminology (25). While Genette claims this cover is usually "mute" (*idem*) – i.e. blank – this is not always the case for the category romance novel. The particular elements that are printed on the inside of the front cover vary, but very often the space contains at least the book's bar code and ISBN number, both of which, as on the back cover, signal the book's technical and economic singularity. Depending on the book's time of publication and the line in which it is published, cover two may also feature a short list of the other books that are published in the line that particular month and/or the publisher's or line's logo.



The printing of the line's name and the explicit listing of the entire set of books published in the line that month signals the book's membership to the line quite explicitly. In this list each book in the line's current batch of books is individually identified by line number, title and (in notably smaller type size) the author's name; thus the most immediate intertextual context in which this particular book figures is overtly identified as the book is explicitly placed in the whole to which it belongs and from which it derives much of its identifying features. While the books are named individually, the visual uniformity of the list (same font, type size, etc.)

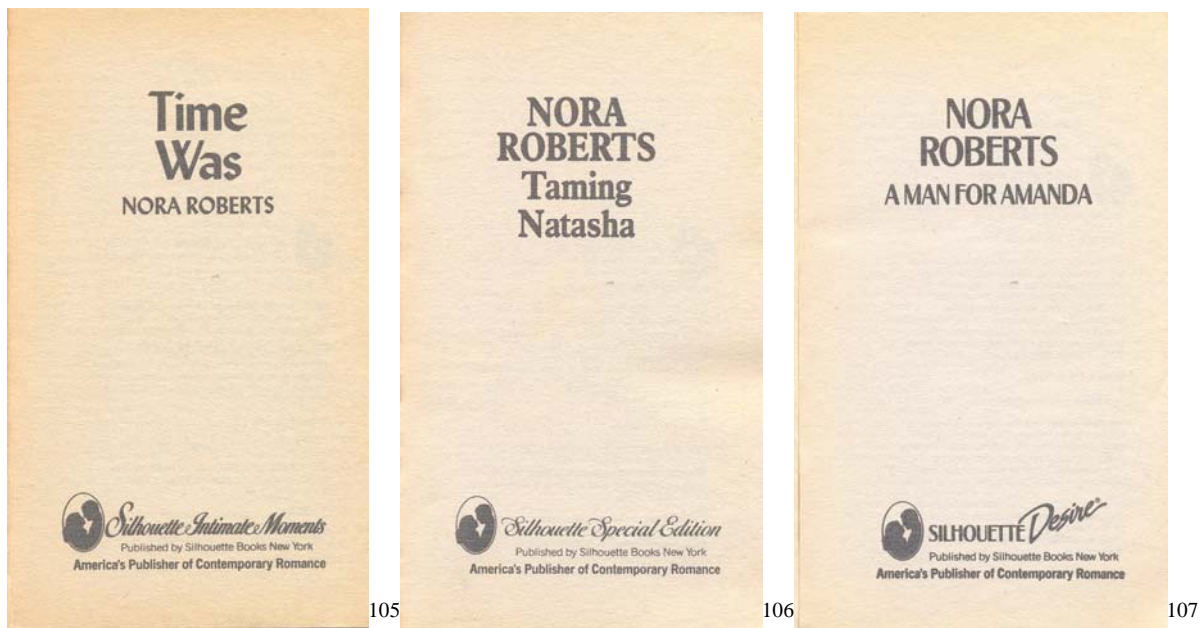
<sup>102</sup> Scanned image of cover two, *Night Shift*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1991)

<sup>103</sup> Scanned image of cover two, *Nightshade*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1993)

<sup>104</sup> Image of cover two, *Bought: His Temporary Fiancée*, Yvonne Lindsay, Harlequin Desire (2011). Image adapted from this source: <http://software.libredigital.com/bookrdr/dp-live/BookBrowse.html?a=9x0KWPGfz579POnPThXYMiXIO2fD0gOniZGZSRCu5%2FwnVqgCE4usm8MW7zNdPqJVQsXrL0Bhn1bMfQXCFc9G8EWeQDT4PBp131x8ZSSTsgsyDpp%2Ftyp%2BSre%2FdKiewLP&z=h1q>

and the numeric successiveness of the books' identifying line numbers indicates the similarities between them. The list furthermore of course also functions as publicity for each of these individual books. In rare cases this inside cover space is taken up not by the line's current booklist but by an advertisement. This use of the space is rather rare, however, and seems to be common only at particular times in the history of category romance publishing.

Turning the first page of the category romance novel, the reader's attention usually first goes to the page on the right hand side – that is, page three. In the category romance novel, page three is usually the title page. This **title page** conventionally features the title, the author's name and a reference to the book's publisher and/or line.



The category's title page is, much like its cover and many of its other peritextual elements, composed according to a predetermined line template; in fact, often the design style used on the front cover is replicated on the title page.



This visual similarity again establishes the connection between the book's identity as it is constructed on the outside and the inside of the category romance novel. Title page templates

<sup>105</sup> Scan of title page *Time Was*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1989), p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Scan of title page *Taming Natasha*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1990), p. 3

<sup>107</sup> Scan of title page *A Man For Amanda*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Desire (1991), p. 3

<sup>108</sup> Part of front cover *Times Change*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1990).

<sup>109</sup> Part of title page *Times Change*

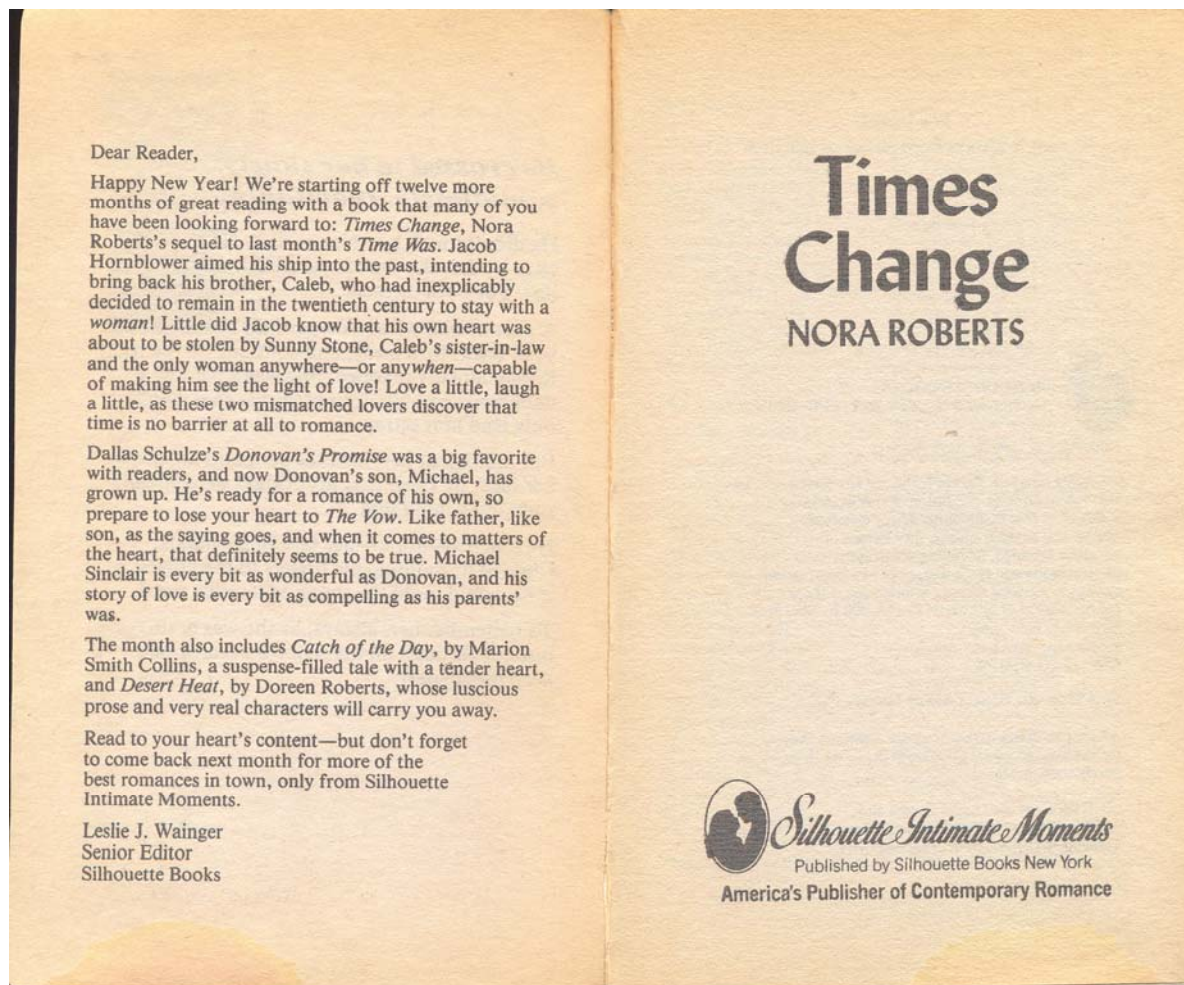
usually follow the overall conventions of book publishing. Thus, the book's title and the author's name are printed in the upper regions of the title page, while the name of the publisher (and the line if it is included) is printed at the bottom of the page. As we can see in these examples, the precise size and position of the title and the author's name vary somewhat. Sometimes the title is placed at the very top and the author's name appears underneath it, while in other category romances it is precisely the other way around. Likewise, the type size of both author's name and title – both in absolute terms and relative with regard to each other – vary slightly.

Although such things might appear to be rather insignificant, we should not underestimate their impact on the performance of the book's identity. Indeed, since in our (Western) culture we have the (often unconscious but inescapable) tendency to equate place and size with significance – that which is bigger and/or higher is perceived as more significant or important – the title's and author's name respective sizes and places on the page likely (considerably) impact their significance in the performance of the book's textual identity. In other words, the bigger the type size of the author's name and the higher up on the page the name is printed the more important to the book's identity we perceive it to be – and vice versa of course. Likewise, the fact that the publisher's name is printed at the very bottom of the title page sets up a construction in which the publisher is presented as relatively less important to the book's identity than its title and author's name.

One might note that this construction differs somewhat from the one developed on the outside cover of the category romance novel, where the book's title and author's name are much less dominant factors than they are on the title page. This is due, it seems to me, to the very strong cultural conventions that influence the composition of the title page. Indeed, to not feature both the author's name and the title as the two dominant elements on the title page would be a flagrant transgression of the conventions that rule this space and would very likely be perceived as extremely transgressive – maybe even to the extent that it might fundamentally undermine the identification of the book. This is less the case for the cover of a book which, although of course also importantly influenced by broader cultural habits, is a space that is less a stronghold of very specific conventions. Moreover, as the examples above demonstrate, the name of the publisher – a genre marker in the case of category romance novels – is still relatively prominent on the category's title page. This area usually includes the name of the publisher, the publisher's visually suggestive logo, the name of the line (in the same, typifying font and type size as is used on the cover, which is yet another element that visually signals the consistency between the book's outside and inside) and sometimes even

the publisher's catchphrase – at the bottom of every book published by Silhouette the catchphrase “America's publisher of contemporary romance” is printed, for example. Beyond the genre marking effect of the name Silhouette, this slogan of course also explicitly names the book's genre, thus again strongly contributing to the performance of the book's generic identity. In short, the category's title page clearly identifies the book's author and title, but also contains various references to its generic identity.<sup>110</sup>

On the opposite side of the title page, i.e. page two, the category romance novel usually features a **preface** of some kind.



The particular content of this preface is one of the few peritextual elements of the category romance that has undergone not superficial but fundamental changes over time. That is, older category romance novels have quite different prefaces than more recent categories. Since these variations are strongly connected to, and in fact important symptoms of, the broader developments in the genre that are the very topic of this dissertation, we will discuss the precise content of this page in more detail later in this dissertation. For now, let only a brief

<sup>110</sup> Remember in this regard that the title itself might also contain generic connotations.



description of the various versions of this page suffice. The preface of older category romance novels (those published in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s) is written by the line's senior editor and often gives a kind of overview of the books that are published in the line that month. This overview might mention by title and/or author name each novel published in the line or it might focus on only a few of them and barely mention the others - the latter practice sometimes leads to quite strange results as the preface to a particular category romance might discuss one or two completely different categories. Obviously, such different prefaces have a different effect. Those that discuss all books very explicitly link the present category romance novel to the others published in the line while also advertising all those other books. Prefaces which focus on one or two books out of the batch raise the profile of those particular books – presenting them as more important, and implicitly perhaps as better, than the other books – but consequently downplay that of the others, which as the example above indicates might create quite a strange effect. Regardless of which specific strategy the editorial preface follows, it always sketches a certain image of the line – be it by directly describing the line's profile, by discussing all its current novels or by focussing on how one or two particular books are exemplary of the line as a whole – and thus makes the book's connection to the line linguistically explicit. This connection is further reinforced by the explicit mentioning of the editor's title at the end of the piece.

While the editorial preface then (very explicitly or somewhat more implicitly) performs the book's connection to the line in which it is published, the preface written by the author takes a different approach. The authorial preface, which became common in the category romance novel in the early 2000s, usually only discusses the present novel and does not refer to the other novels in the line. It generally provides a teasing partial summary of the story, often sketching the conventional romance narrative premise of two people who are both attracted to each other but have multiple barriers between them. Such partial summaries strongly present the narrative in romance generic terms and (once again) performatively inscribe it in the traditions of the genre. Authorial prefaces sometimes also include more personal observations made by the writer about e.g. the writing process, her life-long love for books or her enjoyment at writing (a particular kind of) romances. They often end with the author encouraging the reader to get in touch with her online (links to personal websites, Facebook pages and Twitter profiles are common here) or (increasingly rarely) via regular mail.

Despite the significant differences between category prefaces written by editors and those penned by authors, these two versions of the category preface have numerous elements

in common. In their discussions of particular novels, the writers of the preface always focus on conventional romance generic elements in the narratives and describe the stories or characters in a discourse that is characteristic of the genre. The preface thus (implicitly) further inscribes these novel(s) in the popular romance genre – a performative inscription that by the time the reader reaches the preface might be redundant but is nonetheless part and partial of the category preface. These prefaces are furthermore always directed at the romance reader; they invariably open by explicitly addressing the reader with the words “Dear Reader” and often adopt the second person (“you”), addressing the reader throughout.<sup>111</sup> Prefaces always conclude with the editor or author signing the piece with her full name and (in case of the editor) title or function (e.g. “Lucia Marco Senior Editor.”) This explicit signature, in combination with the direct address of the reader, (seemingly) personalizes the preface. It constructs the preface as a personal communication from the editor or author to the reader and creates an (essentially fake) impression of individualized, even personal contact between one of the book’s producers and its consumer. That impression is further reinforced by the (standard) encouragement to contact the editor or writer personally. Indeed, both the editorial and the authorial preface tend to conclude with explicit appeals to the reader to get in touch with the author or editor (online or via regular mail), who invariably exclaims that she “loves to hear from readers”.

While it is not difficult to see that such exclamations have commercial purposes at their core, it is still remarkable that in a book that is as iconic of contemporary *mass* consumption as the category romance novel, the producers go out of their way to construct the illusion of personalized, even intimate contact with the consumer. Indeed, in a certain way these gestures go against the grain of mass culture as they counteract the implicit impersonality of communication that the scale of mass consumption unavoidably implies. Although from this latter perspective the preface’s consistent gestures towards direct, personalized contact are remarkable and essentially at odds with the mass scale consumption on which the format is economically predicated, the gestures do fit within – and are in fact a constituting manifestation of – the atmosphere of equality, solidarity, connectedness and camaraderie that, romance scholar Annick Capelle has found, (partially) characterizes the romance community (123-24).<sup>112</sup> The authors’ and editors’ unveiled attempts to establish an

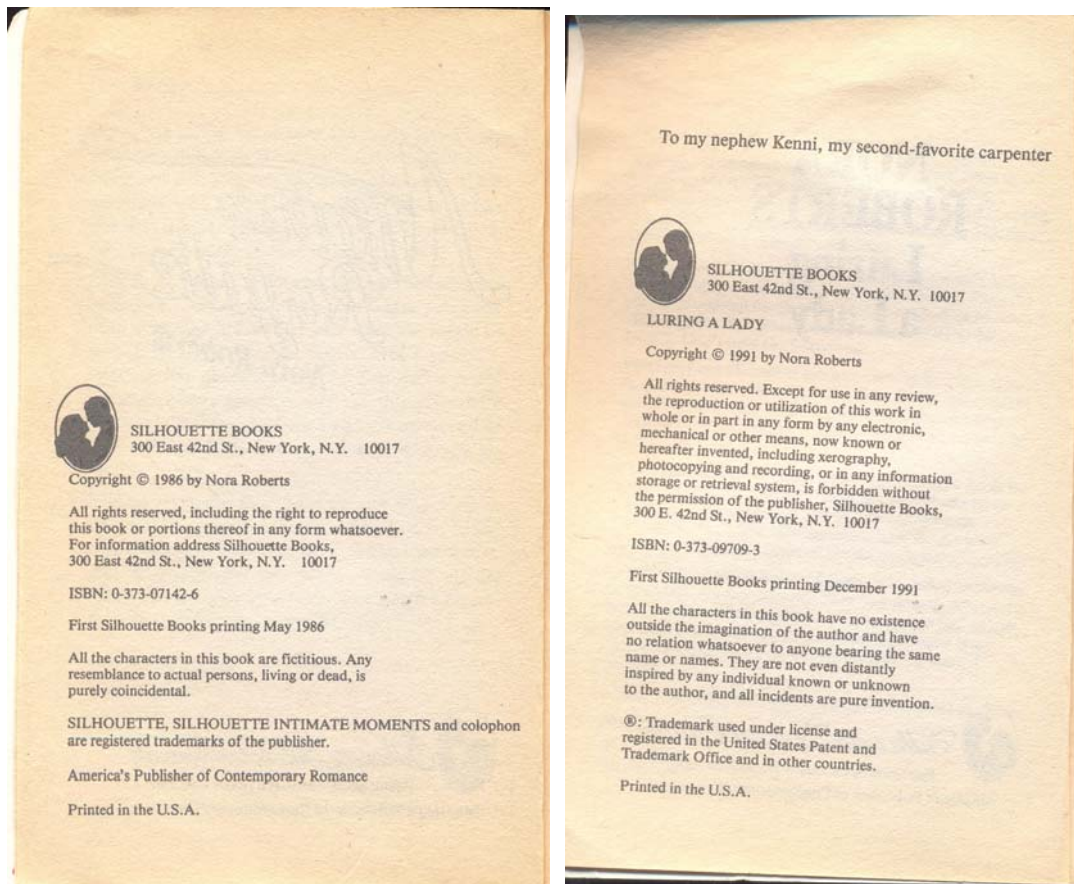
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<sup>111</sup> Exemplary of this tendency is a sentence such as “We hope that you enjoy this Special Edition today, and will enjoy many more.” (*Tempting Fate*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1985), p. 2)

<sup>112</sup> Capelle makes this observation in her (unpublished) doctoral dissertation “*Why Women Really Read Romances*” *The internal discourse on romance fiction* (1998), in which she studies the internal discourse that is used in the romance community – that is, the community constituted by all people who are involved with popular

impression of a personal connection between themselves and their readers by, for example, explicitly inviting reader comments and feedback and/or evoking personal opinions or experiences in these prefaces are part and partial of that atmosphere and are perhaps best understood within that context.

Page four of the category romance novel, the reverse side of the title page, is usually taken up by the **colophon**.



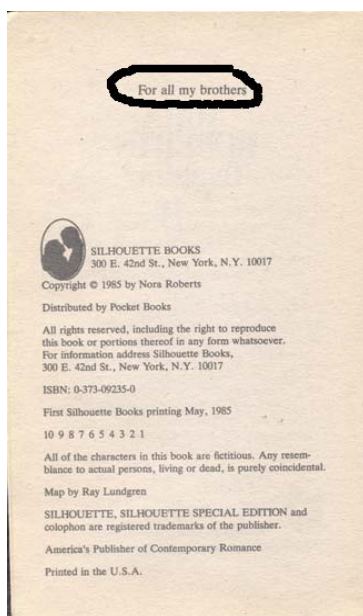
The colophon is a fixed set of elements that together signal the official publication of the book; it not only implies that the work has been completed and printed by a publisher, but also sums up identifying information about the book and its publication (history). The colophon usually includes a mention of the book's date of publication – both the original and, if applicable, the publication date of a new edition of the text -, the name of its author, the book's title, its ISBN number, the country in which the books was printed and the name, place and sometimes the complete address of the publisher. As we can see in the example above and below, in the category romance's colophon the name of the publisher is printed in a relatively

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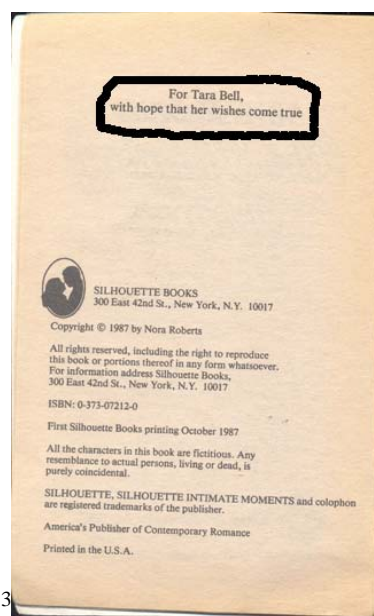
romance novels, predominantly romance readers, writers and editors/publishers. Capelle's findings are based on her analyses of the discourse used in the romance publication *Romance Writer's Report* (RWA's monthly magazine that is mainly targeted at an audience of (professional) romance writers) and *Romantic Times Magazine* (a glossy magazine mainly targeted at romance readers) and on her observations of a number of romance conventions.

big, capitalized type size and sometimes accompanied by the publisher’s logo. Colophons in category romance novels usually also contain an outright copyright statement and state plainly that the narrative is fictional. The colophon then orderly gathers on one page the book’s basic, pragmatic identifying information and formally establish the fictionality of the narrative. While many romance readers are likely not inclined to read the colophon in detail since it is printed in small type size and most of the to the reader pertinent information that is provided here (such as the book’s title, publisher, and author’s name) can also be found elsewhere in the book, its presence is nonetheless an important sign that the book has been completed and officially published – that is, that it is meant to be read by the public.

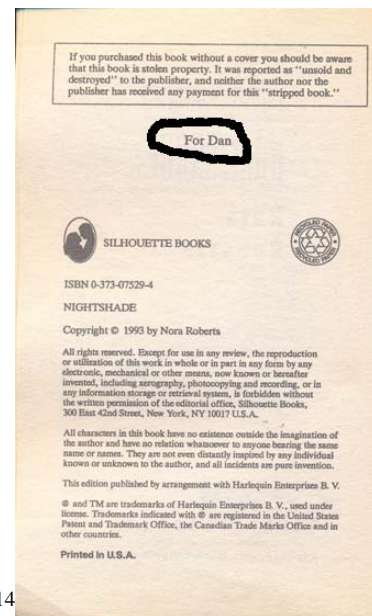
Somewhat surprisingly the colophon is often not the only element that is printed on page four of the category romance novel. Above the colophon, which takes up the lower half or lower two thirds of the page space, we often find a **dedication** or word of thanks by the author.



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Given the personal tone that is adopted in the preface, one would perhaps expect that such a directly personal statement from the author would then be placed in a prominent position in the category romance novel so as to increase the book’s personalized touch. This is, however, not the case. The dedication is relegated to an inconspicuous and highly unusual space – above the colophon on page four – where it hardly manages to catch the reader’s eye. Indeed,

<sup>113</sup> Scan of page with colophon *Tempting Fate*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1985), p. 4. The dedication reads: “For all my brothers”.

<sup>114</sup> Scan of page with colophon *The Playboy Prince*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1987), p. 4. The dedication reads: “For Tara Bell, with hope that her wishes come true.”

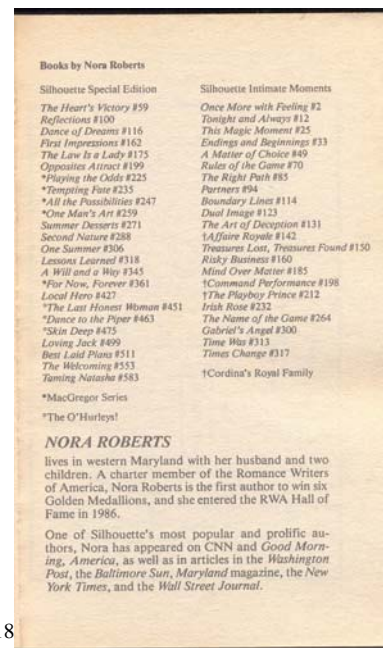
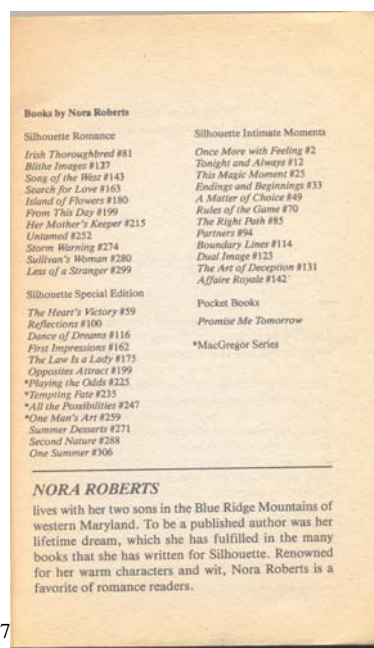
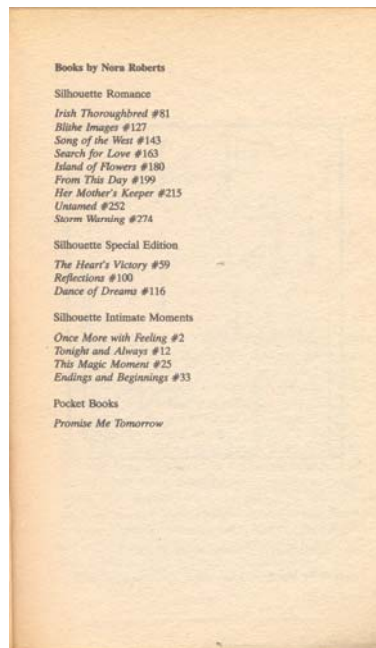
<sup>115</sup> Scan of page with colophon *Nightshade*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1993), p. 4 The dedication reads: “For Dan”

tucked away above the colophon, the dedication is virtually lost from view as it is supplanted by the longer and visually more dominant colophon. The colophon is moreover, as I noticed above, a page the reader is likely to only briefly skim or even skip entirely, so the dedication is quite likely to go unnoticed here. This placing is even stranger given that it violates the wider cultural conventions that exist in this regard of placing the dedication on a separate page before the start of the book's story-text proper. This peculiar placing moreover also creates a rather odd disparity within the page space of page four as the warm, personal tone of the dedication contrasts strongly with the cool pragmatism of the colophon; indeed the combination of what could arguably be considered the book's most and least "personalized" elements in one page space is odd and somewhat inelegant. All of these considerations then raise the question of why the category romance novel places the dedication in such an odd place instead of following the existing tradition of printing it on a separate page. The answer, it seems to me, is purely economic: in an effort to keep production costs down the amount of pages in the book is minimized; a separate dedication page is more expensive than placing the dedication in an existing empty space, so when necessary<sup>116</sup> the latter option is chosen. This reasoning is exemplary of the conceptual logic that underlies much of the creative and material composition of the category romance novel: the individual author has an important part to play in the coming into being of this book, but at every twist and turn this part is constrained by editorial decisions that are essentially driven by economic considerations.

Still, of course, the individual romance author is integral to the category romance novel and her central role is often recognized in the next page of the book – **page five** – which is usually completely dedicated to **the author**. This page explicitly introduces the author to the reader; it often consists of a bibliography and/or a short text which provides some basic biographical facts about the author.

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<sup>116</sup> Sometimes, as we discuss below, page six is free. When this is the case, the dedication might be placed there. This is less common than the page four dedication, however.



The bibliography that is printed here lists the category romance novels written by the author. While such a list clearly develops the notion of an author's *oeuvre* – it gathers in one space and visually represents the (seeming) totality of the writer's authorial feats, thus proving, as it were, her experience and expertise as a writer and lending her a certain status, even authority as a respectable author who has won her spurs as a creative writer – closer examination of the list indicates that only a generically very particular sense of *oeuvre* is developed here. This list namely *only* provides the titles of the category romance novels written by the author; any other kind of book she might have written, be it a single title romance novel, a novel in another genre or any other kind of publication, is not represented on this list.<sup>120</sup> As such, this bibliographical list then works to establish not simply the author's experience as a writer – which implies both minimal reader popularity and a certain (creative) authority – but specifically her experience as an author of category romance novels. A very format-specific notion of authorship is then performatively developed in this peritextual element.

The length of the list is indicative of the extent of that experience – indeed, as we can see in the differences between the examples above, the list allows the reader to determine in a single glance how relatively (in)experienced an author is with writing in the creatively rather particular format of the category romance novel. Moreover, the strict ordering of the bibliography according to lines indicates the extent of the author's experience with a

<sup>117</sup> Author page, *Storm Warning*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Romance (1984), p. 5. In 1984 the biographic text was still published on page 1 of the category romance, underneath the preview scene.

<sup>118</sup> Author page, *Affaire Royale*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1986), p. 5

<sup>119</sup> Author page, *Taming Natasha*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1990), p. 5

<sup>120</sup> For example, at the time *Taming Natasha* was originally published in 1990 Nora Roberts had six single title romance novels to her name, but none of these is mentioned in the here printed bibliographical list.

particular line. The examples above indicate, for example, that Nora Roberts is most experienced in writing for Silhouette Special Edition, Silhouette Intimate Moments and Silhouette Romance, but has very little experience in other lines. Even as the bibliography then details the individual accomplishments of the author as a writer – in the process distinguishing her from all other (romance) writers and acknowledging her singularity – it also further inscribes her into the system of the popular romance genre by focussing exclusively on her achievements in the category romance format.

The text that often accompanies the (partial) bibliography on page five<sup>121</sup> of the category romance novel further introduces the author to the reader by providing some basic biographical facts. Recurrent elements here are an account of the writer's family life – husband, children and pets are regularly mentioned –, an indication of where the author lives, an acknowledgement of her success as a romance author and/or her personal joy at and commitment to being a romance writer.<sup>122</sup> This text then usually represents the author in several intertwined ways: as a woman and often a mother (via the mentioning of her husband and children), as a person from a particular geographical (and concomitantly cultural) background and as a romance author who feels grateful and privileged to be writing for romance readers. Via this particular representation common ground is established between the author and her intended reader, who is also a woman, often a mother, might share a cultural or national background and is, like the author, a romance community member who finds enjoyment in the culturally much maligned popular romance novel genre. Emphasizing the author's writing experience and public success, the text often also introduces a note of distinction between reader and writer, who, after all, do not take up the same position in the genre. These biographical texts are then often intricate balancing acts between, on the one hand, the establishing of points of similarity between romance author and reader so that the distance between the two is reduced and the reader feels personally connected to the book – remember the friendly, personal tone that characterizes the preface and pervades, according to Capelle, the entire romance community – and, on the other hand, allowing enough and the right kind of distance to exist between reader and writer so that the former has a healthy respect for the latter's creative abilities.

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<sup>121</sup> Occasionally the text is featured on a different page; sometimes (e.g. when the bibliography is particularly long) the text is featured on page six; in older categories the text is often printed on the first page below the preview scene.

<sup>122</sup> Here is an example of fairly typical biographical text: “**NORA ROBERTS** lives with her two sons in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western Maryland. To be a published author was her lifetime dream, which she has fulfilled in the many books she has written for Silhouette. Renowned for her warm characters and wit, Nora Roberts is a favourite of romance readers.” (*Affaire Royale*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1986), p. 5)

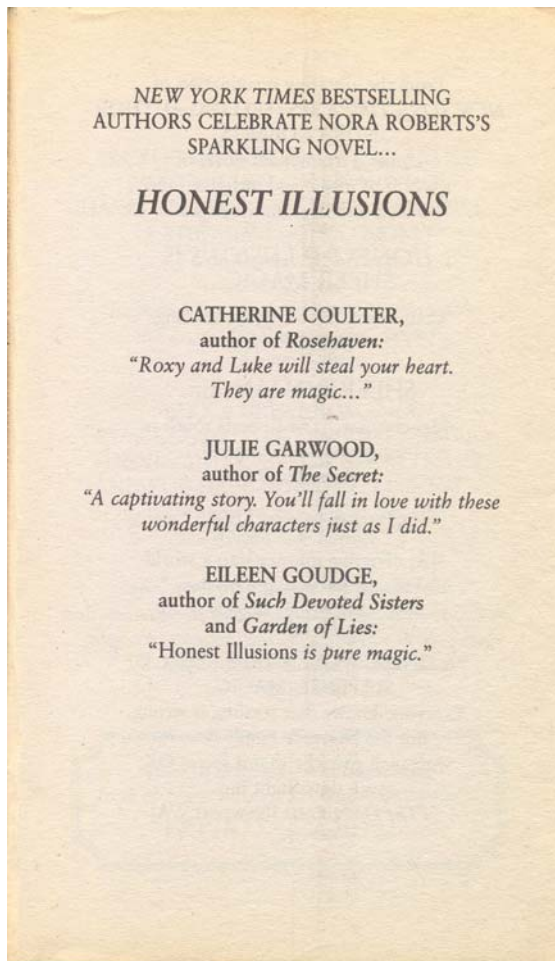
Finally, **page six** of the category romance novel is the only one of the pages preceding the start of the story-text that has no fixed content; indeed, the content of this page seems to be determined on a book by book basis. Various elements can be featured on this page. Sometimes it is taken up by a continuation of the introduction of the author that started on page five – for example, when the bibliography and/or the biography are particularly long. At other times page six features an element that supports the reading of the story – it might, for example, feature a geographical map of the story’s setting or a family tree in which the relationships between different characters are coherently established. Still other category romance novels feature the author’s dedication on page six. Very few category romances have a completely blank page six. Usually, page six is the last of the category romance’s introductory pages and the story-text proper starts on page seven of the book.

#### 4.1.2 The Single Title

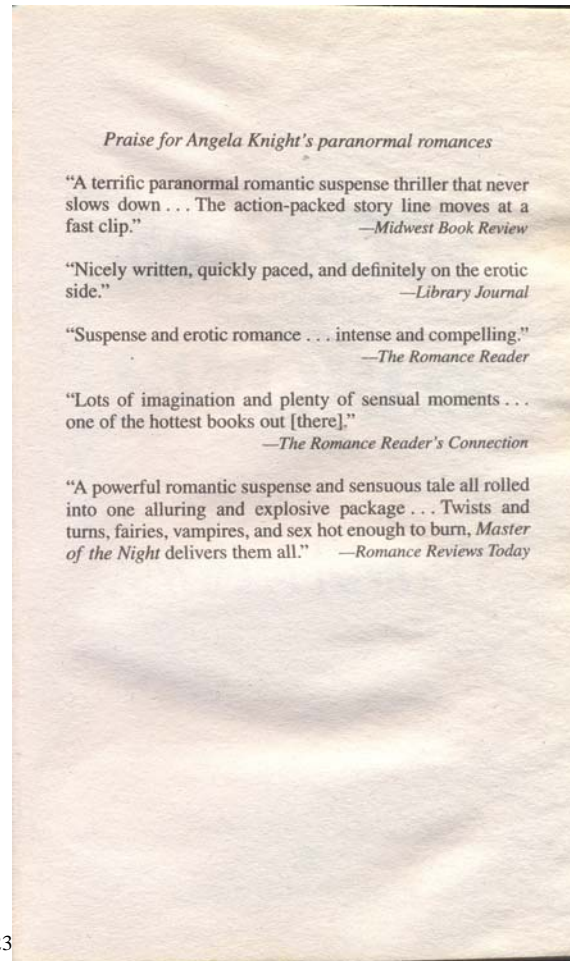
The introductory pages of the single title are, in comparison to their category counterpart, composed according to a less strict predetermined mould or template. Although here too certain conventions are at work, the content of these pages is more so than in the category romance novel determined on a book by book basis. While the generic identity is often performed in these pages, conventionally the introductory pages of the single title romance novel are predominantly focussed on the authorial identity, which they then quite strongly perform. This is, of course, in line with the overall strategies of identity performance that mark other (peritextual) areas of the conventional single title.

The author and/or the book already emerge as the focal point of the single title’s in-book peritext on the very **first page** – or, in some novels, the first several pages - of the book, which usually features a number of quotes that praise the novel’s author and/or her work.





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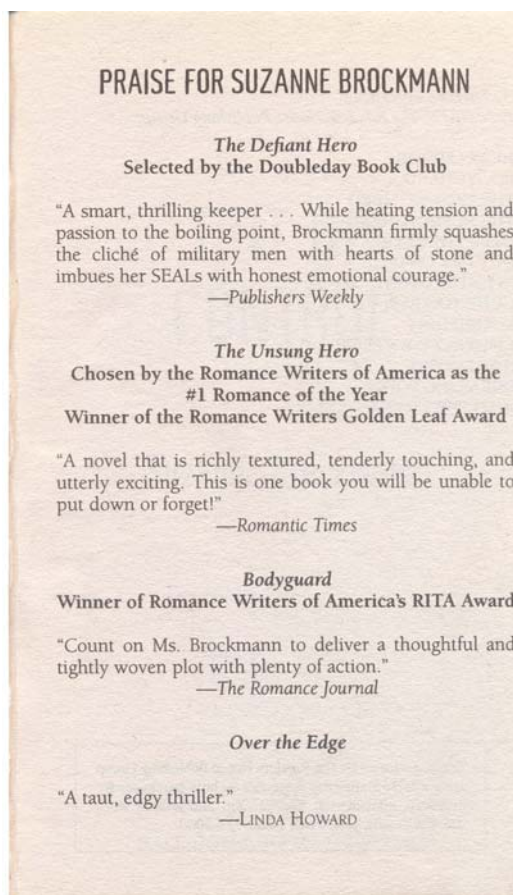
These quotes are similar to the ones on the outside cover of the single title romance novel and indeed function in a likewise manner. That is, they laud the book and endorse its value and appeal. Moreover, via the discourse that is used in the quotes and via the explicitly attributed sources, the quotes performatively assign the book a place in a specifically generic and wider cultural system (cf. *supra*). Furthermore, the distinctly positive image of the author and/or the present book that is created by these quotes not only represents the book as appealing, but also implicitly validates the reader's interest in the book – an interest that usually has just piqued for a first time and materialized in the reader's act of opening the book. The reader is instantly met with an emphatic confirmation of the quality and appeal of the book, which functions also as a positive reinforcement of her interest in the book. The quotes then likely give the reader's very first experience with the open book a generally positive connotation.

While it is self-evident that the laudatory quotes on the opening page(s) of the single title romance novel address in some way the work of the novel's author, the slightly different ways in which they do this are indicative of more significant differences in the book's

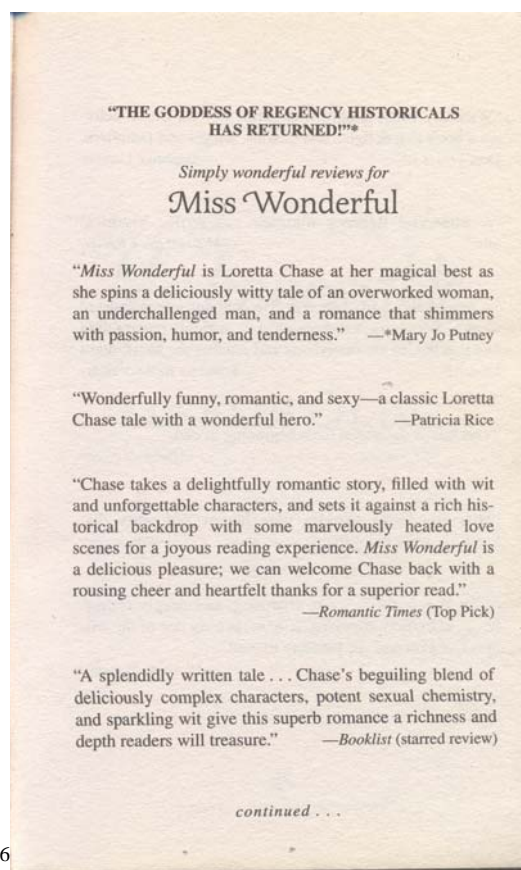
<sup>123</sup> First page, *Honest Illusions*, Nora Roberts, Jove Books (1993), p. 1

<sup>124</sup> First page, *Master of Swords*, Angela Knight, Berkley Sensation (2006), p. 1

underlying identification strategies. There are basically two different ways in which the book and/or the author is made present by the praising quotes on the single title's first page. The most frequent and straightforward way is praising quotes about the present book itself<sup>125</sup> (e.g. *Honest Illusions* example above) or about the work of the author as a whole (e.g. *Master of Swords* example above). Focussing on the book's title and/or the author's name, these quotes build upon one or more of the book's identity threads that have been set up on the outside cover. As such, these pages are smooth transitions from the outside to the inside of the book; they appeal to, performatively reconfirm and even further develop parts of the book's already established (and to the reader recognizable) identity. Relying on already introduced aspects of the book's identity, these quotes establish and confirm the continuity of the book's "outside" and "inside" identity in a smooth and straightforward manner. This is less the case in the second type of first-page-quotes I distinguish here, which are quotes that explicitly address one or more *other* novels written by the present book's author.



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<sup>125</sup> In order to obtain endorsing quotes about the present book before it is officially published, romance publishers often circulate so-called "advance reader copies" or ARCs. These are copies of the book that are released to particular people – reviewers, fellow authors, sometimes individual readers might win an ARC in a competition, etc. – a few weeks prior to the official release of the book.

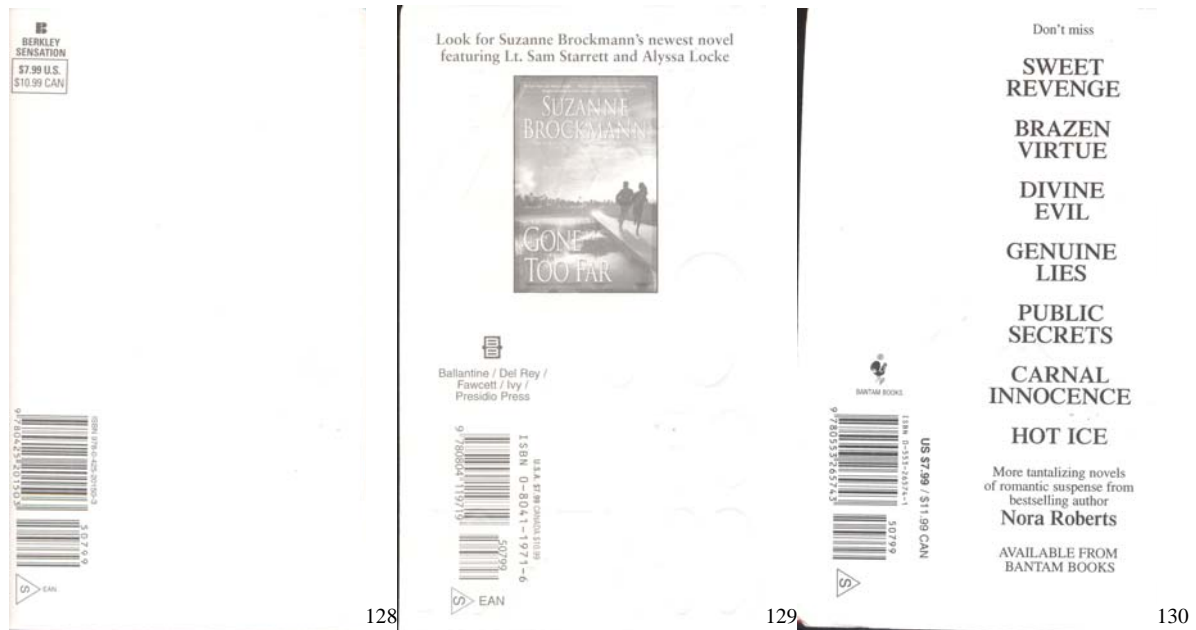
<sup>126</sup> First page, *Out of Control*, Suzanne Brockmann, Ballantine Books (2002), p. 1

<sup>127</sup> First page, *Mr. Impossible*, Loretta Chase, Berkley Sensation (2005), p. 1

Although at first sight such first pages might seem to differ from the other types of quotes only in a superficial manner – the quotes address a different book, but otherwise function in very similar manner: they praise a book and generically and culturally place it – the identification strategy that underlies this second type of single title first page is, I think, significantly different from the first in that it essentially relies much more on the notion of authorship than the first. The notion, implicit but crucial in these pages, that the present book is significantly or meaningfully identified by providing praising, generic and cultural information about one or more other book(s) *by the same author* fundamentally depends on the assumption that authorship, more than other elements of the book's identity, determines a significant (or even the dominant) part of the books' identity. Although this assumption remains implicit in these first pages, their functioning as identification elements for the present book fundamentally rests upon this notion. These pages then clearly signal and performatively constitute a shift away from a predominantly generic identification towards a predominantly authorial identification that marks the single title in general.

Besides conceptually and performatively foregrounding authorship as a dominant identity thread for the single title romance novel, these quotes also explicitly construct the primary intertext for the present book. Indeed, the emphatic mentioning of one or more other books clearly places the present book in a well-determined intertextual context. In the single title romance novel this strategy is very often used for books which have an actual narrative connection with the other novel(s) mentioned on the first page. In the examples above, for instance, *Out of Control* is set in the same fictional universe as the novels praised in the opening page quotes and features a number of the same characters and settings as some of these novels; similarly, *Mr. Impossible* takes place in the same fictional world as *Miss Wonderful*, the novel that is extensively praised on the first two pages of the *Mr Impossible* book.

The inside cover, located on the reverse side of the first page, is as in the category romance novel rarely fully blank or mute.



As we can see in these examples, cover two usually features at least the bar code, the ISBN number, the price of the book and the logo and/or name of the publisher. These elements technically represent the book's singularity and enable it to function as a commodity (cf. supra). In some single title novels cover two features additional elements, such as an advertisement for another book by the same author (see the Suzanne Brockmann example above) or a short list of titles of other books by the author published by the book's publisher (see the Nora Roberts example above). Although these are not really standard elements of the single title cover two – often this cover is blank except for the minor technical elements mentioned above – these examples do indicate that when this space is printed it is mainly used to further develop the authorial presence in the book's peritext by linguistically and/or visually (re)presenting or referencing other single title romance novels written by the author. Much like the second type of quotes discussed above, these visual or linguistic representations performatively inscribe the present novel in a well-determined, authorial intertext. While this intertext might be generically signified – in the Roberts example above, the accompanying texts names the genre as “romantic suspense” for instance – it is in the first place the author's name which functions as the selection mechanism on the basis of which this the intertext is composed. These elements of course predominantly have a commercial function – much like the ads in the back of the category romance novel these pages essentially function as advertisements stimulating the reader to read (and buy) a particular selection of books –, but

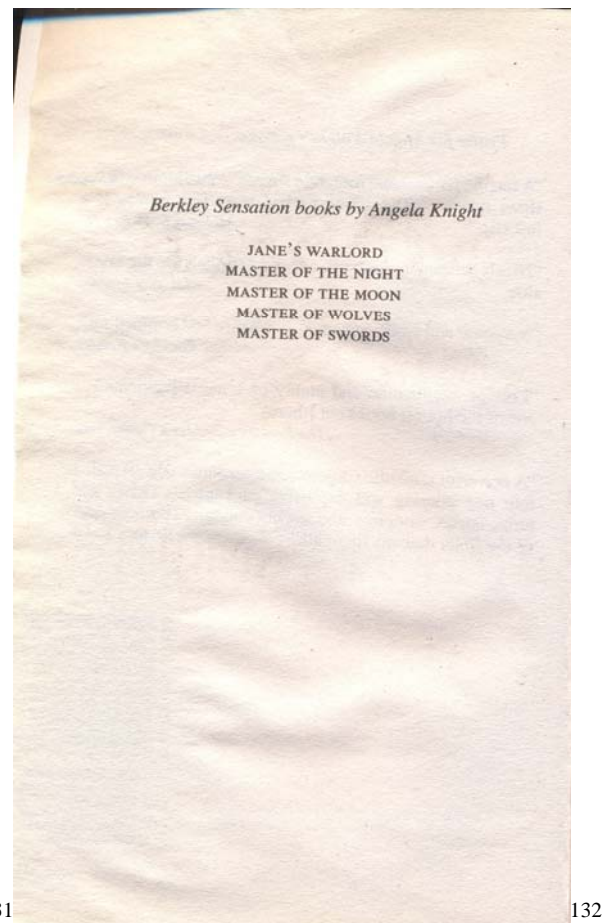
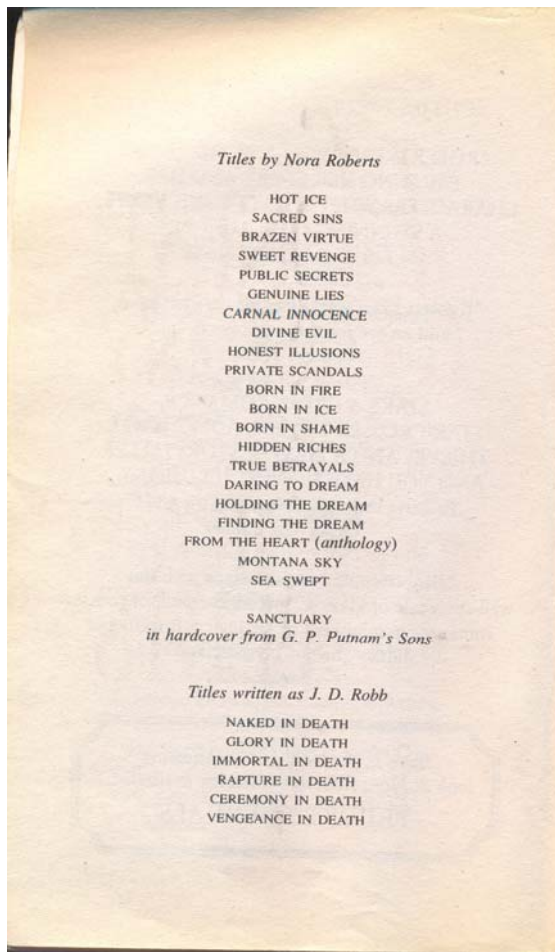
<sup>128</sup> Inside front cover, *Mr. Impossible*

<sup>129</sup> Inside front cover, *Out of Control*

<sup>130</sup> Inside front cover, *Sacred Sins*, Nora Roberts, Bantam Books (1987)

they also again increase the performative presence of and focus on the author's name in the single title peritext.

Another conventional element in the introductory pages of the single title romance novel is the **list of the author's novels or oeuvre page**, which is usually printed on the first left hand page after the opening quotes (depending on how many pages the quotes take up, this list is then often featured on either page two or four). This list is similar to the oeuvre list featured in the introductory pages of the category romance novel and indeed functions in quite a similar way.



The list has a commercial purpose as it rather subtly advertises the author's oeuvre. Although this commercial task is certainly important, the page does not adopt the typical, attention-drawing design style of an advertisement. Instead, it is executed in a quieter and more sober tone which constructs it as more informative than explicitly commercial. The page furthermore visually provides an instant impression of the extent of the author's experience, thus establishing in varying degrees a sense of "oeuvreship" and creative and authorial

<sup>131</sup> Oeuvre list, *Honest Illusions*, p. 4

<sup>132</sup> Oeuvre list, *Master of Swords*, p. 2

authority (cf. *supra*). As in the category romance oeuvre list, the kind of authorship and authority that is developed in this list is specific as the list is constituted exclusively by single title romance novels. Indeed, the single title oeuvre list contains only the author's other single title novels and excludes all her other works, particularly category romances. For example, at the time the above exemplified paperback edition of Nora Roberts' *Honest Illusions* was published in 1998 Roberts had written about one hundred category romance novels, none of which is mentioned on the list above, which instead features only the twenty or so single title romances penned by the author at that time. Yet if one of the functions of this list is to establish the author's experience and concomitant creative authority a longer and more substantive list, establishing more extensive experience and therefore a higher degree of creative authority, would seem to be only beneficial.

The question then arises why publishers so tenaciously hold on to format-exclusive oeuvre lists. The answer to this question lies in part in the commercial function of the list: publishers do presumably not wish to advertise books published by a competitor and since single title romance novels are often published by different publishers than categories these books are not included on each other's oeuvre lists. This logic only holds partially true, however, since single title oeuvre lists do sometimes contain single title romance novels written by the same author but published by a different company – in the Roberts example above, for instance, the first eight novels on the list are published by Bantam Books, while this edition of *Honest Illusions* is published by Jove Books. Commercial interests are then not the only ones at play in the composition of the oeuvre lists. A second influential factor here is, in my view, the fundamental conceptual distinction between the single title and the category romance novel that is made within the romance community. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, each romance format is predicated on its own, particular, format-specific aesthetic and compositional principles and it is this underlying conceptual distinction – one that is paramount in the popular romance genre – that is, it seems to me, essentially reflected in the composition of the oeuvre lists. Each oeuvre list performatively constructs a particular, format-based kind of authorship: category romance oeuvre lists construct the author *as a category romance author* while single title oeuvre lists establish the author's authority and creative licence *as a single title romance author*. This distinction is so fundamental that, apparently, experience in the other format is irrelevant as no acknowledgement of the author's other-format activities is included here. Within the popular romance genre, authorship of category romance novels is then conceptualized in a fundamentally different way from authorship of single title romances. This is an indication that the narrative and compositional

differences between the romance formats that I described earlier are conceptually quite significant.

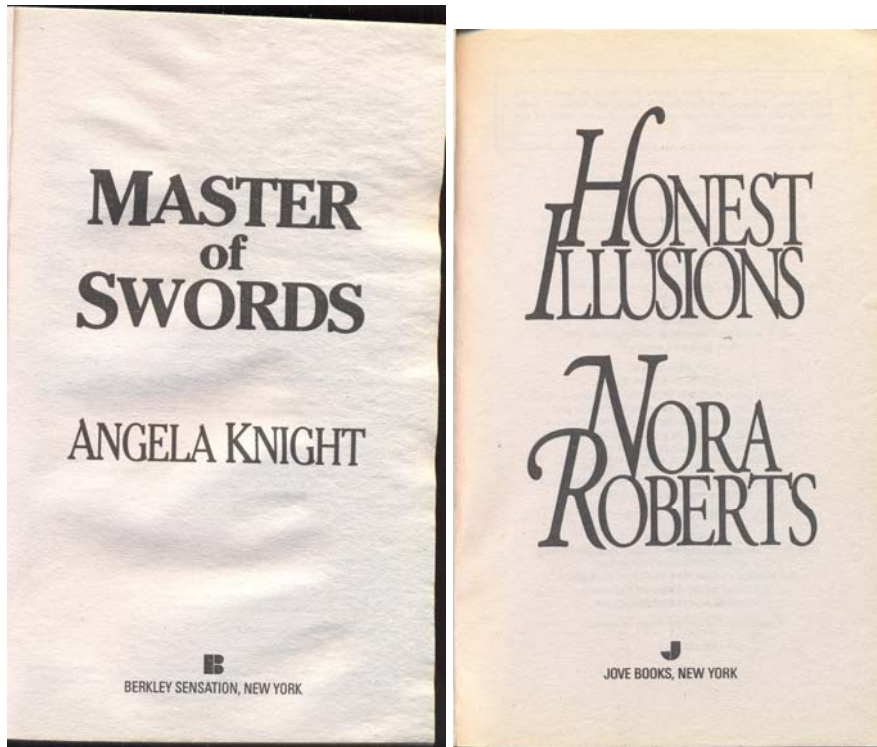
The authorial and creative authority that is implicitly constructed by the oeuvre list depends in large part on the length of the list – that is, on the number of books written by the author. The underlying idea is that the longer the list – the more books the author has written – the more experienced and creatively authoritative the author is and that this experience is in some way reflected in the story-text. This idea assumes, and in part depends on, the simultaneity of the list and the present story-text – that is, it assumes that the state of experience and authority reflected in the oeuvre list is the same as the one at work in the composition of the story-text. This is, however, not always the case for single title romance novels. When single title romance novels are reissued, the most recent, up-to-date version of the oeuvre list is included in the book’s introductory pages. Depending on how much time has passed between the original publication of the story-text and the reissue, this list might be substantially longer – and consequently create a substantially more experienced and authoritative sense of authorship – than it was at the time of the novel’s original publication. This is for instance the case in the *Honest Illusions* example above. When the novel was originally released in 1992, Roberts had written about eighty novels (including seven single titles); by the time this edition of the novel was published in 1998, however, Roberts had penned around 120 novels (including twenty-one single titles). Not only did Roberts’ experience as a single title author triple in the six years separating the original publication and this reissue, but – as we will discuss in much more detail in part II of this dissertation – the kind of single titles she was writing had also evolved quite substantially from gritty, thriller-like romantic suspense single titles (of which *Honest Illusions* is an excellent example) to more family-oriented romantic trilogies (all of which are included in the oeuvre list printed in the 1998 edition of *Honest Illusions*). Here a kind of mute breach or unmarked disparity then exists between the writer’s experience at the time of writing the novel and the sense of experience and authorship that is constructed by the oeuvre list in the introductory pages of the novel – pages which, I have remarked above, have as main function to further develop and perform the book’s identity.

Whereas this disparity is then unfortunate and potentially even misleading towards the book’s reader, in the case of the popular romance novel it often provides the scholar with one of the only (more or less) reliable ways of determining the date of the present book’s publication, that is the time of printing. This is particularly useful for peritextual studies such as this one because dating the publication of a book (not a novel) can be difficult. This is due

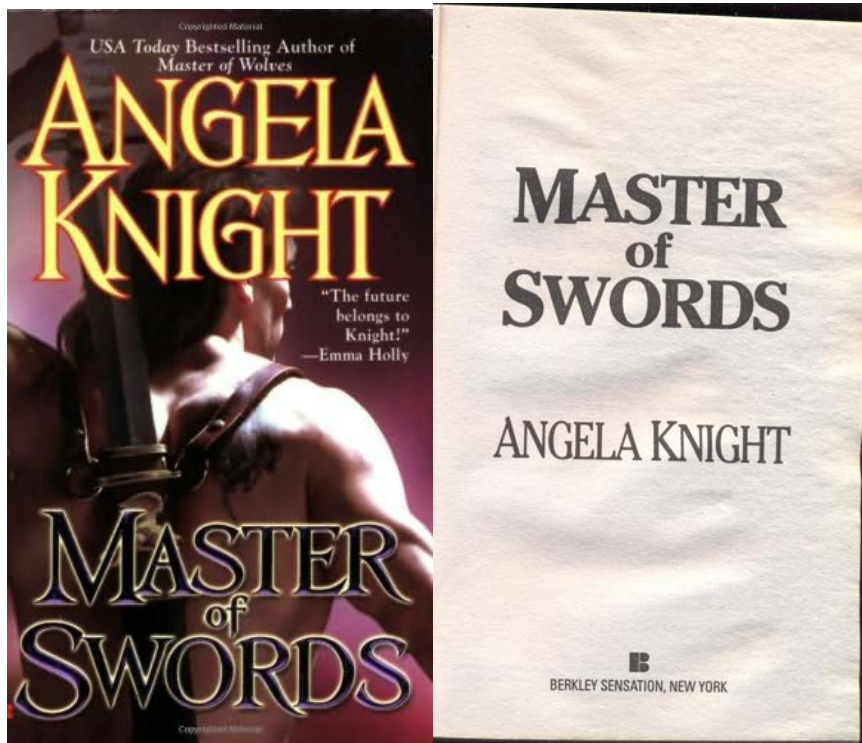
to the fact that the date of publication that is provided in the colophon exclusively relates to the edition of the story-text proper – it reflects all pertinent changes made to this text – but does not necessarily relate to the changes that might have been made to the book that do not influence the story-text as such. For example, in the colophon of the *Honest Illusions* edition used above the date of publication of the Jove paperback edition of the book is established as August 1993, while it is also noted in the colophon that the original hardback edition of the novel published in July 1992 by Putnam. The fact that a distinction is made between the hardcover 1992 date of publication and the paperback 1993 date indicates that something about the story-text was changed between the 1992 and 1993 edition; indeed, the colophon includes the following remark: “This Jove book contains the complete text of the original hardcover edition. It has been completely reset in a typeface designed for easy reading and was printed from new film.” Although it is then explicitly pointed out that no content-related changes were made (“the complete text” is reproduced), the *peritextual* changes made to the story-text proper (resetting of text and new typeface) are reflected in the inclusion of and distinction between the two dates of publication. That 1993 is provided as the most recent date of publication in the colophon of this print of the book indicates that since 1993 no changes (either textual or peritextual) were made to the story-text proper. It does not reveal anything, however, about the other (peritextual) elements of the book, which might have significantly changed from 1993 to 1998. Indeed, we can in fact only determine that this edition of the book was published in early 1998 by way of elements such as the oeuvre list – specifically in this example, the list concludes with *Sea Swept*, a Roberts single title first published in January 1998; Roberts’ next single title, *Homeport*, was originally published in March 1998 and is not included on this list, indicating that this printing of *Honest Illusions* was likely composed in or around January or February 1998. The oeuvre list, and other time-sensitive peritextual elements such as the advertisements in the back of a romance novel, are then indirect but rather reliable means of determining the printing date of a book, which is of course relevant in the study of the paratext. These peritextual elements are often used as such in the rest of this dissertation.

On the right hand side of the page with the oeuvre list we usually find the single title’s **title page**. As we can see in the examples below, this page features the conventional title page elements – i.e. the book’s title, the name of its author and the name and logo of its publisher – and arranges these in what we recognize as a conventional order – i.e. title and author’s name in the upper and middle regions of the page space and the publisher’s name and logo at the very bottom of the page.





As we note in the examples above, the precise size and place of the title and the author's name can differ from book to book, indicating that the single title's title page, unlike that of the category, is designed individually per book. Still, certain trends or common tendencies characterize the single title romance's title page. While the author's name is printed in equally big or bigger type size than the title in some single title romance novels (see the *Honest Illusions* example above), it is more common that the book's title is the visually and conceptually dominant element of the single title's title page (see the other example above). In this regard the design of the title page often deviates (slightly) from the single title front cover design, in which the author's name is frequently more prominent.



The increased focus on the book's title that marks the title page indicates and constitutes an increased peritextual focus, that functions performatively, on the specificity and singularity of the book's identity. Indeed, as I remarked above, the book title functions as a signifier for the book's singularity and, in combination with the author's name, definitively distinguishes the book from all other books (cf. supra). The one other standard element of the title page – the publisher's name and logo - normally takes up a small and inconspicuous place at the very bottom of the title page. While this reference is informative, it usually does not function as a genre marker for single title romance novels as it does in the category romance (cf. supra).

On the reverse side of the title page we usually find the single title's **colophon**, which functions in much the same way as the category romance's colophon (cf. supra). That is, it is the official mark that the book has been published and thereby made available to the public, it gathers and provides in a single page overview much of the book's official identifying information and it stipulates copyrights. As I noted above, the colophon also provides the pertinent information about the book's edition history. The page following the colophon might feature the start of the story text proper or it might feature other non-standard peritextual elements. If a single title romance novel has a dedication, for example, this is usually printed on the page at the right hand side of the colophon. Although dedications, like colophons, essentially function in much the same way in the single title romance novel than they do in its category counterpart (cf. supra), their more conventional placing on a separate page is of course an important difference with the peritextual conventions of the category

romance. Indeed, this more traditional and appropriate placing of the dedication indicates the increased performance and significance of individual authorship that overall marks the single title peritext in comparison to that of the category romance. Other miscellaneous elements that might be printed on the pages following the colophon and preceding the start of the story-text proper are determined on a book by book basis and often reflect the particulars of the author and/or the book. These include such things as an acknowledgement page in which the author thanks numerous people, a note on the spelling (not uncommon in historical romance novels, for example), a glossary of story-specific terms and/or proper nouns (a frequent feature in some paranormal romance novels) or note about the place of the following narrative in the chronology of a series, for example.

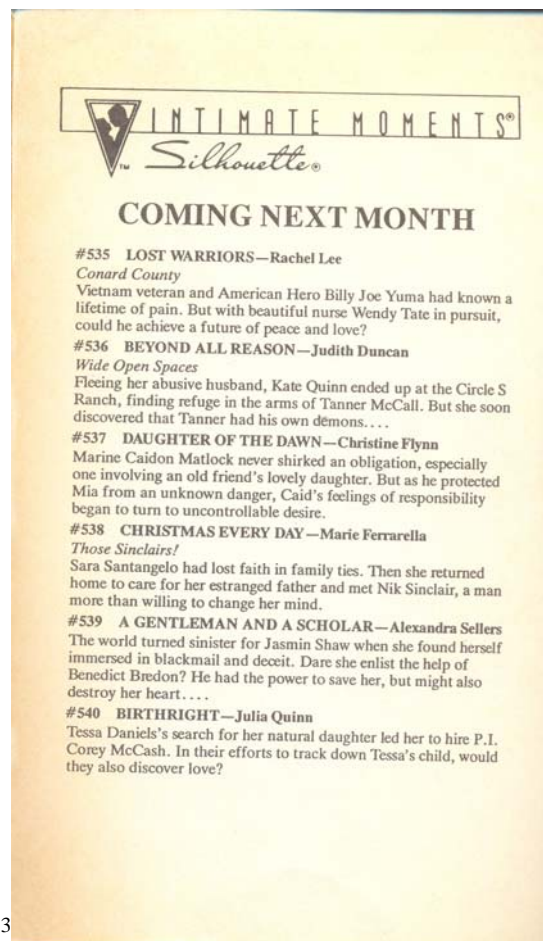
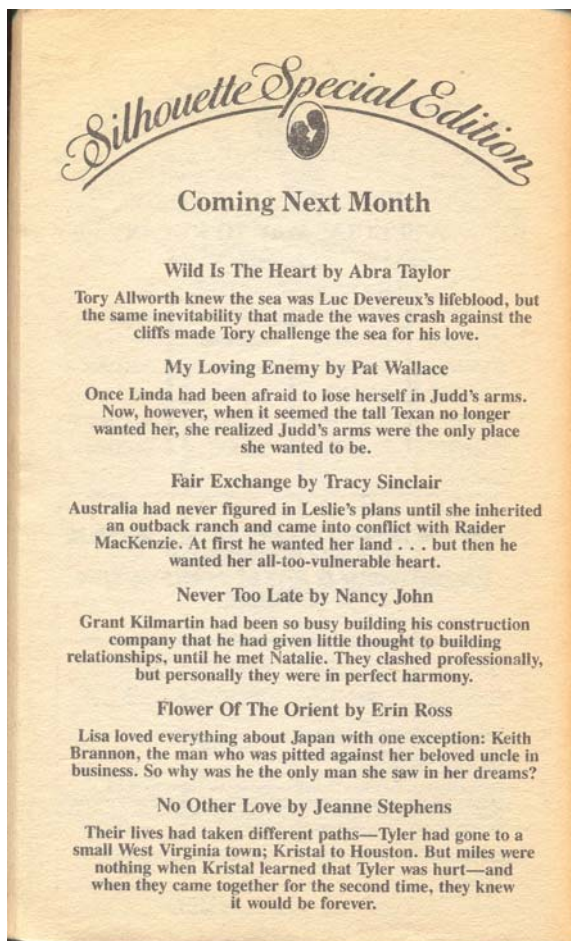
## **4.2 The Final Pages**

This brings us to the final pages of the novel. These pages constitute somewhat of a special zone since they are presumably read (if they are read at all, that is) after the reading act of the story-text is concluded. They then constitute a somewhat bizarre, transitory zone in the book: since the narrative reading act has been completed, the book has (successfully or otherwise) fulfilled its main function; it has been consumed and as such it supposedly ceases at that moment to be of interest to the reader. Yet at that very moment of finishing the reading act the reader might also be most reluctant to leave the world of the story. Indeed, the romance reader has presumably just experienced the emotional high(light) of the happy ending – the goal she has anticipated during the entire reading act – and, in an attempt to recreate that emotional satisfaction, she might be extra receptive to suggestions for new, similar reading experiences. It is this potential receptiveness on the part of the reader, we will see in the following discussion, the final pages of both the category and the single title romance novel mainly try to capitalize upon by redirecting the reader's gaze towards other books. In this process the different identification strategies that mark the peritext of the category and the single title romance novel respectively are once more performatively at work.

### **4.2.1 The Category Romance**

The final pages of the category romance novel are in more ways than one different from the rest of its peritext. Unlike the majority of category peritext, these pages are not composed according to a strict mould that changes little over time. On the contrary, both the concrete texts printed on these pages and the sequence in which they are organized change repeatedly

in the course of category publishing. Despite this extensive variation a few general observations and remarks about the content, form and function of these pages can still be made of course. The final pages of the category romance novel are overall marked by an outward focus that differentiates them from much of the rest of the book. That is, these are virtually the only pages in the book that are not in the first place preoccupied with providing more information about the present book, but that deal with objects outside of this book. This outward focus, perhaps due to the commercial imperatives that always drive the production of category romance novels, often takes the shape of texts that function essentially as advertisements. The majority of these ads provide publicity for other category romance novels, particularly those published within the same line. Indeed, one of the few consistently recurring elements in the category's final pages is the announcement of the books that will be published in the line next month.



Always placed under the eye-catching heading “coming next month” this ad provides the titles, author names and brief partial summaries of the next batch of books released in the book’s line, which reinforces the performance of the current book’s line (and thereby generic)


<sup>133</sup> “Coming Next Month”-page, *Reflections*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1983)

<sup>134</sup> “Coming Next Month”-page, *Nightshade*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1993)

identity. The form and content of all other ads changes from line to line and over time. They might include ads for (books published in) other lines by the same publisher. A Silhouette Special Edition novel might for example carry an ad for Silhouette's Desire line. Announcements and publicity might also be made for the publication of particular subsets of category romances, e.g. thematically related books (Christmas romances, for example), books by a particular author, miniseries, etc. Sometimes ads might even specifically focus on an individual category romance novel. Most of these book ads are concerned with future or recently published books – that is, books that are published around the same time or a little later than the book in which the ad is placed. Sometimes, though, an ad might consist of a list of already published books and include an order form via which these past publications can be purchased. In the 1980s and 1990s the final pages of the category romance novel usually also included a registration form with a special offer via which the reader could subscribe to the line; since the advent of the internet this page has all but disappeared from the final pages of the category romance novel, although the subscription system as such continues to exist. Besides advertisements for other books, category romance novels might also carry ads for objects associated with reading.

**Genuine Silhouette sterling silver bookmark for only \$15.95!**

What a beautiful way to hold your place in your current romance! This genuine sterling silver bookmark, with the distinctive Silhouette symbol in elegant black, measures 1½" long and 1" wide. It makes a beautiful gift for yourself, and for every romantic you know! And, at only \$15.95 each, including all postage and handling charges, you'll want to order several now, while supplies last.



Send your name and address with check or money order for \$15.95 per bookmark ordered to

**Silhouette Books**  
120 Brighton Rd., P.O. Box 5084,  
Clifton, N.J. 07015-5084  
Attn: Bookmark

Bookmarks can be ordered pre-paid only. No charges will be accepted. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

N. Y. State Residents, Please Add Sales Tax

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SEE-THROUGH STRAP Pages turn WITHOUT opening the strap

Built-in bookmark

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WIPABLE VINYL COVERED HOLDER FLAPS

10" x 7 1/2" - opens! Strap closed for easy carrying, too

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Bookmate Offer  
901 Fuhrmann Blvd.  
P.O. Box 1396  
Buffalo, N.Y. 14269-1396

Offer not available in Canada.  
\*New York and Iowa residents add appropriate sales tax.

<sup>135</sup> Advertisement page from the back, no page numbers, *Playing the Odds*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Special Edition (1985)

<sup>136</sup> Advertisement page from the back, no page numbers, *Time Was*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1989)

<sup>137</sup> Advertisement page from the back, no page numbers, *Times Change*, Nora Roberts, Silhouette Intimate Moments (1990)

Indeed, on pages such as the examples displayed above, publicity is made for products that are associated with books or the act of reading, such as a bookmark, a book rack or a so-called “bookmate” (a kind of strap that holds open the book). Such ads always include an order form via which the reader can immediately purchase the product. Besides a slew of advertisements, the final pages of a category romance novel sometimes feature other elements that encourage the reader to actively respond to the publisher – a questionnaire about the reader’s just-completed reading experience or a form to participate in a competition with romantic prizes (a cruise, free romance novels) might for example be included here.

It is then quite clear that the main function of the final pages of the category romance novel is a commercial one; the texts on these pages consistently praise a variety of category romance novels and romance-related products and incessantly urge the reader to obtain these new products – be it books similar to the one she has just read or other objects that might facilitate or acknowledge that reading act. Indeed, in these pages the commercial orientation of the category romance novel becomes perhaps most tangible as a sequence of advertisements rapidly succeed one another. Despite the prevailingly commercial orientation of these pages, they nonetheless also have other effects and functions. They, for one, again create an implicit but generically obvious intertextual horizon in which the present story-text can be placed and read. Indeed, although the reading act has presumably been concluded when the reader encounters these pages, the abundance of popular romance references performatively drives home the point (again) that this book is to be situated within the generic system of the popular romance genre. Furthermore, via, particularly, the advertisements for the other, reading-related products a specific (material manifestation of a) reading or book “culture” is created. That is, these ads implicitly construct the notion that these products – a beautiful lasting book mark, a book rack, etc. – would appeal to the reader and indeed fit her identity as a romance reader. These products are often (ostensibly) quite practical and facilitate the reading act. They often also (seemingly) provide the books for which they are supposedly used (i.e. romances) with a kind of cultural cachet. A book rack, for example, displays books (a function that is explicitly mentioned in the ad, see above); a fancy, romantic silver book mark enables the reader to mark the page she last read in style. These reading attributes then implicitly revalue the reader’s romance reading act and have as such the potential to improve the reader’s own experience of that act.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> The hardly subtle attempt on the part of the book’s producers to sort this effect can perhaps best be understood in view of the fact that romance readers are often said to experience a certain amount of shame or guilt over their reading act. This was most importantly indicated by Janice Radway’s now classic study of

The (repeated) attempts to elicit an *active* response from the reader in the various competitions, questionnaires and some of the ads fits within, it seems to me, the atmosphere of interaction that characterizes the romance community. Moreover, the reader's active response – participation in a competition, filling out a questionnaire, ordering the book mark advertised in the novels, etc. – likely increases her sense of involvement in the romance community.<sup>139</sup> Finally, because the specific content of final pages of the category romance novel changes more than many other peritextual elements of the book, these pages are often also indicative of some particular trends or issues that are at stake in the romance genre at the time of the book's publication. Specific ads might announce the launch of a new line, for example, or they might indicate the increasing popularity of a particular theme or the rising status of a particular author; questionnaires might indicate that publishers are actively seeking reader response at a particular time, etc. In short, these pages provide an interesting kind of snapshot of some of the main tendencies in the genre at the time of the book's publication.

#### 4.2.2 The Single Title Romance

This brings us, finally, to the final pages of the single title romance novel. As in the category romance, in the single title romance novel this is a zone of the book in which conventions, mandatory elements or compositional moulds are much less in effect than in many other parts of the romance novel's peritext. Indeed, this area of the single title book might differ significantly from one single title to the other in terms of size, form and content, each of which is largely determined on an individual, book-by-book basis. Some single title romance novels feature, for example, as many as a dozen pages in between the final page of the story-text proper and the book's back cover, while others do not have a single extra page as the last page of their story-text proper is also the last page of the book. While it is then, consequently, difficult and even futile to describe the non-existent conventions of this zone of the single title book in much detail, there are of course still some general trends that tend to influence the

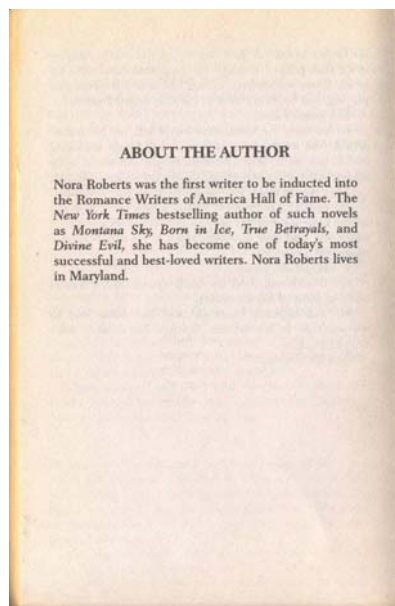
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romance readers, which reveals that although readers (vicariously) experience upbeat and happy feelings during the reading of popular romance novels, the act as such – the fact *an sich* that they read romance novels – is often surrounded by feelings of guilt or shame (Radway 86-92).

<sup>139</sup> This is of course also something that romance publishers strive towards for various reasons that have, essentially, commercial grounds. To name just a few: reader involvement and participation likely increases the reader's positive image of the books and strengthens brand loyalty, reader responses – which often require readers to provide basic identity details – provides the publishers with statistical information about what kind of people read their books; answers to questionnaires might additionally provide specific information about the reader's reading experience and her likes and dislikes, enabling publishers to adapt their stories accordingly and create books that appeal to the largest number of potential readers.

particular way in which these pages are executed in any one single title romance novel. It is these general trends and tendencies that are described in the now following pages.

Most frequently the final pages of the single title romance novel are marked by the same focus on the novel's author that characterizes much of the rest of the single title's peritext. This focus is most straightforward and explicit in the **author page** that is often featured in the back of a single title romance novel. The single title author page, which is often printed on the inside page of the back cover (cover three in Genette's terminology), takes on various forms.



As we can see in the examples above, single title author pages can consist of a short biographical text<sup>143</sup>, a photo of the author or a combination of both these elements. Obviously, the (visual) impact of each of these differs as author pages featuring a photo of the author make the person of the author much more visually present than those that do not include such a picture. Author pictures literally personify the author as they emphatically connect the author's name to (the photographic image of) a concrete individual. In equating the discursive construction of the author's name with the photographic representation of a person the cultural illusion/convention that the author is or coincides with a particular individual is visually maintained and reinforced. Via the author picture the author is concretized, individualized and transformed from a name into a particular person – a person

<sup>140</sup> Inside back cover, *Sacred Sins* (Nora Roberts). Scan.

<sup>141</sup> Inside back cover, *Out of Control*. Scan.

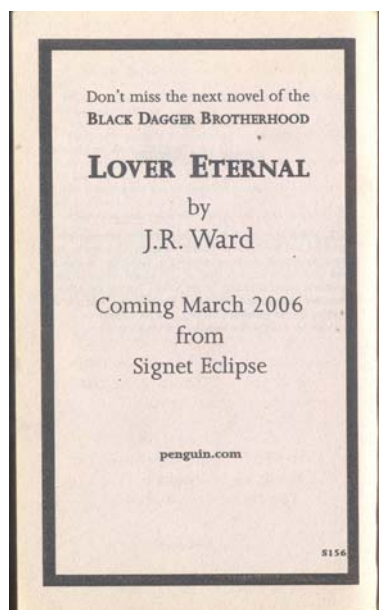
<sup>142</sup> Inside back cover, *Honest Illusions*. Scan.

<sup>143</sup> Unlike in category romance novels, in the single title romances the biographical text about the author has no consistent features, so no general claims can be made about this. In part II of this dissertation we will consider in more detail the various ways in which Nora Roberts is represented in the biographical texts features in her single title romance novels.

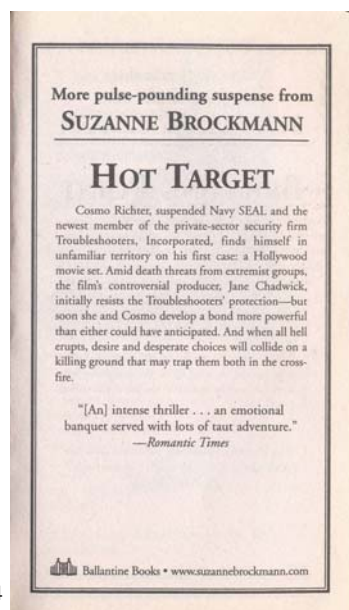


who, moreover, takes up a particular pose and radiates a specific attitude. As we can see in the examples above, author pictures of romance author's usually present the author as a friendly, smiling, approachable woman (see examples above), which is in line with the general sense of (seeming) connectedness and closeness that typifies the romance community (cf. supra). Often represented as an attractive but still average, normal woman in both the pictorial image and the biographic text, the romance author tends to appear above all as approachable and friendly – a woman, in short, the reader can identify with. Although this image is in line with the image of the romance author that is carefully crafted in the biographic texts traditionally featured in the category romance (cf. supra), the difference between the peritextual representations of the author in the respective author pages in the two romance formats – that is, between an author page with and one without a picture of the author – should not be underestimated. The single title's author picture not only strongly increases the visual presence of the person of the author (see e.g. the Nora Roberts example above), but by putting a face to a name also acknowledges the author's individuality to a larger and more relatable extent than the always purely linguistic representation of the author on the category author page.

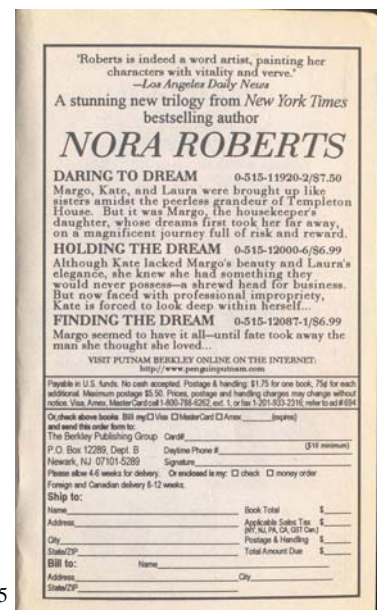
This focus on the novel's author often returns in the **advertisements** that also crowd the final pages of the single title romance novel. Very often, these ads make publicity for other single title romance novels by the same author. Again, such advertisements appear in different forms.



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<sup>144</sup> Advertisement in the back of *Dark Lover*. Scan.

<sup>145</sup> Advertisement in the back of *Out of Control*. Scan.

<sup>146</sup> Order form for other novels by Roberts in the back of *Honest Illusions*. Scan.

They might be quite basic and simply state, as in the Ward example above, the other novel's title, author and publisher; they might mention the titles of several of the author's other novels on one page and include, as the Roberts example above does, an order form via which copies of one or more books by the author can immediately be ordered – a feature that is reminiscent of the order form ads typically featured in (older) category romance novels – or these advertisements might consist of not only the other novel's title and author name, but also a partial summary of the story. This latter type of ad often further performatively reinforces the romance generic identity of the advertised novel by focussing on some of the easily recognizable generic narrative conventions of the popular romance novel (see the Brockmann example above). Overall, such advertisements implicitly support and further develop the notion of the author's "oeuvre" – they make present and concretize to a greater or lesser extent (some of) the novels that constitute this oeuvre – and further increase the peritextual presence of the novel's author. Indeed, in these pages the dominance of authorship over genre that marks the peritext of many a single title romance novel is shown to have also penetrated the most commercially functional pages of the single title book. The implicit assumption upon which these advertisements namely rest is that it is predominantly the author – and not the genre – which determines the appeal of a particular single title romance novel to a potential reader. In this regard these advertisement pages, and the single title peritext in general, differ significantly from the ads in the category romance novel which, we established above, are mainly predicated on the notion that it is in the first place the genre (and not, or only in the second place, the individual author) which fundamentally determines the appeal and identity of a romance novel to a reader.

Many single title romance novels also feature another type of ad, namely the **excerpt**. The excerpt is a relatively long piece of narrative text – usually anywhere between five and ten pages in length - that is excerpted from another single title romance novel, often written by the same author; it is included in the back of another single title, normally immediately following the end of the main story-text and functions, essentially, as a somewhat remarkable and elaborate form of publicity. Such an excerpt usually consists of one or more early scenes in which at least one (and often both) of the romance protagonists are prominently featured. Excerpt scenes often depict a conventional moment in the romance narrative – the first in-book meeting between hero and heroine is, for example, a frequently excerpted scene. They invariably end on a cliff-hanger – a tense moment the outcome of which is not included in the excerpt. Excerpts fulfil an obvious commercial function. They provide just enough narrative material from the new story to wet the reader's appetite – indeed, the reader has presumably

started immersing herself in this new narrative world and wants to know what happens next – but not enough to provide any kind of narrative closure. The particular placing of the excerpt immediately following the end of the main story-text proper implies, finally, also that to a certain extent the previous (romance) reading act is *repeatable*. It implicitly constructs the excerpt as part of a narrative that will give rise to a reading experience similar to the one the reader has presumably just satisfyingly completed.

While the focus on the single title's author is certainly common in the final pages of the single title romance story, this is not a universal practice. As I remarked above, this zone of the book is not subject to strong conventions and so while many single titles tend to carry author pages and author-focussed advertisements in the back, some do not. Indeed, some single romances barely have any peritextual final pages to speak of and instead simply end on the last page of the story-text proper. Others feature final pages that carry advertisements announcing single title romance novels published by the book's publisher but written by other authors. In these books the author is replaced as the dominant compositional principle according to which the advertisements are selected by genre. Indeed, ads in the single title books always exclusively advertise other single title romance novels. This indicates then that when in the composition of the single title romance novel's final pages – and in fact, the previous discussion has indicated, in the single title peritext at large – the author is for whatever reason considered to not be a strong enough commercial and identity strategy, the primary genre of the book – that is, popular romance – functions as a kind of fall-back commercial and identity strategy.

This raises the question, of course, which factors determine such performative identification strategies. To a large extent, I believe, the content of these pages is a direct reflection of the status of the author – that is, the extent to which the authorial identity that resides under the author's name is developed – in the community of readers targeted by the book. In the examples above, for instance, Suzanne Brockmann is already a well-known and very popular romance author when this edition of *Out of Control* is published. The extensive and quite detailed ads for some of Brockmann's other single title romance novels as well as the inclusion of an excerpt from Brockmann's next novel in the final pages of the book reflect this status, performatively reinforce it and try to commercially capitalize upon the author's high standing in the romance community. Reversely, advertisements for or excerpts of books by other authors are indicative of the relatively low status – less well developed authorial identity – the author of the present book has within the community of target readers. However, like all peritextual elements these final pages are not only reflections of existing

realities, but also play a performative role in constituting these realities. That is, the appearance of such ads and excerpts also play a role in actively raising the status of the author whose books are being advertised. Publishers, who are of course very aware of this (commercial) potential of the final pages, then frequently use these pages to actively try to raise the status of a particular author. In such situations these final pages are not in the first place a reflection of the author's already-existing authorial identity – status – but function as a performative tool in the development and realization of such a well-developed identity. Which function of the final pages is stronger is context-dependent and therefore to be determined, I believe, on a book by book basis.

## 5. Conclusion

This extensive discussion and analysis of the main peritextual conventions of the contemporary popular romance novel have shed light on the similar but different identification strategies that both underlie and perform the category and the single title romance novel's identity respectively. These discussions have not only revealed that the peritext of the category romance is strongly geared towards dominantly performing the generic and line-related identities, but have also shown the refinement and enormous consistency of this peritextual identification strategy. That is, almost every single element of the category romance's conventional peritext is preoccupied with performing this genre and line identity; it is an intricate system in which each minor and seemingly inconsequential element – from the publisher's logo on the spine to the ads in the back – has its particular place and function in performatively realizing this specific identity. This identification strategy, discussions in this chapter have indicated, not only performatively represents the category romance novel as a text that derives its most dominant characteristics from an already-existing pattern, but also as a variation for which the idiosyncratic elements that always, necessarily and inescapably accompany the execution of a pattern are of minor importance or consequence. Such a representation, regardless of how (in)accurate it is, encourages a perception of the category romance novel as a repetitive and formulaic aesthetic object lacking the in our cultural system much appreciated idiosyncrasy and originality that respectable literature requires. More importantly, it also *performs* such an identity.

The main identification strategies underlying the conventional peritext of the single title romance novel are quite different. Geared mainly towards performing a singular identity, the single title peritext is much more than the category peritext preoccupied with

performatively representing its texts as unique, original and idiosyncratic. Although its textual identity is always also performatively connected to an already existing, bigger identity – such as genre or authorship – that encompasses the single book’s identity, the singularity of the text is a structural focal point in the single title’s peritext. In this regard the single title differs significantly from the category romance novel, where singularity is of much less peritextual importance.

These two identification strategies not only determine many of the romance formats’ peritextual conventions but are also at work in their respective epitexts. This is the focus of the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 4: THE ROMANCE EPITEXT

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter the discussion of the conventions that characterize the contemporary popular romance genre is rounded off with a relatively brief consideration of some of the characteristic elements of the romance epitext. The epitext, as Genette defines it, is constituted by “any paratextual element [that is] not materially appended to the text within the same volume but [that is] circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space” (344). These are then elements that are in some way relevant to the (development of) the identity and/or the interpretation of the text, but that are spatially and physically separate from the book as a material object. Technically speaking then, *every* element that in however small a way contributes to the presentation and (development of) the interpretation of the text belongs to the text’s epitext. Examples of such epitextual elements include (but are certainly not limited to) interviews with the author, the publisher’s profile, a review of the text, an adaptation of the text in another medium, a passing comment on the text in a newspaper article, a discussion of the text on the internet and academic criticism on the text. In other words, the epitext is, as Genette indicates as well, quite extensive and potentially indefinitely diffuse (346). For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus my discussion on a number of epitextual elements that are directly related to and/or textual manifestations of some of the institutions that play a role in the development and performative constitution of the contemporary popular romance genre. More precisely, the discussion in this chapter focuses successively on the genre’s conventional publication and distribution practices, its most common review practices and the most important popular romance awards and the organization that distributes these genre-specific prizes.

The discussions in this chapter are, more than those in the previous chapters, bound to my own identity as a romance reader and the particular position I take up in the romance community. The knowledge, experience and perspective I have as a member of this community of some of the institutions surrounding and sustaining it come to the fore in these discussions. This knowledge, which I have developed over the course of four years in which I have both actively participated in this community and passively observed some of its goings-ons, is to an extent that of an “insider” – I am, after all, a romance reader. I also rely upon

both my identity as a scholar and the fact that I am not American – and these observations *exclusively* concern the American romance community and genre – to develop strategies to critically reflect upon these dynamics. Whereas the romance community and many of the genre’s institutions are based and/or accessible via the internet, I was also able to explore the physical dimension of romance institutions in the United States (such as its conventional distribution channels) during my yearlong study period in Chicago. This gave me to conduct fieldwork that has become the basis for many of the insights that are articulated in this chapter.

## 2. Publication and Distribution Practices

Like so many other paratextual elements, publication and distribution practices reflect and constitute certain aspects of textual identity. The ways in which a text is offered to the audience – where, how, when, by whom and under which label it is published and distributed – contains important, often culturally specific cues about the most conventional ways in which the text is interpreted and used; both the manner of publication and of distribution of the text then express and perform certain aspect of the its identity. The local supermarket, for example, is a distribution channel that reflects and constructs a different kind of text use and hence textual identity than a high-end bookstore. While the textual identity that is expressed and performed in such publication and distribution practices is sometimes of the generic order – the label “romance” in a bookstore reflects and performs the romance generic identity – it often concerns wider, less specific aspects of the text’s identity. Distribution via the supermarket indicates and constitutes the mass market and popular aspects of the text’s identity while distribution in the high-end bookshop is indicative and constitutive of a much more highbrow identity for the text, for example.

The most conventional publication and distribution practices that characterize the contemporary popular romance genre consistently reflect and constitute the popular – mass market, explicitly commercial – aspects of the texts’ identity. Often, the romance generic identity is also explicitly acknowledged and performed in the ways in which the novels are published and/or distributed. Furthermore, as in so many aspects of the genre, there are both important similarities and differences between the conventional ways in which category and single title romance novels are published and distributed respectively. While the significant similarities that exist between the two romance formats in this regard reflect and perform a sense of shared generic identity, the significant publication and distribution differences that



exist between the category and the single title romance also importantly differentiate (the identities of texts published in) the two formats from one another.

## 2.1 Category Romances

The publication and distribution practices typical of the category romance novel largely resemble those that typify the magazine. Like magazines, the category romance is released at a set moment – e.g. the first Monday of every month or the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month – and/or in a set rhythm – e.g. every month, six weeks or two months. Category romances are published in a batch of, usually, two, four or six novels which are all released simultaneously. Like magazines, category romances are distributed in mainly two ways: via a mail order subscription system and via regular mass market retail. Harlequin’s book club system functions much like a magazine subscription: the reader takes out a subscription, in this case to a particular line of category romances, and indiscriminately receives all novels published in the line immediately upon their release. Retail of individual category romance novels takes place in a wide range of retail spaces. A distinction can be made in these spaces between traditional literature outlets – such as various kinds of bookstores, from superstores à la Barnes & Noble and (pre-July 2011) Borders, to all kinds of independent bookstores and second hand shops – and, importantly, a vast array of retail spaces that are not part of the traditional literary distribution circuit. These include mass merchandise chain stores such as Target and Wal-Mart, supermarkets, drugstores, gas stations, convenience stores, department stores and newspaper booths. Nowadays, category romances are also distributed via a plethora of online retailers; amongst these are exclusive online retailers such as Amazon, online sections of national chains of superstores (Barnes & Noble and Borders both have online sections), and Harlequin’s own online webshop.

Not only the kind of retailer that offers category romances, but also the way in which these books are placed in the store can be important in the construction and performance of textual identity that takes place in these epitextual elements. In grocery stores, supermarkets, drug stores and gas stations category romance novels are often found in a rack placed either near the registers or near the magazine and newspaper section. When drug stores and supermarkets have a book section, they often place a rack with category romances in this section. Although rarely, sometimes this book section might be categorized according to genres; in this case category romances are placed in the “romance” section, of course. Bookstores deal with category romances in different ways. While no general observations can

be made about either independent or second hand bookstores – such bookstores have individual shelving systems – the shelving practices of the so-called “superstores” à la Barnes & Noble and Borders can be relevantly analyzed and discussed because one and the same system is adopted in each individual store of a particular chain.

Super bookstores or superstores are big and usually national chain bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and (pre July 2011) Borders that offer a wide selection of books, magazines, CDs, DVDs and other merchandise and cater to a very large and diversified audience. They are usually organized largely on the basis of distinctions between different media and different genres. Thus, there are for example separate sections for romance, mystery and fantasy novels. Superstores, my research indicates, consistently shelve category romances in a somewhat peculiar way. These books are always placed *in* (or very near) the romance section of the store, but never *on* the romance shelves proper. Instead superstores usually have a separate rack for category romance novels in which the novels are organized according to line. While this category rack is usually placed quite clearly in the romance section of the store, the rack is equally clearly physically and spatially separated from the actual shelves proper that make up this section of the store. This policy of placing the category romance in a rack that is physically and spatially unmistakably separated from the actual romance section of course both materially and symbolically differentiates the books in this add-on rack from the books on the shelves proper – even as, due to their shared placing in the romance section, these books are also generically associated with one another.

The direct, physical retail of category romances is furthermore characterized by the fact that these books conventionally have quite short shelf lives. Category romances are usually available on the shelves of shops only for as long as no new batch of novels in the line has been released – depending on the line this varies from four to eight weeks, at which time they are irrevocably replaced by the newer books. While such a short shelf life is quite unusual for books - which tend to have a shelf life of six months to a year and more – it is of course fairly typical of magazines and journals. The category romance novel’s short shelf life is part of a number of paratextual elements – including its material properties as discussed in the previous chapter – that make the category romance into a very temporary and even transient material and cultural artifact.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Today this construction of the category romance is partially disrupted by the online retail in which category romances are available for a considerably longer time. Both Harlequin itself and other online merchants such as Amazon offer a wider selection of category romance novels than only the most recent batch of the line. Harlequin seems to offer the books from the last three months/batches, while Amazon offers category romances that were published years ago. Although these online retail practices are an important aspect of the distribution

Like the rest of the paratext, these conventional publication and distribution practices both reflect and constitute particular aspects of the category romance's textual identity. The publication of categories in batches or groups reflects the extensive narrative similarity between the individual books in a line; of course it also stimulates the interpretation of these books as very similar to each other. This notion is further emphasized by the distribution via the line's book club, which is a commercial technique predicated on the notion that the line identity takes precedence over the individual qualities of a particular book. The explicitly commercial character of the category romance is also clearly reflected in and constituted by the format's conventional publication and distribution practices. That category romance novels are available "wherever and whenever women shop" – the phrase has been one of Harlequin's tag lines for decades – clearly marks the books as commercial literature and as commodities; at the same time this wide availability is of course also a reflection of the fact that these are texts that are suited for a mass audience. The commercial strategies that significantly influence the publication and distribution strategies of the category romance novel do not only have actual economic significance, but moreover also performatively place the category romance novel in a particular, often hierarchically interpreted position in the literary field. In other words, the distribution of category romances via channels that are unconventional for (critically appreciated) literature implicitly differentiates the books from this concept and category.

This differentiation of the category romance from the concept of literature is further reinforced by the fact that the here described publication and distribution practices construct the category romance novel as a very *temporary* product. Category romances are only briefly available on the market and are very quickly replaced by the newer, more recent, more up-to-date batch of books which automatically if implicitly mark the previous batch as (out)dated. This distribution technique, in combination with the material properties of the category romance that mark the book as not particularly suited for longtime preservation, constructs the category romance novel as a temporary, even transient artifact. To a certain extent, and contrary to the notion that only a fixed and rigid formula drives the category narrative, this transience reflects the category's textual identity, which in certain ways indeed reflects the

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and concomitant performative identity construction of popular romance novels today, in the rest of this dissertation they are taken into account only sparsely because they were not yet common during the time Nora Roberts wrote category romance novels - which she did from 1981 until 2001.

spirit of the times in which it is published.<sup>2</sup> This sense of temporariness and transience that is thus attributed to the category romance novel contrasts (strongly) with the association of timelessness that is an (implicit) part of our cultural conceptualization of literature. To the extent that we consider literature as something that transcends time, the transience of the category romance novel marks it as non-literature. This performative identity construction is, it seems to me, further reinforced by the fact that the category romance's conventional publication and distribution techniques are so similar to those that typify the magazine form, which is a temporary publication that much more obviously does not belong to literature.

## 2.2 Single Title Romances

The publication and the distribution practices that are typical of the single title romance novel differ in some important regards from those described above for the category romance. As I noted in the previous chapter, single title romance novels are not published exclusively by Harlequin, but are released by various popular publishers. For single title romances the publisher thus functions less strongly – and often not at all – as a clear genre marker. On the whole, the single title's typical publication and distribution strategies are more closely modeled after those common for literature, although this does not automatically mean that the commercial or popular aspects of its identity are negated. On the contrary, commercial imperatives play an important role in shaping the publication and distribution strategies that are typical of the contemporary single title romance novel.

As the format name implies, the single title romance novel is published not in conjunction with a batch of other books at a particular moment in time, but solo, as an independent, individual book. Although single title romance novels do not, like categories, appear at set moments, the date of publication is of course determined in advance. For some single titles the publication date is determined quite randomly, while other single titles – particularly those that belong to a narrative series – are sometimes released in a particular rhythm. Every year or every six months a new installment of a series might be published, for example. The publication date is in the single title format increasingly used as a commercial tool. It is given publicity and both authors and publishers attempt to create sales-enticing

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<sup>2</sup> This notion of course problematizes and contrasts with the conventional interpretation of the category romance narrative as a form that is so thoroughly determined by rigid narrative conventions that it is virtually unmarked by time. This notion is, I argue in this dissertation, problematic since in certain respects category romance narratives do change over time in order to incorporate time-sensitive ideas. One of the areas in which this is most noticeable is, for example, the construction and representation of gender roles in category romance novels. This notion is much more elaborately discussed and illustrated in part II of this dissertation.

anticipation, excitement, and curiosity among the target audience.<sup>3</sup> Single title romance novels are distributed in ways both similar to and different from those typical of the category romance. While single titles are not available via book clubs to which readers can subscribe, they are prominently present in both direct and online book retail. Single titles are, more than category romances, available in bookstores. Superstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble usually have a large romance section, the shelves of which are exclusively stacked with single title romance novels. Often, there is quite a big selection of single title romances available in these stores. In a special promotional effort newly published single title romances are sometimes also placed in prominent, eye-catching places in the store such as a table near the entrance, in the middle of the store or near the registers. Category romances are never placed in such visually prominent, sales-stimulating spaces. Single titles are furthermore also available in second-hand bookstores and independent bookstores; the scope of the selection of single titles that is available in such stores is determined on an individual basis. Like categories, single title romance novels are also sold in places that are not part of the conventional literary circuit, such as mass merchandise chains, drug stores, convenience stores, grocery stores, mall book stores and gas stations.<sup>4</sup> Much like category romances, single title romances are placed in the literature – and, when there is one, romance – section of these stores.

While both conventional and non-traditional book retail outlets offer single title romance novels, there is usually a significant difference in the selection of novels they offer. Non-traditional outlets such as supermarkets and drug stores tend to offer a selection of single

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<sup>3</sup>That the publication date can function as quite an effective commercial tool has in recent time perhaps most obviously been demonstrated by J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series; the publication of a number of the later installments in this series was accompanied by intensive anticipation and a media frenzy that only further incited the hype surrounding the particular date of publication and that instantaneously catapulted each of these books to the very top of the bestseller lists. Although this sense of anticipation, excitement and curiosity is real, the extent to which it is also the result of carefully crafted publicity strategies that focus the attention on the particular date or moment of publication – by organizing e.g. midnight launch parties and readings in book stores – should not be underestimated. While it hasn't yet come to this in the popular romance genre – as far as I know, no midnight launch parties are organized to accompany the publication of a particular popular romance novel – in recent years romance publishers and authors have clearly grasped the commercial potential of a hyped publication date. More and more often extensive publicity surrounds the moment of publication of a single title romance novel. Often, the extent of these publicity strategies are indicative of the budget the publisher is willing to invest in promoting the novel and thus, indirectly, of the status and expected commercial power of the author and/or particular novel amongst the book's target audience.

<sup>4</sup> According to RWA's latest survey of romance readers' purchase behavior, romance novels are most frequently bought in mass merchandisers such as Walmart and Target (50.1% of romance readers indicate they buy new romance novels in such stores), followed by book superstores such as Borders or Barnes & Noble (48.8%), independent bookstore (31.1%), online book merchant (26.4 %), grocery stores (24.3%), warehouse clubs (21.7%), mall bookstores (21.3%), drug stores (16.1%), book clubs (12.4%) mail orders (10.5%), airport bookstores (9.4%), and convenience stores (8.1%). [RWA Readership Statistics 2009]. No distinction is made in this survey between category and single title romance novels.

titles that is usually limited to the most recently released books by the most popular and famous authors in the genre. This selection strategy is, it seems to me, likely a consequence of the fact that these retailers do not have a lot of shelf space for books and aim to fill the little space they have with the titles that are likely to sell best to the totality of the store's diverse audience. By contrast the selection of single title romance novels that is available in traditional bookstores is often quite a bit larger and more extensive. Although here too the author's fame and status impact the matter – considerably more and more prominent shelf space is devoted to famous and popular authors than to others – traditional bookstores, particularly superstores, do tend to also carry single title romance novels by less famous, less popular or less established authors. Unlike category romance, single title romances do not have an extremely short shelf life. They can be available in physical bookstores anywhere from six months to a year or longer, depending on the particular supply and demand dynamics of the individual store. As a rule, physical bookstores offer almost exclusively relatively recent (editions of) single title romance novels – overall, their selection is made up of novels released within the last year or so.<sup>5</sup>

As with the category romance, these typical publication and distribution strategies both reflect and construct parts of the single title romance's textual identity. Although via the above discussed practices the single title is, like the category, clearly and unapologetically conceptualized as a commercial product and a commodity – an identity that triggers a multitude of associations and implications regarding the nature and quality of the text – there are also subtle but important differences between the two formats in this regard. While the category's group-publication performatively emphasizes its similarity to a particular set of other novels, the single title's solo publication (re)presents it precisely as an individual book. The increasing attention for the single title's unique date of publication performatively reinforces this conceptualization. Single titles are, furthermore, much more prominently and extensively present in traditional bookstores than categories are; this presence performatively establishes the single title's identity as literature – an identity that for the category romance novel, we noted above, is to an extent disrupted in its typical publication and distribution strategies. This subtle, but in my view not unimportant, conceptual differentiation between the single title and the category romance is manifested most clearly (and symbolically) in American bookstores by the different physical and spatial placing of the two formats within

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<sup>5</sup> Here too the online book retail disrupts this pattern since online retailers such as Amazon tend to offer editions of single title romance novels that were published several years ago.

the romance section of the store. While category romances are placed in a separate, clearly added and often somewhat awkwardly placed rack, single title romances sit on wooden shelves that are clearly a structural part of the store proper and meant to display the bookstore's core merchandise: books. Both formats are placed in the romance section of the store – indicating clearly that they belong to the same genre – but the difference in status between the books on the shelves and those in the awkward, add-on rack is in a single glance obvious to anyone.

The use of the generic label “romance” in (book)stores to indicate and designate the generic identity of the books sold in this particular section of the store is of course a very important and influential epitextual element in the construction and performance of textual identity. The genre label “romance” functions in a similarly performative manner as it does when it appears on the cover of the book proper: in naming the genre to which the book belongs according to the producer of this label – i.e. the publisher or bookseller – this generic identity is also performed. A book is a romance novel in part because it is performatively *named* a romance novel. These labels are also expressions of the programmatic use of the text. Like all other paratextual elements, such generic labels function not only in a constitutive or performative manner but in principle also as a reflection of an already-existing textual identity: the “romance” label indicates that the texts presented under this label have textual and narrative features that are characteristic of the romance genre. In this regard, the generic simplicity of these labels can be problematic since it creates the impression of, and indeed actively performs, the existence of a singular generic identity. As we have established in a previous chapter, however, many popular romance novels feature narrative elements that are traditionally associated with a variety of different genres. This generic plurality or hybridity is usually ignored – and in fact negated – by the bookstore distribution system, which shelves books *only* in a single generic category.<sup>6</sup> This works in two ways: not only are the generically other narrative features in texts shelved as romance ignored or negated, but texts shelved

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and Borders a particular book is always shelved only in a single (generic) section of the store, regardless of the multitude of generic identities it might narratively perform; a particular novel is, for example, either shelved in the “mystery” section or in the “romance” section, but never in both. Although this shelving strategy is mainly motivated by practical and commercial considerations – it is easier for both customers and employees to find the books if these are located in only a single, well-determined place – it seems to me that the generic exclusivity of this system does in fact negate the existence of generically plural or hybrid identities since it implies that a text belongs exclusively to a single generic category. Moreover, very often this generic categorization is subsequently applied to an author's entire oeuvre. As is discussed more elaborately in part II of this dissertation, Nora Roberts' novels are, for example, always shelved in the romance section, despite the fact that many of her novels extensively feature mystery or paranormal narrative elements and would thus, in terms of their narrative identity, equally well fit the mystery or paranormal section. The curious connection that is created here between genre and author's name is discussed more extensively in part II.

under other generic labels (mystery, science fiction, detective, etc.) might also feature conventional romance narrative elements. An important tension then exists between the generically singular identity that can be represented in the performatively powerful bookstore classification system and the plurality of generic identities that a text often performs on the level of its narrative. Interestingly, this tension disappears in the online book retail space where texts are easily placed in several generic (and other) categories at the same time – proving, in the process, the semiotic limits of the physical bookstore’s categorizing system.

This categorization system finally also implicitly but nonetheless quite strongly makes the differentiation between popular literature – in America often referred to as genre fiction – and the opposite thereof, which I call critically respected literature. In the typical categorization system used by the (physical) bookstore popular fiction resides under clearly generic labels such as “romance”, “mystery”, “detective” and “fantasy/science fiction”. As discussed above, such labels name and perform a singular generic identity and thus imply that the identity of the texts they (re)present is dominantly determined by the genre to which this text according to the section label belongs. In other words, these texts are identified by and conceived of in generic terms and this implies, essentially, the existence of important and influential forms of similarity between them. Critically respected literature is, by contrast, usually placed under the label “general fiction” (or variations hereupon such as “fiction”, “novels” or “literature”). Although in the bookstore’s classification system this label is located on the same level as the generic labels and has a similar identifying function as the other generic labels, in literature’s taxonomic system the term and category “fiction” of course takes up a different – higher – position than the terms and categories “romance” or “mystery”. However, precisely because in the bookstores the two names – labels, categories – are used in a similar manner, the impression is created and performed – made real – that the texts categorized under the “general fiction” label lack a generic identity – that, in other words, their singular identity transcends the collectivity and similarity that genre identities imply. This classification system is, I believe, one of the most obvious elements that indicates – and performs – the substantially different ways in which popular literature and its opposite are used and conceptualized in contemporary culture.

### **3. Review Practices**

Reviews are another epitextual element in which a text’s generic identity is both expressed and performed. A review is usually both informative and evaluative; it provides information



about the text reviewed and evaluates this text on the basis of a number of values, norms and/or expectations that the reviewer adopts. These assessment criteria are usually determined by the context in which the review appears and the target audience for which it is composed. A review in the quality newspaper *The New York Times*, for example, discusses a text from the perspective of how the text might appeal to *The New York Times*' average reader and likely articulates quite a different evaluation than a review of the same text that appears in the popular magazine *People*, which targets a different type of reader.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the selection of the texts that are reviewed in a particular publication is also heavily geared towards the interests of this publication's target reader, so usually *The New York Times* and *People* magazine will not review the same texts. As such, reviews are not only explicit assessments of particular qualities of a text, but they are also an articulation of the target audiences and communities to which the text is considered relevant. Reviews are, in other words, expressions of the use of the text and are as such an important factor in the development of the text's generic identity or identities. A discussion of the conventional review practices that characterize the contemporary popular romance will shed light on the different ways in which the popular romance generic identity is performed in reviews of these novels. Here too, as in many other aspects of the genre, the similarities and differences between the category and the single title romance novel are important to the standard review practices of the genre.

### 3.1 In Genre-specific Publications

Both category and single title romance novels are reviewed in what I call **genre-specific** publications such as fanzines and romance review websites; these are publications (or virtual spaces) that are devoted to the discussion of popular romance novels and that are specifically targeted at popular romance readers. One of the most important and most famous romance fanzines is a magazine generally known by the acronym "RT", which stands for *Romantic Times*.<sup>8</sup> *Romantic Times*, which was founded in 1981 by romance reader Kathryn Falk as an

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<sup>7</sup> Note that the term "reader" here refers to a kind of identity – a set of norms, values, expectations – that is assumed in the reading process; an individual can easily assume multiple of such "reader" identities. In other words, one person can simultaneously be a *New York Times* reader and a *People* reader, but presumably reads both texts with different expectations and norms in mind.

<sup>8</sup> *Romantic Times* is now discussed as an exemplary case study of the popular romance fanzine because it is the most important, famous, influential and enduring romance fanzine. While there are other such publications – *Affaire de Coeur* is one – the number of romance fanzines seems to have diminished over the years. In 1998 Annick Capelle reports that of the six main "romance newsletters" that apparently existed besides *Romantic Times* in 1983 only three seem to have survived by 1996 (12). Although Capelle indicates that "by the time this [i.e. her own] study gets completed [these fanzines] might have already disappeared and others might have begun" (idem), a brief online search in 2011 indicates that besides *Romantic Times* only *Affaire de Coeur* survived and no new fanzines seem to have been established. A logical explanation for the apparent decline of

amateurishly published 24 page tabloid newsletter about popular romance novels, is now a glossy 130 page magazine that is released monthly with an average print run of 70,000 copies (Shah). While each issue features a number of articles about a variety of topics that likely interest popular romance readers (interviews with authors, the newest trends in the genre, discussions of book covers, etc.), its core business is book reviewing. Each *RT* issue contains up to 300 reviews of both category and single title popular romance novels and, increasingly in the last decade, novels belonging to other popular genres.<sup>9</sup> Besides such hardcopy fanzines, romance review websites also increasingly offer important spaces in which both category and single title romance novels are seriously reviewed. Over the last decade a plethora of such websites have been launched, many of which stagnate or disappear again rather quickly. Of those with staying power, the most famous and popular ones include the aforementioned blog

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paper-published romance fanzines seems to me to be the advent of the internet and the increasing development of fan-run websites and blogs that essentially fulfill similar functions as hardcopy fanzines but are often easier and cheaper to produce.

<sup>9</sup> While *Romantic Times* still predominantly reviews popular romance novels, its exclusive focus on this genre was abandoned in 2002 in order to reflect, they maintain on their website, the increasing presence of other genres within popular romance novels and popular romance authors' more frequent ventures into genres other than romance ("RT History"). To reflect this change in reviewing content the magazine's name was officially changed into *RT Book Reviews' Bookclub* (idem). Despite this official name change the magazine is still widely known as "RT". And although *RT* now officially claims that "romance [is] only a section of the magazine and other genres [are] equally represented" (idem), a brief perusal of the issues published in 2009 and 2010 indicates that while some novels belonging to other genres are indeed included in the review section, popular romance clearly remains the dominant focus in both the feature articles and the reviews proper. This is why, in my view, *RT Book Reviews* continues to qualify as a popular romance fanzine.

*Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*<sup>10</sup>, and the review websites *Dear Author*<sup>11</sup> and *All About Romance*<sup>12</sup>.

Reviews in these various publications conventionally consist of a number of components. All review venues provide an overall evaluation of the reviewed text that is expressed in a single coded sign, usually either a letter – *Smart Bitches*, *Dear Author* and *All About Romance* give grades from A (best) to F (worst)<sup>13</sup> – or a number of stars (in *Romantic Times*, for example). The romance *subgenre* to which the reviewed text belongs is usually also explicitly named. Interestingly, very often this naming of the text’s subgeneric identity does not include the term “romance”; a reviewed text’s genre designation on *Smart Bitches*, *Dear Author* and *All About Romance* consists only of the term that establishes the text’s subgeneric identity – e.g. “paranormal”, “suspense” or “historical”. This manner of designating subgeneric textual identity – and specifically the revealing fact that romance is explicitly not

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<sup>10</sup> This blog (<http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php>) first went online in 2005 “as a community of romance readers eager to talk about which romance novels rocked their worlds, and which ones made them throw the book with as much velocity as possible.” (“Who Are You Crazy Bitches?”). It is run by romance readers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan (although since 2009 the vast majority of posts is by Wendell), who have also authored the already mentioned book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels* (Fireside, 2009). While initially mainly a romance review website, over the last few years posts on *Smart Bitches* have increasingly addressed various issues that are important to the romance community, including new trends in the genre, positive or negative portrayals of popular romance in other (mainstream) media, interviews with romance authors, agents or editors and the popular request category “Help a Bitch Out (HaBO)” in which readers request help from other readers in locating particular popular romance novels. Reviews are mainly written by Wendell, who is known for her snarky, humorous tone and critical but fair attitude. Occasionally pieces by guest reviewers are posted. The vast majority of novels reviewed on *Smart Bitches* are popular romance novels, but sporadically reviews of novels in other genres are put up. This departure from the popular romance genre is always indicated by categorizing these posts in the section “But... that’s not really about romance novels.”

<sup>11</sup> Founded in April 2006 by romance reader Jane Litte and her friend known as “Jayne”, *Dear Author* (<http://dearauthor.com/>) is primarily a romance review website, although its posts also tend to include romance industry news, author interviews and, particularly, discussions of ebooks and various other sorts of reading related technologies. While Jane and Jayne provide most of the site’s content, there are about ten other regular reviewers who frequently review books in particular romance subgenres. *Dear Author* adopts a more serious, less snarky tone than for example *Smart Bitches* and is known for its reviews of less central or prototypical strands of the genre – it regularly reviews gay male and BDSM romances, for example.

<sup>12</sup> Originally created in 1996, *All About Romance* (<http://www.likesbooks.com/>) is one of the oldest and biggest romance review websites. Containing over 7.000 reviews of popular romance novels and posting up to 55 new reviews every month (“Review Hub”), the site presents itself as “a professional[ly run] publication” (“Our Mission”). It currently employs a staff of over a dozen reviewers and, unlike many other romance review websites, it regularly posts two or more reviews of one novel by two or more different reviewers. While reviewing popular romance novels is clearly its core business, *All About Romance* also features a wealth of other romance-related information, from author interviews, over blog discussion about topics in the romance genre to top 100s of the best romance novels of all times. *All About Romance* is particularly well known for its interaction with romance readers, featuring various so-called forums on which readers can post and interact and for regularly organizing various polls amongst its readers.

<sup>13</sup> Only *Dear Author* provides a key for its use of this in the U.S. standard evaluation code, stipulating the following explanation of the grades: “A: I loved it and would cry if someone took it from my library. I would need lots of chocolate to get over its loss. B: It’s good and I would buy it again, given the chance. C: Eh. Not bad but I probably would never read it again. D: I want my money back. F: I want my money back and repayment for the time wasted reading it. D[id]N[ot]F[inish]: does this really need an explanation?” (“For Readers”)

named as part of the text's generic identity – indicates, it seems to me, that the romance identity of the reviewed text is assumed as a prerequisite, always-present part of the identity of the texts reviewed in these venues. The presence of the popular romance identity is so self-evident that explicitly naming it is superfluous; the (narrative) categorization of the text then immediately (and tacitly) designates the subgeneric level.<sup>14</sup> Some review venues also consistently label the level of sensuality of the reviewed text; *Romantic Times* and *All About Romance*, for example, differentiate between three and five levels of sensuality respectively.<sup>15</sup> Each popular romance novel reviewed in these venues is assigned the appropriate sensuality label. Both the naming of the reviewed texts' subgeneric identity and the coding of the level of sensuality indicate how established these strategies of narrative diversification are in the popular romance genre and their importance as parameters of narrative categorization within the popular romance genre.

Besides such coded information, romance reviews also consist of a written text in which the novel's story is (partially) summarized, its narrative analyzed and the overall evaluation of the reviewer motivated. In these discussions the (often tacitly assumed) romance identity of the reviewed text holds a prominent place since the text is usually primarily evaluated *as a popular romance novel*.<sup>16</sup> Reviewers tend to pay particular attention, for example, to the reviewed narrative's incorporation of the conventional narrative elements of the genre – elements such as the anguish of the dark moment, the perceived authenticity of the declaration of love, the depth and credibility of the conflict, etc. are regularly discussed and evaluated in these reviews. Often inclusions of classic romance plot lines (amnesia, secret baby, revenge, etc.) or recognizable romance character types (the alpha hero, the smart-mouthed heroine, etc.) are referred to in ways that clearly assume the reader's familiarity with both the concepts and the terminology that prevail in the romance community.<sup>17</sup> In reviews of subgeneric romance novels the development of the subgeneric narrative traits is often also

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<sup>14</sup> This not the case for *Romantic Times*, which does explicitly name romance as part of the identity of the text it is reviewing. This is a logical consequence, it seems to me, of *RT*'s self-proclaimed widening of its reviewing scope to regularly include popular novels that do not belong to the popular romance genre.

<sup>15</sup> Concretely, *Romantic Times* differentiates between “Scorcher – borders on erotic. Very graphic sex. Hot – Most romance novels fall into this category. Ranges from conventional lovemaking to explicit sex. Mild – May or may not include lovemaking. No explicit sex.” This key explaining the rating system is placed at the top of every page containing reviews in *RT*. *All About Romance* differentiates between “kisses”, “subtle”, “warm”, “hot” and “burning” levels of sensuality (“Sensuality Ratings Guide”).

<sup>16</sup> An exception to this rule is obviously the review of a book that is explicitly recognized as not being a popular romance novel.

<sup>17</sup> A review might for example state that a particular novel offers a version of “the secret baby plotline” without explaining what this plotline precisely entails; both the concept and the terminology are assumed familiar to the reader of the review, who is then implicitly assumed to be a member of the romance community and as such familiar with its community-specific concepts and discourse.

evaluated; the reviewer examines, for example, the level of suspense in romantic suspense narrative, the world building in a paranormal romance or the historical accuracy of a historical romance narrative. Although the reviewed texts are often also judged on broader parameters that are not specific to the popular romance genre – the style of writing, the quality of the language that is used, plot development and cohesion, motivation of the characters, etc. – the (sub)generic parameters often seem to play a more important role in the final evaluation of the novel.<sup>18</sup>

Although all the romance review venues here discussed share the popular romance generic identity as a core evaluative framework in the majority of their reviews, there are also important differences between the websites and the fanzine *Romantic Times*. One such difference regards the different ways in which they deal with, and performatively conceptualize, the romance format. Whereas the websites here discussed review category and single titles in a very similar manner, *Romantic Times* approaches the two formats in a decidedly different way. *Smart Bitches*, *Dear Author* and *All About Romance* do not fundamentally distinguish between the review act of the category and the single title romance novel. Reviews of romance novels in both formats are similar in terms of selection – out of the thousands of romance novels published each year only a strictly selected small number of novels are reviewed on these websites –, in terms of form – category and single title reviews are equally long and have a similar layout – and in terms of content – they are equally thorough, analytical and critical. This does not mean that the websites fail to recognize the reviewed text’s format identity; to the contrary, often this is both explicitly mentioned and implicitly indicated via an image of the front cover that is posted alongside the review text. The format identity moreover also informs part of the evaluation criteria the reviewer adopts; category romances are, for example, judged on the inclusion of the line’s identifying features and their overall handling of the particular creative balance between conventionality and variation that fundamentally characterizes the category format.<sup>19</sup> But their conceptualization

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<sup>18</sup> This is expressly not the case, however, when the more basic elements of the reviewed text are found lacking; bad writing skills, rambling plots or underdeveloped characters are cause for a negative review even if the story does manage to more successfully include particular romance elements. This latter situation is unlikely, however, since a successful representation of the conventional romance elements in part depends of course on basic writing and narrating skills.

<sup>19</sup> Consider for example these two revealing statements from a *Dear Author* review of two category romances in the Harlequin Presents imprint (a line known for its classic, sweet, fairy-tale like tone): “There are two problems with the story for me, the first being believability. Oh, *I know that seems like a crazy accusation to level against an H[arlequin] P[resents], a series that pretty much thrives on the fantastical* more than even paranormals but in bringing together two disparate individuals, the circumstances of their connection needs to be authentic.” (my emphasis, “Review: The Heir from Nowhere by Trish Morey and The Secret She Can’t Hide by India Grey”)

of the review act as such does not differ between the romance formats; category reviews are as critical, long, thorough and analytical as single title reviews.

This is not the case for *Romantic Times*, which reviews category romance novels in a much more superficial way than single titles. This is apparent in the considerable difference in length of the review text – which averages around 150 words for the category versus 350 for the single title –, the different structure and content of the reviews – category reviews contain much more story summary and much less actual analysis and evaluation than single title reviews – and a visibly different lay-out, which immediately displays and signals the different format to the *RT* reader. Category reviews are, moreover, all placed together in a single section of the magazine aptly titled “series romance reviews” whereas single title reviews appear throughout the various other sections of the review pages, which are categorized on the basis of (sub)genre. Finally, single title romance novels are selected for review by *Romantic Times* – implying a kind of discrimination that is predicated on the novel’s particular properties and qualities – whereas category romances are not. That is, *Romantic Times* indiscriminately reviews *all* category romance novels that are published in a given month without selecting one above the other. This lack of selection, in combination with the superficial content and monotone layout of the *RT* category review, is indicative of *Romantic Times*’ underlying conceptualization of the category romance novel as a text that lacks singularity and uniqueness and whose identity is instead primarily determined by the already-existing larger wholes to which it belongs. By performing this conceptualization in its standard review practices, I argue, *Romantic Times* performatively contributes to the perpetuation of this conceptualization of the category romance. The review websites here discussed do, to a certain extent, the reverse: by reviewing the category romance in a similar way as the single title romance, they implicitly but performatively conceptualize the uniqueness and singularity of each category romance novel and thus effectively counter the prevailing conceptualization of the category romance novel.

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Reviewer Jane clearly indicates here that in formulating her judgment of the novel she uses as an evaluative parameter Harlequin Presents’ particular narrative profile as a line that offers dreamy, less realistic romances. Another example from the same review: “The amnesia of Cristiano’s is used to affect the right amount of agnst [sic]. Oh, the pain that Kate feels when Cristiano treats her like he has never seen her before is delicious. I ate it up with a spoon (*I know this sounds macabre but this agnst [sic] is exactly the reason I read HPs*). What was surprising was the direction the story took. *In many ways it was unpredictable even though it incorporated many of the HP mainstays – the secret baby, the amnesia, the marriage of convenience, misunderstandings.*” (my emphasis, idem). Here the novel’s success at incorporating a line characteristic – the “agnst” – is celebrated. In the latter part of the statement the reviewer commends the novel for successfully incorporating the category’s particular creative balance between conventionality (“it incorporated many of the HP mainstays”) and variation (“it was unpredictable”). This is, finally, also a good example of reviewers’ use of the concepts and discourse specific to the romance community (“the secret baby ... misunderstandings”).

Another important difference between the review websites and the fanzine regards the rigor with which they evaluate the reviewed texts. While we should be careful with overgeneralizing remarks in this regard, it seems quite clear that on the whole the here-discussed romance review websites are more critical and adopt higher (or at least different) standards than the fanzine *Romantic Times*. This is apparent in both the respective average grading curves of the review agencies and the overall tone of their review-texts. Whereas the websites on average award a B or C grade,<sup>20</sup> *RT*'s reviews average on three ("Enjoyable – Pleasant Read") or four ("Compelling – Page-Turner") stars (Capelle 366). Even more important than the overall grade is the tone and content of the review text. The review websites often adopt an unapologetically critical-but-fair tone in their reviews; they are not afraid to point out (even dwell on) problematic aspects of the reviewed text and offer both outright criticism and praise where they see fit. *Romantic Times*, by contrast, is more inclined to adopt a positive tone in its reviews and tends to downplay or skim over problematic or unsatisfactory elements in the reviewed text. Although occasionally the fanzine does print rather negative reviews, these are on a whole (considerably) less common and less severe than negative reviews that appear on the websites.

While it falls outside the scope of the present study to thoroughly examine the myriad of reasons for these diverging evaluations, I tentatively want to suggest two potential reasons that might underlie these differences. A first one is simply that the review venues might be addressing a different kind of romance reader who has different expectations of the romance novels she reads. Indeed, as I remarked in the introduction of this dissertation, romance readership statistics consistently point towards the demographic diversity of romance readers; it then seems likely to me that the different evaluations formulated by the review websites and *Romantic Times* are a reflection of these subtle differences in their respective target audiences.<sup>21</sup> A second reason for these differences has to do, it seems to me, with a diachronic

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<sup>20</sup> *All About Romance* provides detailed statistical information about this aspect of its review practices; B is most often rewarded on this website (42.33% of the reviews), followed by C (31.84%) and D (13.97%). Only a small minority of reviews fall in the top A category (8.65%) or the bottom F category (3.21%) ("Reviewer Scoreboard."). *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* similarly indicates that most of its reviews are a C, followed by a B ("Can I send my book to review?"). *Dear Author* does not provide this kind of information.

<sup>21</sup> This notion is furthermore supported by the fact that a considerable amount of romance readers likely does not partake in the online romance review practices and romance community constituted by the romance review websites. Although to my knowledge there are no specific statistics available on the percentage of romance readers that is active in the online romance community, in a blog post on *Smart Bitches* one unnamed former romance bookseller estimates that "well over 50% - somewhere in the neighborhood of 55 to 75%" of romance readers do not partake in the online romance community at all ("Talking About People Who Aren't Here"). While it is difficult to judge the accuracy of this estimation, even if this is a gross overestimation it is likely that a considerable amount of romance readers do not visit review websites such as the ones discussed here, but do read a magazine like *Romantic Times*.

development in the overall tone of the romance community. As I remarked earlier, Annick Capelle has pointed out that in the course of the 1980s and (early) 1990s the romance community's prevalent tone was "a spirit of camaraderie and sorority" (124) in which community-internal critical voices were often quite silent. Perhaps in a reaction against the fact that romance texts, readers and authors were the object of widespread disdain in the culture at large, it was rather uncommon in the romance community to openly voice strong criticism of texts or fellow romance readers or authors. *Romantic Times*, founded in 1981, was a constituting agent in the development of this community tone and continues in this tradition to this day. The review websites, by contrast, were founded at a time when this overwhelmingly positive and optimistic tone had for some become more stifling than empowering. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan indicate, for example, that it was precisely because they "found most reviews of romance novels online were unfailingly too nice, [n]ot nearly critical enough, and in [their] opinion likely to recommend highly books [they] both loathed" (198) that they initially launched their own review website, knowing quite well their "grading curve ... was harsher than most" (idem). The different evaluations often formulated by the review websites and *Romantic Times* might in part, it seems to me, still be lingering results of their divergent origin and history.

### 3.2 In Mainstream Publications

While the vast majority of reviews of popular romance novels appear in what I have called genre-specific venues, sometimes romances are also reviewed in **mainstream** publications. In this context I define the term "mainstream" as referring to review venues that do not focus on a particular genre and consequently do not target a generically specific readership. Of course, such a broad definition implies that a huge and internally strongly diversified and stratified group of review venues are considered mainstream here. In spite of this considerable diversity, mainstream review venues reviewing popular romance novels do have some common features. Their profile tends to have either a popular or a professional orientation. That is, they are either in some way involved in popular culture or they deal with reviewing in a professional manner. Review venues with a popular profile discuss, represent and participate in what we generally consider the popular strata of our culture; examples of such popular mainstream review venues in the contemporary American media landscape are magazines such as *People* or *Entertainment Weekly* and a newspaper such as *USA Today*. Review venues with a professional profile have a professional interest in reviewing and tend



to primarily target an audience in the book industry – book publishers, literary agents, retailers, librarians, etc.. Examples of such professional publications in America are *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*.<sup>22</sup> In contrast with these popular and professional publications, more highbrow mainstream review venues – quality newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* and magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* – do not conventionally review popular romance novels. Although this disregard for popular romance stems to a large extent from the general lack of interest in popular or lowbrow culture that characterizes these highbrow publications, there are some indications that newspapers such as *The New York Times* tend to more strongly dismiss popular romance than other popular genres.<sup>23</sup>

Although in reviewing popular romance novels each of these mainstream review venues adapts the romance review to its own particular profile and format, there are a number of characteristics that reviews of popular romance novels published in mainstream review venues share. First, these reviews are quite rare. Both in comparison to the frenzy of review activity that takes place within the borders of the romance community and in comparison to the amount of mainstream reviews that are published of texts in other popular genres, relatively few mainstream reviews of popular romance novels are published. Second, *only* single title popular romance novels are reviewed in mainstream venues; no reviews of category romance novels are published outside of the kind of genre specific publications I discussed earlier. Moreover, often the single titles selected for review in mainstream publications are romance narratives written by the romance genre's most popular and famous authors. Third, the genre to which the text belongs in the eyes of the reviewer<sup>24</sup> is often explicitly named; this is very frequently popular romance, although it does happen,

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<sup>22</sup> While their professional interest in books might be opposed to the common understanding of mainstream – which refers to the normal, average, mass audience of laymen readers – in this dissertation such professional publications do fall within this broad category because their review practices are not genre specific.

<sup>23</sup> In the opening pages of *A Natural History*, Pamela Regis notes for example that “[d]uring ten weeks in late 1997 [popular] romance writers Johanna Lindsey, Kaye Gibbons, Julie Garwood, Sandra Brown, Nora Roberts, Catherine Colter, Judith McNaught, and Jude Deveraux all made the [*New York Times Book Review's* Best Sellers] list. During the same ten weeks the *Review* ran its crime column several times, in which Marily Stasio reviewed a short stack of mysteries; and once Gerald Jonas provided a similar service for science fiction. Yet the romance novel went unreviewed, despite its strong presence on the list, despite its dominance in the bookstores. The newspaper of record simply reflects the usual lack of respect accorded to the genre in the larger culture” (*A Natural History*, xi). As Regis indicates here, in this particular instance *The New York Times* uses the popular genres crime and science fiction differently from the equally (or more) popular genre romance. Although this example refers to a single instance, I agree with Regis' claim that it is exemplary and indicative of a wider tendency in contemporary American culture to look down on popular romance, which is by many considered the lowest – most popular, least respected – of the popular genres.

<sup>24</sup> While this might be a personal observation on the part of the reviewer, it seems likely to me that often mainstream reviewers follow the generic categorization and identification of the text suggested by its producers, in particular its publisher.

particularly in reviews of a strongly generically hybrid narrative, that a text considered to be a popular romance novel in the romance community is (also) attributed to another genre in a mainstream review. In either case the naming of genre identity(ies) in the review – as in the bookstore and on the front cover – functions performatively. While mainstream reviewers often use conventional features of the performatively named genre as part of their evaluation criteria, they tend to do so in less detail and with less expertise than reviewers in genre specific contexts and to comment more on the text’s general qualities.<sup>25</sup> Finally, although popular romance generally has a low cultural status, mainstream reviews of popular romance novels are not negative across the board, but run the gamut from very positive to extremely negative. While, depending on the venue and the reviewer, a hint of condescension is not infrequent in many mainstream reviews of popular romance novels, the romance novel’s appeal as escapist, feel-goody fiction is equally often somewhat indulgently acknowledged.<sup>26</sup>

The relevance of the two types of romance reviews – the generic and the mainstream one – to this study’s wider discussion of the relationship between genre and authorship in the popular romance genre lies in that these two review types are indicative of an important difference and even shift in the performative conceptualization of the primary textual identity of the popular romance novel that is reviewed. In a nutshell, the generic review conceptualizes and performs the text’s primary identity as being of the generic order – the text is first and foremost used as a popular romance novel – while the mainstream review conceptualizes and performs a different kind of primary identity, one that is very often (but not always) tied to authorship and the author’s name.

The generic review conceptualizes and performs popular romance as the reviewed text’s primary identity mainly in two ways. First, the venue’s strongly generic profile – review venues such as *Smart Bitches*, *Dear Author*, *All About Romance* and (pre 2002) *Romantic Times* are profiled around their near-exclusive interest in popular romance novels –

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the *USA Today* review of Roberts’ single title romance *Happy Ever After* (2010) clearly invokes both the text’s strong romance identity as a general evaluative framework in remarks such as “For escapist fun, you can’t beat this romance. Sweet Tart.” (Donahue “Roundup: Romances That Will Leave You Happy Ever After”), but remains quite superficial in its examinations of the text’s romance qualities, instead commending the novel for its overall humor (“even embittered divorcees will smile”), freshness and enjoyable mix of emotion and humor (“[a]s usual, Roberts keeps her stories fresh by mixing the sap of emotion with caustic humor about crazy brides.”) A review in the same paper of Roberts’ romantic suspense single title *The Search* (2010) - a generically hybrid novel in which the romance plot is strongly interwoven with a suspense storyline – offers an example of a mainstream romance review that all but ignores the romance aspect of the story, and focuses instead much more on the general qualities of the author’s writing: “*The Search* highlights Roberts’ crisp, often salty dialogue, NASCAR-fast pacing, egalitarian spirit and, most of all, her ability to craft appealing characters, including four-legged ones” (Donahue “Book Roundup: Chance at Romance”).

<sup>26</sup> For an example of this, see the “sweet tart” comment above.

indicates that a text reviewed here is a popular romance novel. The review act *an sich* thus performatively expresses popular romance as the text's primary identity. This identity construction is further reinforced by the content of the review, in which the characteristic and most conventional elements of the popular romance genre are used as the primary interpretative and evaluative framework on the basis of which the qualities of the text are judged. Both these elements indicate that texts reviewed in such genre specific venues are primarily *used* as popular romance novels and thus play a performative role in the dynamic construction of the text's (generic) identity. It should be noted that while this use performatively conceptualizes popular romance as the *primary* identity of the reviewed text, this does not exclude or negate other types of textual identity. As I have indicated earlier, often generic reviews also recognize non-romance aspects of the reviewed text – by commenting on general qualities of the writing, the author's personal style, and the incorporation of generically other elements, for example – and thus to an extent also perform these other identities. But in this process the popular romance generic identity consistently emerges as the text's most important, primary identity in the generic review.

This is a different matter for what I have called the mainstream review, which both in the review act as such and the content of that act tends to express and perform a non-generic identity as primary textual identity. Although the kind of identity that is conceptualized as primary varies in mainstream reviews since the venues' profiles vary, very often this identity is related to authorship and the author's name. In other words, in many mainstream reviews of popular romance novels the text is primarily conceptualized as “a popular novel written by author X” instead of “a popular romance novel”. This conceptualization of the text's identity is perhaps most clear in the selection of the text for review by the mainstream review venue. The selection is based on the notion that the selected text is relevant to – is, in other words, (potentially) used by – the venue's target audience, which is not a generic niche audience of romance readers, but usually a wider and more diversified mass audience. This potential for use and appeal is essentially based on the characteristics of the text. Where in generic reviews this primary identity is considered to be determined in the first place by genre – the text is first and foremost a popular romance novel – in mainstream reviews, as in very many other areas of our contemporary culture, the core identity is often considered to be determined by the author. So, when *People* magazine reviews the newest Stephen King novel, it does not do so because the novel is a thriller – as a thriller fanzine does – but because it is written by Stephen King and King's novels have textual qualities that make it appeal to *People*'s mainstream audience. *People*'s review act thus indicates that the author Stephen King is

considered as the main instance determining the text's core, its most dominant identity. This manner of selection also suggests that there is supposed to be a cross-textual consistency to the authorial qualities of a text: King's newest novel is supposed to appeal to a mass mainstream audience in part because the author's other texts do and the new text shares its dominant authorial characteristics with those other texts. In this manner the author emerges as the primary site of textual identity in many mainstream reviews.<sup>27</sup>

As in the generic review, this authorial or otherwise non-generic identity that is primarily reflected and performed in the mainstream review does not exclude or negate other (generic) textual identities. As I indicated earlier, often one or more generic identities – usually including popular romance – are performed in the mainstream review both in the explicit naming of the genre and in using this genre's conventions as part of the evaluative framework. Depending on the venue's precise profile, the mainstream review act furthermore also frequently performatively expresses the text's identity as popular mainstream literature. While this identity does not as such contradict a genre specific romance identity, it does prevent the reviewed romance text from exclusively circulating in the romance system and squarely places it in the wider system of texts that is the field of mainstream (popular) culture. This in turn often influences the text's, and by extension the author's, position in the romance system, where use of the text in mainstream culture is usually considered a sign of achievement and success. In other words, a mainstream review very often raises the community-internal status of the reviewed single title novel and its author. The more the mainstream reviews focus on the author and the more they primarily identify the romance text on the basis of its authorship, the higher the author's status in the romance community (and outside of it) rises. To an extent this is of course a self-perpetuating dynamic, both within and outside of the romance community. The higher an author's star rises – the more famous and popular she becomes – the more often and the more easily her texts are performatively identified in terms of authorship, which in turn further increases her authorial fame and popularity.

The conventional romance review practices that I have just described are, finally, indicative of some of the important differences between the conceptualization of textual identity for the category and the single title popular romance novel respectively. The complete lack of mainstream reviews of category romance novels indicates quite clearly that for this

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<sup>27</sup>This is, however, not so much the case for mainstream reviews in which the author does not play a role in the review selection and/or evaluation criteria. A local newspaper might, for example, review a romance novel because it is written by a local author or because it takes place in a local setting; in such a case the local aspects of author and/or text are primarily performed as textual identity.

format the generic identity is *always* primary. There are no other ways, apparently, to conceive of the primary textual identity of category romance novel than in generic terms. These review practices indicate, as do many of the other paratextual and narrative conventions of the category format that I have described in the previous chapters, that a category romance novel is always, first and foremost and before it is anything else, a popular romance novel. This is a different matter for the much more fluid and dynamic single title romance format. Romance novels published in this format can be identified in a plethora of ways and the primary identity that is reflected and performed in its reviews is to a large extent dependent on the particular context in which the review appears and the author by whom the text is written. We have noted similar tendencies in the narrative and other paratextual conventions that I have described for this format in the previous chapters. While the popular romance identity is rarely absent from the single title's main features, the extent to which this generic identity is prominent differs from novel to novel and author to author. Indeed, as both the review practice and the format's other conventional features indicate, it is in this format that the romance author is principally able to come to the fore. The existence of that possibility lies at the basis of the complex dynamic between authorship and genre that is extensively discussed in the second part of this dissertation.

#### **4. Awards and Associations**

The most important popular romance literary prizes and the association that awards them are the final epitextual and institutional aspect of the contemporary popular romance genre that I discuss here. Like so many paratextual elements, such literary awards are expressions of the use of a text. When awards are explicitly tied to a particular genre – as is the case for the so-called RITA awards, the most important literary prizes for contemporary popular romance novels – they reflect and performatively constitute the generic identity of a text. In other words, when a particular text is nominated for or awarded the prize for best popular romance novel this act expresses that the text is interpreted and used as a popular romance novel (by the institution awarding the prize) and thus performs this generic identity. Literary prizes, which tend to distinguish the “best” from the rest, often also create a form of (evaluative) stratification within the (sometimes seemingly homogeneous) body of texts to which they pertain. To this extent, and depending on the prize's particular profile, such awards can have the effect of stimulating and enabling the development of a canon within the group of texts they are relevant for (“Literatuurprijs” 259). This is indeed a process that is slowly taking

place within the popular romance genre, where the genre specific awards that are distributed by Romance Writers of America contribute to the gradual development of a canon of top romance authors and novels.

The significance of a literary prize cannot be disconnected from the agency that awards it. The romance-awards-distributing organization Romance Writers of America (RWA) is a non-profit trade association for popular romance writers. Founded in 1981 in Houston by 37 self-identified romance writers (“About RWA: Our History”), the association currently counts over 10,000 members and is one of the largest writer organizations in the world (Danford).<sup>28</sup> This massive membership provides RWA with considerable clout in the publishing industry. Its core activities involve developing multiple initiatives to advocate for the rights of romance authors and to promote the popular romance genre in which these authors are writing. Amongst its most important and visible initiatives are the statistics about the romance genre and its readership RWA annually accumulates and makes available via its website, the various definitions of romance related terms and concepts RWA provides, and the array of popular romance prizes they award every year to the top novels, authors and advocates of the genre.

As I have remarked before, Romance Writers of America have formulated their own definition of the term “romance” (and of various other terms and concepts common in the romance industry, such as formats and subgenres). This definition, which stipulates that romance is a narrative with “a central love story and an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending”<sup>29</sup> (“About the Romance Genre”), is of course central to RWA’s functioning since it determines the characteristics a text has to have to be considered by RWA as belonging to the romance genre (and thus being, for example, eligible to win an RWA award). At the same time this definition (and others like it formulated by RWA) also circumscribes the identity-constituting, performative power that RWA’s acts have. Thus, when RWA awards a romance prize to a particular novel, the romance identity performed in that act coincides with how

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<sup>28</sup> While such numbers are impressive, the vast majority of RWA members are not published authors – that is, they have not (yet) published a popular romance novel. On its website RWA reports that currently “1,885 RWA members are published in book-length romance fiction.” (“A Few Facts”) This distinction between so-called published and non-published members has been part of the RWA dynamic since the association’s inception, Annick Capelle reports, although over the years the number of non-published members has increased far more rapidly (41-42).

<sup>29</sup> RWA further elaborates on these two central concepts of the romance definition: “**A Central Love Story:** The main plot centers around two individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work. A writer can include as many subplots as he/she wants as long as the love story is the main focus of the novel. **An Emotionally-Satisfying and Optimistic Ending:** In a romance, the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love. Romance novels may have any tone or style, be set in any place or time, and have varying levels of sensuality—ranging from sweet to extremely hot. These settings and distinctions of plot create specific subgenres within romance fiction.” (idem).

RWA defines the concept of romance. The same goes for its performative use of format and subgenre names. It is worth noting here that while RWA's definition of romance is broader than, for example, the eight narrative elements of the romance novel identified by Pamela Regis, the generic indispensability of the happy ending is confirmed and reiterated by RWA's more inclusive definitional description of what constitutes the narrative heart of the popular romance genre.

RWA distributes various kinds of awards. Most important amongst these are the already mentioned RITA awards, which “promote excellence in the romance genre by recognizing outstanding published romance novels and romance novellas” (“RITA Awards: Overview”). First awarded in 1983, the RITAs were known as the Golden Medallion awards before 1990 at which time they were renamed after Rita Clay Estrada, RWA's first president (“Contests and Awards: Awards History”). Like the much more famous Academy Awards after which they are quite obviously modelled, the RITAs are distributed in several different categories. Currently, there are twelve such categories: Contemporary Series Romance, Contemporary Series Romance: Suspense/Adventure, Contemporary Single Title Romance, Historical Romance, Inspirational Romance, Novel with Strong Romantic Elements, Paranormal Romance, Regency Historical Romance, Romance Novella, Romantic Suspense, Young Adult Romance and Best First Book (“Category Descriptions and Judging Guidelines”).<sup>30</sup>

This categorisation of the RITAs into different formats and subgenres reflects and performatively constitutes the importance of these categorization parameters to the popular romance genre. That, for example, different awards exist for “series” (i.e. category) and “single title” romances implies that RWA is of the opinion that texts in different romance formats are conceptually so distinct from each other – have such different conventional features – they warrant being judged on different terms. The distinction between category and single title awards thus reflects and constitutes the importance of the format distinction in the use of these texts. The same logic applies to the various romance subgenres that have their own RITA award. As always, these paratextual elements also actively *perform* the separate existence and importance of such textual identities; thus, the existence of, for example, a RITA award for Best Paranormal Romance is part of the forces that performatively constitute

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<sup>30</sup> Both the number of awards that is distributed and the categories for which they are distributed change over time. In 1983, the first time these romance awards were distributed, there were for example only six categories. While the number of categories has been more or less stable around a dozen since the early 1990s, the names of the categories continues to change quite regularly (“RITA Awards: Past Winners”). An overview of all RITA awards ever distributed can be found on RWA's website.

paranormal romance as a recognized subgeneric textual identity within the popular romance genre. That the categorisation of RITA awards changes over time reflects the diachronic changes the popular romance genre undergoes. In fact, the coming and going of certain categories and the various changes in their names offers a rather solid way of tracing wider changes in the genre.

Besides the RITA awards for the best published romance novels in various categories, Romance Writers of America award several other prizes as well. Perhaps the second most important set of RWA prizes are the so-called Golden Heart Awards, which are awarded to “outstanding romance manuscripts” – that is, unpublished romances (“Golden Heart Awards: Overview”). Like the RITAs, the Golden Hearts are awarded in various categories. Manuscripts that have won a Golden Heart significantly increase their chance at publication. RWA furthermore also annually award a RWA Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award, formerly known as the Golden Treasure (1983-1989) and the Lifetime Achievement Award (1990-2008). Considered as one of the highest honours in the romance genre, this award is given to “a living author in recognition of significant contributions to the romance genre. To qualify for the award, the recipient’s career in romance fiction must span a minimum of 15 years” (“RWA Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award”). RWA’s Centennial Award is given to romance authors “upon the publication of the author’s 100<sup>th</sup> romantic novel” (“Centennial Award”). Besides recognizing individual romance novels, manuscripts and authors, RWA also distribute several prizes to people who are otherwise involved in the romance community and the promotion of the romance genre in the wider cultural landscape. There is, for example, a Bookseller of the Year, a Librarian of the Year, a Media and an Industry Award.<sup>31</sup>

Competition for RWA awards is often keen. About 1200 novels compete annually for the RITA and Golden Heart Awards, for example (“RITA Awards: Overview”).<sup>32</sup> In a first selection round the competition is narrowed down to about one hundred finalists – eight or nine in each category (*idem*). Out of these eight finalists, one winner is selected. With such stiff competition, not many novels and authors end up winning RITA awards, which then tend to function as strong promotion for and endorsement of both the winning novel and its author. To recognize “those outstanding authors who win multiple RITAs” RWA created the RWA Hall of Fame, to which an author is submitted upon her third (formerly fourth) win in a

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<sup>31</sup> There are other awards still. A complete overview awards distributed by RWA is available on the association’s website.

<sup>32</sup> To keep the organization of the competition manageable RWA only considers the first 1200 entries (*idem*), which implies that even more texts would be submitted if this were possible.



particular category (“Contests and Awards: RWA Hall of Fame”). The RWA Hall of Fame currently has twelve members.

Nora Roberts’ exceptional position in the romance genre, which I examine in detail in part II of this dissertation, is reflected in the author’s remarkable track record of RWA awards. Since the awards were first granted in 1983, when she won “Best Contemporary Sensual Romance” for the contemporary category romance *The Heart’s Victory*, Roberts has won an unparalleled twenty RITAs (“RITA Awards: Past Winners”). No other author has ever done better. She has been inducted in the RWA Hall of Fame three times – once in 1987 for Long Contemporary Romance, once in 1995 for Romantic Suspense and once in 1996 for Contemporary Single Title – and remains the only author to have been inducted to this select club more than once (“Past Recipients of the RWA Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award”). She received the RWA Lifetime Achievement Award as soon as she qualified for it in 1997, fifteen years after her first novel was published. In recognition of Roberts’ exceptional significance to the popular romance genre, the RWA Lifetime Achievement Award was named after her in 2008. Roberts is also one of only thirteen authors to have received the Centennial Award, indicating she has published over one hundred romance novels. This unparalleled romance award track record indicates the deep embeddedness of Roberts’ oeuvre in the popular romance genre even as it also evidence of the author’s exceptional position in the genre as the single most successful romance author of our time.



**PART II:**  
**NORA ROBERTS AND THE**  
**CONTEMPORARY POPULAR**  
**ROMANCE GENRE**



## CHAPTER 5: CONCEPTS AND HISTORY

### 1. Introduction

The discussion in part I of this dissertation concentrated on the description and analysis of the most important narrative and paratextual conventions of the contemporary popular romance genre; these conventions form a general and stable framework that is both characteristic and constitutive of the generic textual identity “popular romance”. Within this overall generic framework, however, several culturally and historically specific evolutions and transformations take shape on both the narrative and the paratextual level. In the study of the relation between genre and author in the constitution and dynamic development of textual identity, it is such historically and culturally specific forms of generic conventions that primarily have to be taken into account. An author, who is always a product of the particular historical and cultural context in which he or she is situated, relates to generic conventions in the first place on the historically and culturally concrete instead of the conceptually abstract level. This is why in part II of this dissertation the oeuvre of romance author Nora Roberts is studied from a more explicitly diachronic perspective. More specifically, in this part of the dissertation I attempt to get a grip on and develop insight into the ways in which Roberts’ oeuvre relates to the popular romance genre in which it is, according to numerous indications, mainly situated. This discussion consistently revolves around developing an understanding of a double dynamic: on the one hand it traces the ways in which historically specific evolutions and transformations of the contemporary popular romance genre manifest in the oeuvre of one of its most popular, prolific and prominent authors; on the other hand it attempts to determine to which extent the work of a particular author further develops, stimulates, transforms, popularizes and brings to the fore certain aspects, evolutions and transformations of the genre as a whole.

The more explicitly diachronic perspective that is adopted in this second part necessitates a brief sketch of the particular institutional history of the popular romance genre that gave rise to the historically and culturally specific context in which Nora Roberts started writing. This part thus includes a brief sketch of mainly the institutional history of the popular romance genre prior to the publication of Roberts’ first novel in 1981. This is followed by an also rather brief overview of Roberts’ career and her massive oeuvre, which in the rest of this part of the dissertation is discussed much more thoroughly and elaborately. This overview

briefly sketches the main phases that I distinguish in Roberts' oeuvre and career and discusses the few academic papers that have been published on Roberts and her massive oeuvre.

After these two rather brief introductory pieces, the focus shifts to the actual analysis of Roberts' oeuvre; this discussion is ordered in three chapters, each of which discusses one phase of Roberts' oeuvre and career. Following the poststructuralist conceptualization of genre and authorship that is adopted in this study, the discussion in each of these analytical chapters always considers three aspects of the oeuvre: first, the presence (or absence) of narrative conventions characteristic of the popular romance and other genres; second, the presence (or absence) of elements of narrative serialization (cf. below) and third, the novels' paratext. In these analyses Roberts' novels are consistently compared to the relevant historically and culturally specific versions of the conventions of the popular romance genre. This comparative approach allows me to determine to which extent Roberts' novels follow and/or transgress the ruling conventions of the genre and how these practices play a role in constituting the novels' textual identity in terms of genre and/or authorship.

The relevance of both narrative and paratextual conventions to the development and constitution of generic and other kinds of textual identity has been established in part I of this dissertation. The role that the notion of narrative serialization plays in this process has, however, not yet been thoroughly addressed. This part then first starts with a brief discussion of the concept of narrative serialization and the ways in which it is relevant to this dissertation's overall study of the relation between genre and authorship in the constitution of textual identity in contemporary popular romance novels.

## **2. A Note On Narrative Serialization**

In this dissertation, narrative serialization is defined as the existence of a narrative connection between two or more narrative texts originally published separately. This kind of narrative serialization takes many different forms; it can consist of a plotline developed over the course of two or more originally separately published texts, it can be constituted by one or more characters who turn up in a number of originally separate narrative texts or it can be simply a fictional setting shared between two or more texts originally published separately. Narrative serialization is distinguished from other types of serialization by the necessity of one or more concrete narrative elements that are shared between the separate texts in the series.<sup>1</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup>This is why the category romance is, for example, not considered a narrative serial. Although they are clearly subject to a serialization dynamic – an alternative term for them is even the “series” romance – this series is not

different forms of narrative serialization are characterized by rather strongly varying degrees of narrative interdependence – plot-related serialization is often considerably more intensive than a shared fictional setting, for example – all these forms of narrative serialization or narrative interconnectedness are based on a common principle, namely the existence of (a) connection(s) on the level of the narrative between two or more originally separately published texts. This understanding of the concept of narrative serialization is somewhat broader but generally in line with definitions formulated by scholars of serialization. Jennifer Hayward, for example, defines serialization as “an ongoing narrative released in successive parts” (3) and Linda Hughes and Michael Lund stipulate that the serial is “a continuing story over an extended time with enforced interruptions” (2 quoted in Warhol 73). Both definitions emphasize, as does my description, that the concept of serialization is essentially predicated on a connection between the levels of the narrative – the world of the story – and of the paratext – the way in which the text embodying and representing this story is published.

This connection is at once the first of three main reasons why I consider the notion of narrative serialization to be relevant to this dissertation’s overall study of the relation between genre and authorship in the development and constitution of textual identity. Like textual identity (at least in my Poststructuralist interpretation thereof), narrative serialization is a notion that is at its core constituted by a connection between the narrative and paratextual levels of the text; textual identity and narrative serialization have the same playing field, so to speak. It is then logical that they influence one another – that, in other words, a text’s belonging to a narrative series influences the constitution and development of its textual identity. A text’s seriality – i.e. its belonging to a (narrative) series – is indeed part of its identity. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is a novel by J.K. Rowling, it is a fantasy novel, but it is also the seventh novel in the *Harry Potter* series. This latter notion is a fundamental aspect of the text’s identity that manifests both on the level of the narrative – in this case, the narrative interconnectedness with other novels in the series is strong as *Deathly Hallows*’ plot and characters are difficult to fully understand without taking other installments in the *Harry Potter* series into account – and the paratext – it was originally published separately from other installments in the series, it references its serial identity in its title and various front covers, etc. The extent to which its seriality is prominent in the text’s identity varies a great deal; it can be very prominent – as is the case, for example, for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – or it can be (much) more inconspicuous – as, for example, in series

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based on the sharing of concrete narrative elements such as plotlines, characters or fictional universes between separate novels.

in which the common narrative elements figure only in the background of the story and/or for texts whose seriality is not prominently present in their paratext.

A second reason why I consider the concept of narrative serialization to be a relevant factor in this study is its special relationship to the popular romance genre. One of the most characteristic elements of narrative serialization – the trope of “refusal of closure” (Hayward 3 and 141) – is at odds with popular romance’s fundamental dependence on the narrative closure that is reached in the generic HEA. As I have pointed out in chapter 2 of the previous part, the narrative functioning of the HEA depends fundamentally on the fact that it is a definitive ending to the story. Narrative serialization is, by contrast, essentially predicated on the notion that the narrative ending is provisional. Although, depending on the particular format of the serialization, serialized narratives are able to reach definitive endings – as far as we currently know, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is the final installment of the *Harry Potter* series and forms a definitive ending to the story – the act and concept of serialization as such – the narrative connection between separately published texts – depends on the notion that the narrative ending is not definitive but that the story (world) is revisited in another text. Since the narrative closure of the HEA is a genre-constituting element – indeed, as I pointed out in my earlier discussion, following accounts by Pamela Regis and RWA among others, the HEA is one of the very few *indispensable* narrative conventions of the popular romance genre – I argue that the notion of narrative serialization is fundamentally at odds with the narrative generic form of popular romance.

There are basically two ways in which narrative serialization can problematize the generically crucial narrative closure of the HEA: via deferral and via conceptual disruption. The deferral of closure in serialized romance narratives is rather obvious: it happens when the happy ending is not achieved in the text, but is postponed to a later installment of the series. The text lacks the generic HEA, which problematizes the popular romance aspect of its identity.<sup>2</sup> The conceptual disruption of the closure of the HEA is a bit more complex. It is in principle constituted, I argue, by the act of revisiting the narrative world in what I have called the “post-HEA”, which is the time in the narrative after the formal HEA has been achieved. This post-HEA is frequently featured in romance narrative series because these series are often based on a set of recurring characters; these characters turn up in various installments of

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<sup>2</sup> At least, this is the case when no HEA is reached within the text. The most frequent form in which this deferral of the HEA is realized in contemporary popular romance novels is when it regards a secondary couple and their romance that develops in a subplot of the novel. In such a narrative the “main” couple does achieve their HEA – which narratively performs the romance identity of the text – but the narrative mechanism of deferral of narrative closure is invoked by the unresolved secondary romance.



the series, even after they have reached their own romantic HEA in an earlier installment. When revisiting the narrative world requires the representation of a previously established couple after their formal HEA, this act of narrative representation raises the conceptual *possibility* that the so far unrepresented “ever after” of the HEA is not as romantically happy as the narrative element of the HEA promised. In other words, in this representation of the post-HEA, the HEA transforms from a utopian narrative promise – which it is in the prototypical generic romance narrative – into a narrative actuality. This transformation raises the conceptual possibility of the disruption of the HEA – i.e. it makes possible the notion that the couple is in fact not as everlastingly romantically happy as the HEA seemed to promise – and by doing so, I argue, it disrupts and problematizes one of the core constitutive narrative-conceptual elements of the popular romance genre. One of the complex questions about the meaning of the generic identity of popular romance that emerges from such acts of narrative serialization is for example whether, if the narrative actualization of the post-HEA confirms and reinforces the couple’s romantic happiness, as it usually does – established couples are standardly represented as successfully living the promise of the HEA – the generically disruptive conceptual power of the post-HEA is in fact strong enough to truly problematize or disrupt the romance generic identity of the text. Such fundamental questions about the core meaning of the generic romance identity are explored more extensively in the discussions of Roberts’ oeuvre, in which narrative serialization is frequent.

The fact that Nora Roberts’ oeuvre is rife with serialization is at once the third main reason why I include narrative serialization as a relevant parameter in my study of textual identity, genre and authorship in Roberts’ oeuvre. As the discussions will make clear, Roberts often uses narrative serialization. She employs the strategy in various forms and to varying degrees: she has written both open-ended series and series with a set number of installments (the trilogy format is a particular favorite of hers), some of her series are based on shared characters – she has written numerous series about families, for example – while others are based more on continuing storylines, and still others simply take place in a shared fictional universe. One of the first popular romance authors to frequently use narrative serialization in popular romance novels, Roberts is often credited with popularizing narrative serials in the genre, where it is now a dominant form (“A Publisher’s Journey” 31). It is a narrative strategy that is very frequent in Roberts’ oeuvre and has proven consistently popular amongst readers – to such an extent that today the narrative serial is often perceived as a characteristic hallmark of Roberts’ writing. The narrative serial, then, is an important part of the performance of Roberts’ identity as an individual author within the genre and often functions

as one of the vehicles via which she manifests the typifying singularity of her author's voice. Narrative serialization is thus not only one of the constituting elements of the serial novels' textual identity, but also of the author name Nora Roberts more generally. Narrative serialization is then included as an important parameter in this study because, due to the specific characteristics of both the popular romance genre and Nora Roberts' oeuvre it is a notion that unites the three core concepts of this study: textual identity, generic identity and authorship.

### **3. A Brief (Corporate) History**

When Nora Roberts starts writing category romance novels at the beginning of the 1980s, she enters a genre and a format in which historically and culturally specific conventions are very important. The particular shape these conventions take is directly related to the preceding (corporate) history of the category romance. In 1981 the category romance novel is already a well-developed format driven by a set of narrative and paratextual generic conventions. These conventions generally fall within the overall generic framework of the popular romance genre (cf. part I), but do take on historically and culturally specific forms that are, in part, the result of the corporate and intercultural history of the popular romance novel in English. This history explains the precise place that Silhouette, who publish all of Roberts' category, takes up in the institutional matrix of the popular romance genre at the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s. It details the historical ties between Silhouette and the other two important category romance publishers, Harlequin and Mills & Boon. More specifically this history reveals how the category romance novels published by Silhouette at the beginning of the 1980s are both a continuation of an intercultural generic tradition that reaches back many decades and a break away from this tradition towards the beginning of a new phase in the generic evolution of the popular romance novel. Although it falls outside the scope of this dissertation to elaborately discuss this institutional (corporate-driven) pre-1981 history of the category romance novel, the format's most important and pertinent developments are briefly discussed in the following pages. This discussion is based in the first place on two earlier studies of the romance novel's corporate history, namely Joseph McAleer's excellent study of the romance publisher Mills & Boon and Paul Grescoe's considerably less scholarly account of Harlequin's development over time.<sup>3</sup> This overview focuses in the first place on the history

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<sup>3</sup> Although McAleer's study is an excellent scholarly work that provides an, in my eyes, reliable, thoroughly researched, nuanced and fact-based account of Mills & Boon's history, some of the scholar's claims do not match the remarks made by Jay Dixon (1999) in her account of Mills & Boon's history. While I am aware of

of the *category* romance novel, since it is via this format that Nora Roberts enters the popular romance genre as an author in 1981.

### 3.1 The Category Romance

The history of the category romance novel starts, essentially, with the foundation of the British publisher Mills & Boon in London in 1908.<sup>4</sup> Initially Mills & Boon published in a variety of genres, but by the 1930s they developed a strong focus on romantic fiction (McAlear 58). Many of the early versions of the core narrative conventions that drive (category) romance novels to this day were developed by Mills & Boon authors in the decades before the outbreak of the Second World War. Charles Boon, one of the company's founders, establishes two ground rules for the romances he publishes; these rules are known within the company as "Lubbock's Law", which is to write from the heroine's point of view (149), and "the Alphaman", which consists of the notion that the female is always attracted to the strongest male of the species (150). The convention of romance's compulsory happy ending in marriage was also established at this time (*idem*). With regards to the representation of the sexual aspect of romantic love, Mills & Boon romances of the 1930s and early 1940s were overall very "wholesome" and never included explicit sex scenes (*idem*). The only form of sexuality in these early novels were the so-called "punishing kisses" (155) – the first, and often only, in-book kiss between hero and heroine, which is prompted by the hero's desire to punish the heroine for something; it has become of a trope of popular romance that, in slightly varied form, is still frequent in the genre today.

The core character types of the romance heroine and hero were also developed in this period. The heroine is always a very young (eighteen to twenty years old) virgin, who is usually orphaned and quite clever (150). The hero is significantly older (in his thirties or forties), enigmatic and rough-edged (151). While for the heroine physical beauty is an optional element, the hero is always very handsome and almost god-like (*idem*). There is usually a (strong) class and financial difference between the heroine, who is often middle or

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some of these differences, it falls outside the scope of this dissertation and my expertise to examine these in depth. I then point out some of the divergences between Dixon's and McAlear's accounts, but generally base my remarks on the latter's study.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the narrative themes and conventions of the popular romance novel are of course much older. In her aforementioned study on the history of the popular romance novel, Pamela Regis argues for example that the start of the romance novel in English coincides with the advent of the novel. And Barbara Fuchs (2004) has pointed out that as a literary form romance has a long history that goes back to Ancient Greece and beyond. While I am aware of these complex historical origins of the romance novel, I find that the history of the *category* romance novel, a format that has rather specific narrative and paratextual properties, is less extensive and starts, quite clearly, with the foundation of the publisher Mills & Boon who almost single-handedly developed the category romance novel format.

lower-middle class and works for a living, and the hero, who is very often upper (middle) class, and is always recognized for this strength, integrity and ability to provide a financially secure future (153). Although conventionality was then an important aspect of the romance novels Mills & Boon published in this period, McAleer emphasizes that before the Second World War no rigid formula or strict editorial policies were used by the publisher (165). Nonetheless, the most important paratextual development of the 1930s was Mills & Boon's decision to focus their promotional efforts on their own name as a brand name instead of the always varying author names or titles of the books they published (62). To achieve this, they started standardizing both the product – that is, the texts – and its material packaging – that is, the peritext (65).

By the outbreak of the Second World War, McAleer observes, popular romance was recognized as an independent, separate genre by both the media and the publishing industry (73). For Mills & Boon, the 1940s were characterized mainly by a continuation of the already-existing narrative conventions – that is Lubbock's Law, the Alphamale, the HEA, and the overall wholesome tone and theme (172) – with one important shift, which was the increased emphasis in the narratives on the heroine's career (173). Slowly and, McAleer contends, as a reflection of women's increased importance in the workplace in real life, Mills & Boon heroines were shown to have jobs and became slightly stronger and more independent characters (*idem*). The hero remained, according to McAleer, "strong and silent" (174) type. Much like the 1940s the fifties were mainly marked by a preservation of the conventions that are already in place for Mills & Boon, even though, McAleer remarks, these conventions were still not thought of by the publisher as a formula (tipsheets do for example not exist) (198). The average heroine is now slightly older (twenty-four instead of twenty) and often has a typically female job such as nurse, secretary or stewardess (200), but generally remains "clumsy and insecure" (201). The hero again undergoes little to no change and remains "a tall, dark and handsome, imposing presence" (200) without weakness (201). This hero, a still frequent type known as the alpha hero, is always the most attractive and most prominent man depicted in the story (205). With regards to the plot, the most important change in the 1950s was the introduction of the misunderstanding as an important form of barrier or conflict (207); like many of these early narrative conventions, the misunderstanding remained a hallmark of category romances for decades.

The biggest challenge of the 1950s for Mills & Boon, McAleer argues, was the representation of sexuality in its romance novels. In an effort to strictly avoid offending any part of its huge readership, Mills & Boon carefully guarded its chaste image. Apart from a

few punishing kisses, there were no representations of sexual interactions on the pages of the average Mills & Boon novel in the 1950s (209). Although no tipsheets or strict formula were used at this time, McAleer finds that with regards to the representation of sexuality Mills & Boon novels were very strictly edited to respect the publisher's wholesome image (222). This new editorial policy was accompanied by a further peritextual standardization of the books. A standardized length of 188 to 192 pages was introduced at this time (and is still used for category romance novels today) as were standardized bindings, blurbs, book size, title types, etc. (106). Perhaps the most important development in the 1950s was, however, the start of the collaboration between Mills & Boon and the Canadian publisher Harlequin, who contacted Mills & Boon for the first time in 1957 (McAleer 116). Harlequin, which had been founded in Winnipeg in 1949 by Richard Bonnycastle (Grescoe 15), was interested in expanding the romance part of its catalogue and turned to Mills & Boon for material to do so. Both companies soon reached an agreement that allowed Harlequin to select novels from Mills & Boon's large catalogue and publish these under their own name in Canada and the United States. Harlequin copied Mills & Boon's brand name publishing strategy, replacing Mills & Boon's name with their own on the editions of the (originally British) romance novels that they circulated in North America, and an incredibly successful romance publishing venture was born.

The 1960s were a time of important changes for Mills & Boon and Harlequin. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and the significant changes in societal attitudes towards (the interrelations between) love, marriage and sexuality that followed in its wake, left their mark on the average Mills & Boon novel. McAleer's study shows how the publisher was struggling to, on the one hand, preserve its wholesome and chaste image and on the other incorporate in such wholesome narratives some of these major changes that were starting to impact the lives of many of Mills & Boon's authors and readers.

Although certain basic elements remained – the happy ending, the Alphaman, and the virginal heroine – the novels became more daring, even explicit in their depiction of romance (253).

As society was changing, along with attitudes towards love, sex, marriage and children, so did Mills & Boon authors reflect these changes in their novels. ... This is not to imply that Mills & Boon no longer imposed certain restrictions on its authors and upheld a traditional moral standard. Boundaries remained – primarily, premarital sex – that could not be crossed. ... Readers wanted their fiction lively and up-to-date, ... but the emphasis remained on 'clean' and 'wholesome' stories (258).

The result was that, within certain clear boundaries, the overall tone of Mills & Boon's novels became sexier and more modern. In a further response to these societal changes, finds McAleer, Mills & Boon's heroines became more assertive and independent while "the English-born hero faded to the background, superseded by a brutal, dangerous, but fascinating Greek, Italian or Spaniard" (262). "Although the heroine remained an approachable figure with all her faults and insecurities, the heroes bec[a]me more obscure, daring and even fantastic" (264).

However, while these changes appear to have been rather widespread in the Mills & Boon novels that were published in the U.K. and elsewhere in the course of the 1960s, they did not manifest to the same extent in the romance novels Harlequin published on the North American market. Although from 1964 on Harlequin exclusively published Mills & Boon novels (120), the Canadian company had always insisted on carefully *selecting* the Mills & Boon novels it deemed fit for publication in North America. In the course of the 1960s this selection was in the hands of Harlequin's small editorial department led by Mary Bonnycastle – wife of owner Richard – and Ruth Palmer (Richard's secretary); both women, Paul Grescoe reports, were quite conservative and only selected the more traditional of Mills & Boon novels (96). This tendency is confirmed by Joseph McAleer, who emphasizes that for a long time in the 1960s Harlequin had a decidedly more conservative (narrative, ideological) profile than its partner Mills & Boon (122). Although towards the end of the 1960s Harlequin slowly began to select slightly more modern novels, their initially staunch rejection of more progressive narratives nonetheless left its mark on the development of the popular romance novel, since many of Mills & Boon mainly British authors, wanting access to the vast (and financially interesting) North American readership, complied with Harlequin's more conservative demands (273). Indeed, reports McAleer, in the course of the 1960s Harlequin was the single biggest editorial influence at Mills & Boon (*idem*).

Still, even Harlequin's hesitation towards the more sexy and modern tone in the Mills & Boon novels of the 1960s did not stop some of the wider socio-cultural changes from seeping into these romance narratives. By the late 1960s the representation of sex between husband and wife had, for example, become more or less commonplace in Mills & Boon novels and to a lesser extent in Harlequins (McAleer, 279). However, the ban on inclusion of premarital wasn't lifted until well into the 1970s, when the first premarital sex scenes appeared on the pages of a Mills & Boon novel. Even then, this kind of content is anything but frequent and novels with such scenes were published under a special banner announcing the presence of this sexually explicit content (277). The use of such banners indicates that

Mills & Boon deemed premarital sex far from acceptable to the majority of its readership in the 1970s. And although, as McAleer's study traces, in the course of the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s the average Mills & Boon heroine had gradually become stronger and more independent, the impact of this emancipation should not be overestimated. Even in the 1970s, McAleer reports, the outcome of every Mills & Boon and Harlequin romance novel is unquestionably that "motherhood still followed on marriage and transcends the heroine's career" (279). At the end of the story, heroines got married and gave up their (financial) independence in order to become wife and mother; this was a notion that no romance novel at this time questioned.

In 1972 Harlequin buys Mills & Boon in what Paul Grescoe characterizes as a very painful process (80-85). Initially the publisher's editorial department remained located in London – where it had been as long as Mills & Boon existed independently from Harlequin – and the Toronto office only took care of the packing and marketing of the books, but eventually, by the beginning of the 1980s, "the balance of editorial power" shifted from London to Toronto (Grescoe 99). With this move Mills & Boon's starring role in the history of category romance essentially came to an end and irrevocably shifted to Harlequin, who were now in charge of not only the marketing but also the editing of the category romance novels they were publishing. Still, the Mills & Boon name and traditions did not disappear. To this day Harlequin continues to use the Mills & Boon brand name; there are various places in the world – amongst them the United Kingdom, Ireland and India – where Harlequin still publishes its category romance novels under the name Mills & Boon. In the course of the 1970s Harlequin, now entailing Mills & Boon, further expanded its North-American activities as category romances become an increasingly successful and important segment of the American book market. In 1975, three years after Harlequin bought Mills & Boon, the Canadian media conglomerate Torstar buys a controlling share of Harlequin, which from that moment on is no longer an independent romance publisher but a company that is part of a huge media concern (McAleer 282; Grescoe 104).

Although in the course of the 1960s and early 1970s the American market developed into the world's biggest and most important market for the category romance novels published by Harlequin, it is quite remarkable that in all this time the novels themselves are not Americanized. Until the 1980s Mills & Boon, and later Harlequin, do not employ American authors nor are American characters or settings common in the narratives; instead, the vast majority of authors were British – followed by Australians and writers from other Commonwealth nations – and the narratives were set in either British or clearly exotic (Greek, Spain) locations (Grescoe 119). Harlequin's initial disinclination to Americanize the category

romances they publish seems to not have been coincidental but deliberate. This is indicated for example by the fact that although in the course of the 1970s, in part as a result of the increasing success of category romance novels in America, Harlequin received more and more manuscript submissions from American authors, they quite consistently turned down the vast majority of these submissions and continued to publish mainly British authors (Grescoe 157-58).<sup>5</sup> When Silhouette, a new category romance publisher, was founded in New York in 1980 to compete with Harlequin on the category romance market, the new category publisher capitalized upon Harlequin's increasingly odd refusal to Americanize and modernize their narratives. At the time of its launch and during the first years of its existence, Silhouette explicitly presented itself as a "*modern and American*" category romance publishing house. Although these two words largely remained open signifiers – Silhouette did not precisely articulate what these notions of modernization and Americanization in their eyes entailed – they nonetheless functioned effectively to strategically distinguish Silhouette from Harlequin's more conservative and British/Commonwealth identity. Many of the American authors who in these years were rejected by Harlequin, amongst them Nora Roberts, found a home with Silhouette, who in the early 1980s gave a whole generation of American romance authors the chance to try their hand at category romance writing.

The years that follow Silhouette's initial launch were marked by intense competition between Harlequin and Silhouette for dominance on the American category romance market. Although Silhouette was a newcomer in the market, their "modern" and "American" category romances rapidly became popular with the vast American category romance readership and Harlequin had to scramble to keep up with its new competitor. One result of the ensuing market battle is the quick and thorough Americanization of the category romance novel. Following Silhouette's successful example, in the first years of the 1980s Harlequin quickly launched its own line of American romances and started to accept more submissions from American authors (Grescoe 119). Another result is what Paul Grescoe calls "the segmentation of the romance market, which resulted in so many more novels begin written for so many tastes by new authors and being handled by new editors – most of them North American" (184). The competition between Harlequin and Silhouette, which was a time of change and upheaval in the category romance market, ended in 1984 when Harlequin – that is, Torstar – bought Silhouette. Following the strategy they had employed when buying Mills &

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<sup>5</sup>According to Paul Grescoe it was specifically the Boon family, who still had an important presence on Harlequin's editorial board in the 1970s and early 1980s, who actively oppose the Americanization of Harlequin's novels and repeatedly blocked the publisher's acceptance of more American authors and narratives (157-59).



Boon a decade earlier, Harlequin again preserved the Silhouette brand name, which in the four years of Silhouette's independent existence had developed into a strong category romance label with a profile that was, for romance community members, clearly distinct from Harlequin's own. For twenty-seven years, until 2011, Harlequin continued to use the Silhouette brand name and simultaneously published as Harlequin and as Silhouette on the American category romance market. While to an outsider this strategy might make little sense as, indeed, the general profiles of Harlequin and Silhouette lines were often similar – both brands had romantic suspense, more erotic, or sweeter lines, for example – this history makes clear why to romance community insiders the distinction between a Harlequin and Silhouette romance was, certainly initially, not unimportant.

Although at the beginning of the 1980s Silhouette was then clearly differentiated from Harlequin in mainly its American and more modern or progressive profile, this does not mean that Silhouette's category romance novels are completely different from those published by Harlequin. To the contrary, notwithstanding the editorial differences between the two publishers, Silhouette's category romance novels are in many ways in line with Harlequin's category romances. Silhouette adopted many of the basic conventions that characterize the Harlequin categories, which were in turn of course modelled after the Mills & Boon category romances. Like Harlequin's novels, Silhouette romances in the early 1980s are, for example, told exclusively from the heroine's point of view – a convention that goes back to the so-called Lubbock's Law that Charles Boon introduced in the 1930s –, they feature young, often poor and orphaned virginal heroines who fall in love with much older, imposing, emotionally domineering, alpha male heroes; the barrier between the protagonists is very often based at least in part on a form of misunderstanding and the novels always end happily – that is, in a marriage that signifies not only the end of the courtship and definitive establishment of the romantic union, but usually also the end of the heroine's professional life and financial independence and the beginning of her existence as wife and mother. That Silhouette romances are in many ways in line with Harlequin's categories is a logical consequence of the fact that very many of the American authors who wrote these early Silhouette novels were readers of the Harlequin romances, which they (implicitly) used as a model in their work for Silhouette.

This is also the case for Nora Roberts, who belongs to this first generation of American category romance writers given an opportunity to write popular romance novels by the launch of Silhouette and its specific interest in American authors. Roberts was a reader of Harlequin's category romances novels when at the end of the 1970s she wrote her first

romance manuscript (Roberts 156), which she later found “dreadful” (155). Describing the process of writing her first manuscript in 1997, Roberts happily admits to having “no clue what [she] was doing and simply stuff[ing] every element of every category romance [she]’d read into that 55 thousand words. It even had a Spanish hero, and the heroine sprained her ankle so he’d have to carry her around in those lean, muscled arms” (155-56). Roberts submitted these early manuscripts to Harlequin in 1979 and 1980 (155) but, in what Pamela Regis has described as an “amazingly short-sighted” decision (*Natural History*, 183), the publisher turned her down. The rejection was, Roberts was made to understand, at least in part based on the fact that she was American; accompanying one of the rejected manuscripts was a note saying the “work showed promise, and the story had been entertaining and well done. But ... they (Harlequin) already had their American writer” (Roberts 155). Harlequin’s rejection of Roberts on the basis of her nationality, accompanied by their explicit recognition of the quality of her work, is indicative of the extent to which Harlequin was still inscribed in the Mills and Boon generic, national and cultural profile at the end of the 1970s. In Roberts’ case, as in that of many others, Silhouette was quick to take advantage of Harlequin’s reluctance towards American authors and they offered her a contract for her first novel, which was published in May 1981.

Roberts, who went on to become the single most successful author Silhouette or any other romance publisher ever worked with, later shows a keen awareness of Silhouette’s particular profile and the role it played in the newly Americanized category romance market. She remarks:

When Silhouette opened in 1980, looking specifically for new American writers to tip at the Harlequin format a bit, it opened a new era for romance and offered an entire generation of writers a chance. ... Silhouette took the Harlequin framework, the constants such as the one man/one woman love story, the sexual tension, the emotional commitment, the conflict and happy ending, then let its new and American-based writers give it all a *modern and very American* spin. This is the primary reason, I believe, that category romance, and the entire romance market, has grown and evolved over the years. The American market was poised for change, for stronger heroines, less domineering heroes [sic], for more contemporary themes. For myself, and for the writers who started in the early 1980s, we were readers of the genre first. We knew what we wanted to read. So we wrote what appealed to us. And it worked (my emphasis, 155).

As Roberts indicates, the Americanization of the category romance initially led by Silhouette's authors changed the category romance market and the entire romance genre. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s category romance conventions that had been fixtures of the form since the 1930s – the exclusive heroine point of view, the domineering heroes and virginal heroines, the near-exclusion of sex, etc. – would change and evolve as a plethora of new authors entered the generic system. The process of how Nora Roberts played a role in this generic evolution – that is, of how the initially subtle changes she (and other authors) made to the Harlequin-based conventional framework of the category romance eventually reverberated in the entire popular romance genre – is examined in depth in the discussions of Roberts' oeuvre in this second part of the dissertation.

### 3.2 The Bodice Ripper Phenomenon

While the transformations in the American category romance novel that are dawning at the beginning of the 1980s are then in important ways tied to (institutional and other) dynamics that are specific to the category format, they cannot be considered completely separately from another development that takes place in the American romance genre in the course of the 1970s. In 1972 the publishing house Avon publishes the historical romance novel *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss. The novel, which is one of the first to be immediately printed in paperback, causes a revolution in the world of (romance) publishing and is now often considered as the beginning of the modern popular romance novel (Radway, 33; Thurston, 48). *The Flame and the Flower* is a historical romance novel that incorporates all narrative conventions characteristic of the popular romance genre (cf. part I), but it is different from earlier novels in this generic tradition due to its rather explicit sexual content. Woodiwiss' story about a young English maiden who is both literally and figuratively conquered by a dashing American sea captain has an unusually high number of unusually explicit sex scenes and is narrated in an at the time strikingly erotic tone. *The Flame and the Flower*, which was extensively promoted by Avon, was a massive success and was instantly imitated by other authors and publishing houses (idem). The novel quickly became the iconic model for a new kind of strongly erotic and sexually explicit historical romance novel that in the course of the 1970s was published by a number of different American publishers and that quickly became known as “the bodice ripper” or the “sweet savage romance” – after Rosemary Rogers' *Sweet Savage Love* (1974), the second important instance of the emerging model (Radway 34; Thurston, 51).

The bodice ripper thus introduces sexually explicit content in stories that otherwise adopt the broad narrative structures conventional of the popular romance genre. A remarkable characteristic of many of these sex scenes is their rather violent nature. Though it would be exaggerating to claim each bodice ripper contains scenes of sexual violence, so-called “forced seductions” and outright rapes of the heroine by the hero are not infrequent in many of these novels (as is hinted at by their nicknames). When rapes or other forms of sexual violence occur, they tend to do so in rather specific conditions – one being, for example, that the rape occurs because the hero either mistakes the heroine’s identity or because he is so attracted to her that he cannot control himself in her presence (Radway 75-77)– and are often functional in the romance narrative. This is for example the case in *The Flame and the Flower* in which the hero’s rape of the heroine takes place during their first meeting when the hero mistakenly believes the heroine is a prostitute playing a game flirtatious resistance to his advances. Even though he realizes his mistake upon piercing her maidenhead, the damage is of course both literally and figuratively done. The rape is an important motor for the ensuing love story as the heroine turns out to be pregnant and is forced to marry the hero; during this marriage his initial violation of her is of course an important barrier to the true romantic union that the romance HEA requires. Only when the hero completes the transformation from brutish seaman into a reliable and loving provider, lover, husband and father does the barrier established by the rape truly fall. A number of the elements from *The Flame and the Flower*’s now exemplary rape scene – the mistaken identity, the violation of the heroine’s virginity and the concomitant unlocking of her sexuality, the pregnancy, etc. – recur in many of the 1970s American bodice rippers.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of the bodice ripper to the development of the category romance in the (early) 1980s is, in my view, ambiguous. Although clear narrative parallels exist between the category romance and the bodice ripper – both of which follow the overall narrative and peritextual conventions of the popular romance genre as discussed in part I of this dissertation – and although over the course of time the bodice ripper has come to be seen as the beginning of the modern popular romance novel (see for example popular romance studies by Janice Radway (1984) and Carol Thurston (1987)), there are indications that in the 1970s this now-presumed generic alliance between these two formats was less self-evidently established than we might assume today. Bodice rippers and category romance novels were not published by the same publishing houses, nor were they generally read, scholar Carol Thurston remarks, by

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<sup>6</sup> Often, as for example in many novels by Rosemary Rogers, the heroine is (also) raped by other men than the hero.

the same readers (52-53). While it is difficult to determine now how these texts were used then, it is clear that organisations such as Romance Writers of America and fanzines like *Romantic Times*, which play an important role in the performative development of the popular romance genre and its community of readers, did not yet exist in the seventies. Consequently, the romance community was much less established then than it is today and, it seems to me, no institutionalized connections existed that would have put category romances and bodice rippers in the same generic context. It then seems to me that we would be jumping to conclusions if we were to argue, as Carol Thurston and Margaret Jensen at times seems to do in her aforementioned studies (see for example Thurston 24 and Jensen 66), that the representation of sexuality simply migrates, as it were, from the 1970s bodice ripper to the 1980s category romance in America.

However, the narrative and some peritextual similarities between the category romance and the bodice ripper in the 1970s of course do exist and the bodice ripper does offer an example of what the inclusion of scenes of explicit sexual content in the broad narrative conventions of the romance novel might look like. The bodice ripper, and its huge commercial success, also indicates that the cultural norms regarding the representation of female sexuality in American mass culture are in fact shifting – a societal change that, as Joseph McAleer and Paul Grescoe have observed, was only scantily being absorbed into the Harlequin category romance novels available on the American market at the time. Moreover, the bodice ripper also proved that a huge (female) audience existed for such sexually more explicit romance novels and that the form was thus not only commercially viable but very likely profitable.<sup>7</sup> All of this indicates, it seems to me, that the bodice ripper phenomenon did play a role in the cultural and generic context in which the transformations of the category romance novel in the early 1980s are situated. Although the extent to which the connection between the two formats was direct is difficult to reconstruct within the scope of this dissertation, it seems more than plausible to me, particularly given the underlying generic narrative parallels that exist between the category romance novel and the bodice ripper novel at this time, that the developments that took place in the 1970s American bodice ripper did influence the transformations of the American category romance in the (early) 1980s.

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<sup>7</sup> Remember that one of the reasons Mills & Boon was initially reluctant to include sexually explicit scenes in its romance novels was that it wanted to avoid offending its readership.

## 4. Nora Roberts: an overview

Nora Roberts is one of the, if not the single, most important popular romance author(s) of the last thirty years. Her significance to the popular romance genre is related to the unparalleled popularity of her work as well as the substantial contributions her oeuvre has made to the institutional and narrative developments of the genre in the last three decades. Since Roberts published her first category romance novel for Silhouette in May 1981, she has written nearly two hundred novels.<sup>8</sup> While the sheer volume of her oeuvre then already sets Roberts apart from the majority of her peers – remember, there are currently only twelve romance authors that hold a so-called centennial award and have thus written more than one hundred romance novels – the phenomenal popularity of this massive oeuvre marks Roberts as truly exceptional. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, with over 400 million copies of her books currently in print and 173 *New York Times* best sellers to her name, Roberts is one of the best selling and most read authors on the planet (“Did You Know?”). Although she is probably most famous in her native United States, where “her name has become synonymous with romance fiction”, her books are translated in dozens of languages and sold all over the world (Rholetter). While Roberts’ ties to the romance genre are strong, in the course of her career she has moved beyond both the narrative and commercial boundaries traditionally associated with genre literature and has become “a major player in the mainstream fiction market” (idem).

### 4.1 The Oeuvre

Roberts’ exceptional success was not instantaneous, however. Born as Eleanor Mary “Ellie” Robertson on October 10 1950 in Silver Spring (USA), Roberts started writing romance fiction at the end of the 1970s with, as we have established, initially little success. Although Harlequin repeatedly rejected Roberts’ first submissions, the author was in fact trying to enter the romance genre at an opportune moment and in May 1981 Silhouette published Roberts’ first novel, *Irish Thoroughbred*. In the following years Roberts writes dozens of essentially run-of-the-mill category romances. These novels not only allow Roberts to gain experience with romance genre form, but also develop strong ties between her slowly emerging authorial identity and the generic identity of popular romance. As a beginning category author Roberts is bound by the strict conventions of the format and many of the romances Roberts writes in

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<sup>8</sup>Unless stated otherwise all bibliographical information regarding Roberts’ oeuvre is based on the information proved in *The Official Nora Roberts Companion* (2003) for publications prior to 2003 and Roberts’ official website ([www.noraroberts.com](http://www.noraroberts.com)) for publications after 2003.

these early years are quietly conventional and unremarkable. Although the narrative and paratextual performance of Roberts' authorship is confined by the category format in which she is writing, even in this narratively and institutionally strongly constrained context Roberts' novels develop the first hints of three elements that would, in the rest of her oeuvre, be pivotal in the strong development of her authorial identity. First, Roberts is incredibly prolific. She publishes no less than fifty category romances in only the first seven years of her career. Second, Roberts' novels start, initially often rather clumsily, mixing narrative conventions traditionally associated with different genres with the basic narrative framework of the romance genre. The category romance *Storm Warning* (1984), for example, is one of Roberts' earliest attempts at combining the romance narrative with suspense elements, a subgenre that would become a strong presence in much Roberts' later work. Third, early on Roberts introduces elements of narrative serialization in her category romance novels. Her first set of very loosely connected categories are published in 1983 and the first instalment of Roberts' first family series – a type of narrative series that would later become a staple in her oeuvre – appears in 1985. By 1987, barely six years after her first category romance novel was published, Roberts is one of the most successful authors in the romance genre. The various forms of institutional recognition she receives – Roberts wins six RWA Golden Medallions in five years and is, in 1987, the first inductee in RWA's Hall of Fame – cement her identity as a popular romance author.

At this time, Roberts expands the generic horizons of her narratives and thereby also her authorial identity. In 1987 her first single title romance, *Hot Ice*, is published. The story's darker and edgier tone, fast-paced mystery plot and abundance of murder and mayhem are a definite break away from Roberts' more light-hearted category romances and signal the beginning of what would become her extensive exploration of the romantic suspense subgenre. In the years that follow Roberts develops her oeuvre – and, concomitantly, her authorial identity – on this double track. Each year she publishes numerous category romances – most of which are tied in to a (family) series – and one single title romantic suspense novel which is aimed at a wider, mainstream audience. Her slowly increasing mainstream success is evidenced in 1991 when *Genuine Lies* becomes her first *New York Times* best seller. Roberts' 1992 move to publisher Putnam/Berkley heralds a new stage in her career and in the development of her authorial identity. The first original hardcover editions of Roberts' novels slowly start divorcing Roberts' authorial identity from the very strong association with genre fiction that had been developed in the previous decade. Yet at the same time she reinvigorates these associations by writing original mass market paperback romance

trilogies. These single title romance trilogies – which narratively perform very strong romance identities, but are paratextually clearly differentiated from the category romance format – seem to function as the bridge between Roberts’ different authorial identities and readerships. These series – Roberts writes ten such trilogies between 1994 and 2008 – are enormously popular and seem to appeal to both Roberts’ generic romance readership and a wider, more mainstream audience. Roberts’ trilogies then play a decisive role in the further development of Roberts’ authorial identity – from a successful romance author she grows into a (inter)nationally recognized star – and the connection that, to this day, exists in mainstream American popular culture between the generic identity popular romance and the author’s name “Nora Roberts.”

Although by the mid-1990s Roberts is developing three (subgenerically different) strands of her authorial identity – hardcover romantic suspense single titles, single title paperback romance trilogies and category romance– she is still wants to write more than her publishers, who fear an oversaturation of the market, are willing publish. Roberts adopts a pseudonym in 1995; as J.D. Robb she starts writing the *In Death*-series, an ongoing open-ended series of futuristic romantic suspense police procedural narratives. The series, set in the New York City of 2058, focuses on Lieutenant Eve Dallas and her billionaire lover and later husband Roarke. While each instalment in the series brings the complete story of one of Eve’s police investigations, the series as a whole focuses on the developing relationships between Eve, Roarke and an ever-expanding cast of secondary characters. Written in a darker voice than the Nora Roberts novels, this series develops yet another aspect of Roberts’ authorial identity. It combines elements of suspense, science fiction, detective and romance and thoroughly explores the narrative possibilities of the open-ended series. Although Roberts keeps the connection to Robb more or less under wraps until 2001 – when she officially “comes out” as Robb in an elaborate campaign – *Loyalty in Death* (the series’ ninth instalment) reaches the *New York Times* best seller list in 1999, which indicates the remarkable popular success of Roberts’ writing even which this is disconnected from her by now famous author’s name.

Towards the end of the 1990s Roberts’ (mainstream) popularity increases exponentially and her author’s name increasingly develops into a brand in its own right. While Roberts continues to write category romances and maintains strong (institutional) ties to the romance community – she is twice more inducted in the RWA Hall of Fame (in 1995 for romantic suspense and in 1996 for contemporary single title) and receives the RWA Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997 – her sales figures put her squarely beyond the scope of the



genre. In 1998 one of her novels reaches the top spot of the *New York Times* bestseller list – and important milestone for any popular literature writer today – and from 1999 onwards every new novel Roberts publishes, either as Nora Roberts or J.D. Robb, becomes an instant best seller. Her mainstream success now transfers to her more romance specific publications and Roberts' *The Perfect Neighbor* (1999) becomes the first Silhouette category romance to ever reach the *New York Times* best seller list. Although Roberts thus continues to have stellar success in the category format, she leaves Silhouette in 2001 and, from then on, publishes only single titles. While Roberts no longer writes new novels for Silhouette, the publisher continues to benefit from her success as they vigorously reissue the vast majority of Roberts' considerable backlist.

By the beginning of twenty-first century the combination of Roberts' steady stream of new novels – Roberts continues to publish an average of five new novels every year – and Silhouette's extensive reissuing of her older novels makes Roberts into a fixture on best seller lists. Roberts' output is increasingly streamlined. Every year she publishes one stand alone hardcover romantic suspense novel, an original paperback romance trilogy (often with strong paranormal undertones) and two instalments in the *In Death*-series. The consistent popularity of her oeuvre – both, noticeably, the new novels and the reissues of older work – slowly make Roberts into a figure of note in mainstream popular culture. She appears on *Forbes* 2004 and 2005 list of 100 Most Powerful Celebrities and is named as one of only two authors on *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in 2007 (the other author is J.K. Rowling). In that same year the American TV channel Lifetime Television airs *The Nora Roberts Collection*, a set of four movies based on four of Roberts' romantic suspense novels; the movies are Lifetime's most watched programs of the year and in 2009 a second *Collection* is made.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century Nora Roberts has then become one of the most popular authors alive today.

## 4.2 Roberts in the Media

Today, as one of the most popular authors on the planet, Nora Roberts has a fairly strong media presence. Her novels are frequently reviewed in popular American newspapers and magazines, she regularly gives interviews and numerous more lengthy pieces in several, mostly written, media have offered a more in-depth look at Roberts, her exceptional career

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<sup>9</sup>These movies are also aired outside the U.S. In 2009, for example, the Belgian commercial station VTM aired both sets of movies under their original name "The Nora Roberts Collection 1 and 2." The fact that Roberts' name is used in VTM's announcements might indicate that the author's fame and cultural visibility is steadily increasing outside the U.S. as well.

and her vast oeuvre. Roberts' media presence has significantly increased in the course of her career, which indicates her rising status in mainstream popular culture. In many of these publications Roberts is explicitly presented as the romance author par excellence, which increasingly constructs Roberts as the face and voice of the popular romance genre in America.

While media attention for Roberts in popular magazines and newspaper often consists of brief, rather superficial articles, in recent years several more serious, in-depth discussions of Roberts and her oeuvre have been published, hinting at her slowly shifting position in the cultural landscape. One of the earliest examples of this kind of in-depth approach is the publication of *The Official Nora Roberts Companion* in 2003. The book bundles (among other things) numerous articles that had been published about Roberts in the preceding decade, several interviews with key figures in Roberts' career (her agent, publishers, etc.) and a two hundred page bibliographical overview of all editions of all of Roberts' novels at the time of publication. While *The Official Nora Roberts Companion* is primarily a commercial publication targeting Roberts' fans, its attention to bibliographical detail and completeness is rare in discussions of popular romance and indicates that the approach to Roberts' body of work is slowly shifting as she develops into a figure whose significance to contemporary American popular culture is increasingly recognized.

This notion is also borne out by Roberts' appearance in 2007 on *Time Magazine's* list of the 100 most influential people. Although the brief profile on Roberts explicitly reiterates her connection to the culturally much derided popular romance genre, introducing Roberts as "the world's leading romance novelist", it nonetheless offers respect and recognition for Roberts' achievements in the genre, noting that she "has inspected, dissected, deconstructed, explored, explained and extolled the passions of the human heart" and "can make romance seem fresh and hopeful every time" (Sachs). Roberts' status as a culturally significant figure in contemporary American society was perhaps decisively established in June 2009 when *The New Yorker* ran a long, well-researched and much noted profile on the author. The article by Lauren Collins discusses everything from Roberts' writing style, to her interactions with fans, her relationship to the romance genre, the clever marketing of her oeuvre and her annual sales and estimated income. It is not only one of the most complete and insightful articles published on the author to date, but the fact of its publication also considerably raises Roberts' cultural standing since *The New Yorker* is one of the leading magazines in the U.S. and a powerful, respectable cultural institution. The publications of articles such as this one then signal Nora

Roberts' status as a cultural figure of note – not necessarily critically appreciated, but undeniably culturally significant - is increasingly recognized in the American media.

Roberts' prominence in contemporary American popular culture is further evidenced by the publication in 2010 of Mary Ellen Snodgrass' *Reading Nora Roberts*, the first complete book on Nora Roberts. In it Snodgrass gives a brief overview of the Roberts' career and oeuvre, focuses more in-depth on some novels and, in particular, discusses and analyses the presence of numerous socio-cultural themes in Roberts' writing. The book, published in Greenwood Press' The Pop Lit Book Club series, aims to facilitate discussion of Roberts' oeuvre among the general public (as appears from the "discussion questions" provided at the end of each chapter) and is directed, primarily, at the vast American book club audience. Although *Reading Nora Roberts* is not a scholarly study, the book's publication again underscores, as Snodgrass explicitly points out in her introduction (vii), that a discussion of contemporary popular culture is not complete without a discussion of Nora Roberts.<sup>10</sup>

### 4.3 Scholarly work on Roberts

As I have noted in the introduction to this dissertation, in spite of Roberts' status as one of the leading figures in contemporary popular culture, very little scholarly attention has been paid to her oeuvre. No academic monograph or scholarly account of Roberts' complete oeuvre and career currently exists – indeed, this dissertation is the first ever scholarly study of its kind – and only very few scholarly articles and papers about Roberts have been published. The scholar who has most extensively published on Roberts is Pamela Regis, who wrote an article on Roberts in *Paradoxa's* special romance issue (1997) and devoted one chapter of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* to a discussion of Roberts. In the *Paradoxa* article Regis uses her analysis of nearly a dozen of Roberts' category romances to make a broader claim refuting stereotypical assumptions about the romance genre. Examining the different embodiments of the structural romance elements barrier and point of ritual death in Roberts' novels, Regis points out that "[r]omances are not interchangeable ... [r]omances contain ideas ... [and] romance readers are not junkies" (152-53). Regis' chapter on Roberts in *A Natural History* places the author in the long literary history of the genre. Discussing seven of Roberts' novels published throughout her career, Regis points out that Roberts' novels "reflect the long tradition of the romance, the importance of affective individualism, of financial independence, and of companionate marriage for the heroine, as well as the taming and the healing of the

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<sup>10</sup> For a more elaborate review of *Reading Nora Roberts*, please see Goris (2010).

hero” (184). Briefly offering a wider perspective on Roberts, Regis explicitly casts Roberts as the top romance author of our time, claiming “Roberts is a master of the romance novel form” and “one of the best” romance authors in recent history (183-84).

To my knowledge, only four other substantial scholarly papers on Nora Roberts have been published. The first is John Lennard’s essay (2007) on the complex role genre plays in the relationship between Nora Roberts and her alter ego J.D. Robb. Discussing the role of, among other things, seriality and generic fusion in Roberts’ fiction, Lennard considers Robb’s *In Death* series an “explosive liberation for Roberts from the generic imperatives of female objectifications and male discourtesy with which she was struggling with” in her other fiction (71). Lennard analyses how in the long-running series Robb has the (narrative) time and space to slowly and extensively characterize protagonists Eve and Roarke and their complex, multi-layered relationship and favourably compares the exceptionally successful generic fusion of the *In Death* series to what he considers some of Roberts’ less successful generic mixtures in such novels as *Sanctuary* (1997) and *Carnal Innocence* (1991). Séverine Olivier’s discussion (2008) of Roberts’ exceptional place in the (translated) French romance genre is the only existing French criticism on Roberts. Writing from a francophone perspective, Olivier analyses the promotional and generic strategies used by Roberts to rise above the commercial and narrative confinements of genre fiction. The scholar argues that ultimately Roberts was so successful in this endeavour she modified the attitude of French publishers towards the production of her work. Wylene Rholetter (2008) contributes the article on Roberts to the special romance issue of the online journal *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*. Directed at (higher education) teachers, the article provides a long overview of the novels Roberts has published and their reception. While interesting, informative and well-researched, the article mainly consists of an enumeration of facts and does not develop much of a critical thesis. My own article (2012) on Roberts, finally, develops a paradoxical reading of the representation of romantic love in her oeuvre and, in doing so, defies the stereotypes of simplicity and superficiality that surround popular romance novels.

#### **4.4 Roberts in this Dissertation**

It is then clear that although a few scholars, such as Pamela Regis and John Lennard, have developed some critical perspectives on specific novels or certain parts of Roberts’ massive oeuvre, there is no sustained critical discussion of Roberts in academia today. What is missing

in particular – and what is, moreover, necessary to develop a sustained scholarly discussion on Roberts – is a critical account of Roberts’ complete career and oeuvre. Such a critical discussion of this massive body of work offers, in the first place, more thorough insight into an set of books that are amongst the most massively read literature in the world and, in the second place, a more fundamental understanding of Roberts’ complex development as a (popular) author. To achieve this latter diachronic perspective on Roberts’ authorial development this dissertation will consider the author’s novels not simply as a set of individual novels, but as a group of literary works which collectively constitute and represent the author’s transformation from a semi-anonymous category romance writer in 1981 to a bestselling global superstar in 2008.

This implies, of course, that this study is based on a massive corpus. To deal orderly and coherently deal with this huge body of work, the corpus discussion is spread out over three chapters, which are ordered both chronologically and thematically. The first chapter focuses on Roberts’ oeuvre between 1981 and 1994. The second chapter considers the category romance novels and the single title trilogies Roberts wrote between 1994 and 2008. The third and final chapter looks at the single title romantic suspense novels Roberts wrote between 1994 and 2008 and the futuristic police procedural *In Death* series she publishes under the pseudonym J.D. Robb. The decision to limit this study to Roberts’ novels that were released prior to 2009 is based in the first place on practical considerations since an important part of the research for this dissertation was conducted in the course of 2007 and 2008.



## CHAPTER 6: NORA ROBERTS' OEUVRE 1981 – 1994

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between genre and authorship in the development of the textual identities of Nora Roberts' novels undergoes massive changes in the course of her career as she develops from a semi-anonymous category romance author to a global superstar. This transformational process takes place more or less simultaneously in a number of different areas of Roberts' oeuvre. The analyses in this and the following chapters focus on what I consider to be the three most important and relevant lines of development in this regard: shifting generic narrative conventions, generic hybridization and narrative serialization. Each of these has the potential to manifest, to a greater or lesser extent, on both the narrative and paratextual levels of the text and thus contribute to the performative developments of textual identity as it is conceptualized in this dissertation.

The evolutions that take place over time in each of these areas contribute to the overall changes in the relationship between genre and authorship in Roberts' oeuvre. First, with regards to generic narrative conventionality a double dynamic takes place. On the one hand the general generic narrative conventions of the popular romance are present in all of Roberts' texts, which in this way consistently perform the popular romance generic identity. On the other hand, the specific embodiment of these general conventions changes significantly over time in a transformational process that, we will note, starts quite early in Roberts' oeuvre. While these transformations are congruent with the specific historical context of the American category romance that I have described earlier – in the early 1980s this format was, for several reasons, poised towards change – they are also gestures towards and performances of authorial presence and identity. Second, generic hybridization influences the relation between genre and authorship in the context of Roberts' oeuvre. It fragments the generic identity that is performed by the text and this often leads to a (significant) increase in the relative importance of the author in the text's identity. Generic hybridization is moreover a matter in which there is often a relatively big difference between the text's narrative level – where it is often a smooth and nuanced process that takes place to considerably varying degrees – and the paratext, where the performance of this fragmented identity and its relation to authorship tend to be (considerably) less nuanced. Narrative serialization, finally, affects the relationship

between genre and authorship in a more indirect way. It counters the dominance of genre in the textual identity because it is essentially based on the individual identification of the text in the sequence of the series. Since the author name functions, moreover, as one of the most meaningful nexuses in the serial sequence, narrative serialization tends to increase the relative importance of the author at the cost of genre in the textual identity that is performed.

Between 1981 and 1994, the period that is discussed in this chapter, significant developments in all three of these areas take place in Roberts' oeuvre. This is in part due to the fact that Roberts is incredibly productive in this period; between May 1981 and October 1994 no less than ninety-four of her novels are published.<sup>1</sup> Such a huge corpus of course presents a practical challenge for a study such as this one since it is all but impossible – and for the purposes of this dissertation in certain ways also redundant – to individually discuss each of her novels published in this period. Reduction of the corpus that is actually discussed is then, in my view, strongly advisable and even pragmatically unavoidable. While the discussion in this chapter then focuses on and mentions only a relatively limited number of the ninety-four Nora Roberts novels that were published in the period between 1981 and 1994, the claims that I make here are always based on the entirety of Roberts' corpus. In other words, even though not all novels of Roberts' published in the period under discussion are explicitly analyzed, or sometimes not even mentioned, it should be clear that my conclusions, made on the basis of those texts I consider most exemplary or representative, hold true for the entire oeuvre of this period.

The selection of the novels that are deemed indispensable in the discussion is based on the particular developments in Roberts' oeuvre that are the main subject of this discussion. Thus, the selected novels are in some way particularly significant for or exemplary of certain transformations and evolutions in the relationship between genre and authorship in Roberts' oeuvre as it is constituted and shaped by the shifting use of generic narrative conventionality, generic hybridization and narrative serialization. For each of these areas or parameters I trace, describe and analyze a certain process of transformational development in this chapter. For clarity's sake this discussion predominantly focuses on certain highlights or core moments in the transitional processes that are described. While this approach of focussing on certain exemplary novels and/or time periods seems prudent to me in the discussion of such a huge

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts' huge productivity rate in this period is rather constant; discounting 1981 in which only one novel appeared, on average seven new novels by Roberts are published each year. 1984 and 1985 are peaks in terms of productivity with ten new novels; 1993 is a quiet year with only three new novels. The vast majority of these novels (eighty-two, to be exact) are category romances; eleven of the novels published in this period are single titles.



corpus, it does tend to describe as structured, distinct and even (teleo)logical processes that in practice happened quite haphazardly, blurrily and without much (teleological) logic at all. It tends to distinguish clear, apparently separate steps in processes that are, for the most part, continuous, ongoing and fluid. For clarity's sake the discussion, moreover, focuses on each area of development more or less separately from the others – thus the developments in the shifting use of generic conventions, generic hybridization and narrative serialization are traced and discussed one by one – while in practice these developments are very much interwoven with one another, often even within one text. It is thus for example not the case that Roberts first introduces subtle changes to the narrative generic conventions she uses, then starts writing more generically hybrid narratives and subsequently introduces the element of narrative serialization in her novels. Instead, all three evolutions take place step by (miniscule) step throughout the same time period. In my discussion this entwinement and constant crisscrossing of different transformational developments is, for clarity's sake, somewhat downplayed.

## 2. Romance Conventions

As I have remarked earlier, the narrative conventions that characterize the popular romance novel take on historically and culturally specific forms. While these concrete embodiments of the more abstract conventions fall within the overall narrative framework typical of the popular romance genre, they nonetheless evolve quite significantly over time. Such evolutions are, as I have also indicated earlier, particularly strongly in the American category romance novel at the beginning of the 1980s. In fact, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the culturally and historically concrete narrative conventions that drive the American category romance novel undergo numerous significant changes. Nora Robert is one of the authors that play a part in this transformative process. Over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s she introduces multiple variations on the format's then still strongly established conventions and, in doing so, plays a role in shaping and molding the conventions of the American category romance in this period.

I argue that the manner in which Roberts participates in this process – the extent to which the conventions shift in her romance stories and the particular narrative content of these shifts – is related to and indicative of Roberts' particular position in the popular romance genre at this time. In the strongly constrained category romance format *popular* authors – i.e.

authors with (exceptional) commercial success or visibility – are usually allowed more leeway in introducing variations upon the established conventions by editors (who effectively function as gatekeepers “guarding” the generic and line-related conventions) than beginning, less established or simply less popular authors. In other words, the stronger a romance author’s individual authorial identity is developed (that is, the more popular she is), the more variation and changes to the conventions she is allowed to introduce in her stories. This implies that the extent to which category romance texts incorporate or contain variations and changes upon the existing, established conventions is indicative and constitutive of the extent to which the author is present and significant in the text’s identity *in relation to* the significance of genre in this identity. This is why tracing the ways in which Roberts’ category romance novels both follow and transform the established narrative conventions of the American category romance novel in the course of the 1980s and early 1990s provides insight into the evolving relation between the author Nora Roberts and the popular romance genre at this time.

In this discussion a clear distinction needs to be made between the narrative and the paratextual level of the text. Whereas, as we will discuss below, the concrete embodiments of the category romance’s narrative conventions transform and evolve in a rather fluid, subtle, slow and in a certain sense natural process, the format’s paratextual conventions are more rigid and institutionalized. Hence, the latter are, as it were, less inclined to change and consequently evolve more slowly and in more or less discrete steps. Where my discussion then reveals numerous moderate evolutions of conventions on the narrative level of Roberts’ category romances published between 1981 and 1994, this is much less the case for the texts’ paratexts which are characterized (more or less) by a status-quo of the conventions. Consequently, my discussion focuses first and most extensively on the narrative developments that take place in Roberts’ oeuvre in this period and only in second instance and rather briefly considers the characteristics of the corresponding paratexts.

## 2.1 Narrative Conventions

In terms of narrative conventionality, Roberts’ first dozen or so novels – all of which are category romances published by Silhouette – are very traditional. As a new author, Roberts has not proven anything yet in the genre – she has, in other words, not yet gained a strong individual authorial identity – and as such it is logical that in these category romances, published between May 1981 and July 1983, the format’s conventions take on very

established, even classic forms. Roberts writes about a dozen of such very traditional and conventional category romance novels.<sup>2</sup> Her first two novels, *Irish Thoroughbred* (Silhouette Romance, May 1981) and *Blithe Images* (Silhouette Romance, January 1982) between them contain about all of the most important traditional narrative conventions of the time.

*Irish Thoroughbred*, Roberts' first published novel, tells the story of the young Irish woman Adelia Cunnane, who after losing all her family and possessions in Ireland travels to the United States to live with her uncle Paddy, a trainer of Thoroughbreds on a prestigious horse farm owned by Travis Grant. Adelia, who has a knack for working with horses, starts to work for Travis as a stable hand and later horse trainer. Although she quickly falls in love with this powerful, enigmatic and mysterious man, she mistakenly believes him to be involved with a woman named Margot and refuses his less than subtle advances. When uncle Paddy has a heart attack and asks Travis to take care of Adelia, Travis suggests a marriage of convenience for uncle Paddy's sake. Adelia agrees, on the condition they do not consummate the marriage so it can be annulled when her uncle is on the mend. Once married Adelia and Travis quickly grow closer and as they fall in love the sexual tension rises. Eventually they consummate the marriage and Adelia briefly believes all her dreams to have come true. Upon waking up the next morning, however, she partially overhears a conversation between Travis and Margot and mistakenly believes Travis still intends to divorce her. Brokenhearted, Adelia flees to the airport, intending to return to Ireland. Before she can board the plane, she is intercepted by Travis who drags her back home and reveals that she misunderstood his conversation with Margot. He declares his love for her, confessing that he has been in love with her from the moment he met her and never intended to annul their marriage or divorce her. Adelia declares her love for him and the novel ends with the generically conventional happy ever after ending.

*Blithe Images*, Roberts' second novel published six months after *Irish Thoroughbred*, is the love story of the fashion model Hillary Baxter, whose world famous face hides the small-town girl she is at heart, and the rich, enigmatic and mesmerizing man of the world and magazine mogul Bret Bardoff. Hillary and Bret meet at a photo shoot where Hillary mistakenly believes Bret to be the photographer. When she realizes her mistake, she is annoyed with Bret for deceiving her, but when he makes her a professional offer she can't

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<sup>2</sup> In order of publication these are: *Irish Thoroughbred* (Silhouette Romance 05/81), *Blithe Images* (Silhouette Romance 01/82), *Song of the West* (Silhouette Romance, 04/82), *Search For Love* (Silhouette Romance, 07/82), *Island of Flowers* (Silhouette Romance, 10/82), *The Heart's Victory* (Silhouette Special Edition, 11/82), *From This Day* (Silhouette Romance, 01/83), *Her Mother's Keeper* (Silhouette Romance, 04/83), *Once More With Feelings* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 05/83), *Reflections* (Silhouette Special Edition, 06/83) and *Tonight and Always* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 07/83).

refuse, they nonetheless agree to work together for a year. Hillary soon falls in love with Bret, but mistakenly believes him to be involved with a woman named Charlene and refuses his to her mind purely sexual advances. Although Bret and Hilary grow closer to one another while working together, Hilary eventually flees Bret and New York City when she thinks he is simply using her to make Charlene jealous. She goes back home to Kansas and gives up her modeling career, deciding she doesn't fit the classy and sophisticated world of fashion. Bret eventually follows Hilary to Kansas, declares his love to her and explains that he hasn't given Charlene a second thought since meeting Hilary. She now returns his love and accepts his marriage proposal.

Both novels have a series of narrative features that are very traditional embodiments of the category narrative conventions in the early 1980s. There is a virginal heroine, who is sympathetic, spirited and feisty, but also rather naïve and very inexperienced. She has a job, but no career to which she is really dedicated, nor is she shown to develop serious professional aspirations throughout the novel. The hero is a typical alpha man; he is considerably older than the heroine, more experienced – both in life and in the bedroom – and firmly established in his profession, where he always takes up a position of authority. Both Travis and Bret are the head of their companies and the professional superiors of Adelia and Hillary respectively. The hero is rich – and considerably richer than the heroine – and moves in the upper circles of whatever community he is part of. Travis belongs to the upper echelons of the world of Thoroughbred breeding and racing, while Bret easily moves in the exclusive top regions of New York's fashion and magazine industry.

The hero is an enigmatic and mysterious figure whose feelings and motivations remain impenetrable for the heroine throughout much of the story. Both Adelia and Hillary understand very little of what drives and motivates the actions of Travis and Brett respectively and often misinterpret the men's behavior. This is an important contributing factor in the barrier or conflict, which, as is conventional at this time, mainly consists of misunderstandings and is essentially based on a lack of communication between the hero and the heroine. In both *Irish Thoroughbred* and *Blithe Images* the main barrier to the romantic union is Adelia's and Hillary's inability to understand why Travis and Brett behave the way they do combined with Travis' and Bret's lack of explanation for their actions. Both women interpret the hero's advances as purely sexual, mistakenly believe he is in love with another woman – the love rival who is the heroine's foil (experienced, self-confident, sexually aggressive, etc.) and thus raises the heroine's insecurities is another traditional narrative element of the category romance at this time – and are convinced that he does not love them.

Because both novels are told exclusively from the heroine's point of view – a strong category romance convention that goes back to Charles Boon's introduction of Lubbock's Law in the 1930s – the reader, like the heroine, for a long time lacks the information to understand the hero, whose thoughts, feelings, and motivations remain hidden throughout much of the story.<sup>3</sup>

This narrative dynamic gives rise to what I call the hero's big revelation scene, which is another traditional narrative element of category romances at this time. In these scenes, always located at the very end of the story, the hero reveals his true feelings and explains the motivations for many of his previous actions, thereby resolving the misunderstandings that are the final barrier. Both Travis and Brett deliver such long and revealing speeches at the end of their respective novels.<sup>4</sup> The information about the hero's true feelings that is revealed in these speeches allows the heroine (and the reader) to reinterpret much of the hero's past actions and thereby enables the happy ending.<sup>5</sup> Finally, *Irish Thoroughbred* and *Blithe Images* are, as is traditional at this time, rife with sexual tension but pretty chaste in their representations of actual sexual acts. While both novels contain numerous punishing kisses – another long established conventions of the category romance – Hilary and Bret do not

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<sup>3</sup> While it seems likely the reader takes up a double position in this interpretative process – at once ignorant (like the heroine) and knowing (because of the strong generic conventions) – this second, genre-based interpretation is only substantiated at the end of the novel when the narrative articulates the hero's motivations etc. outright.

<sup>4</sup> As is conventional, in this final speech the hero revisits nearly all of his past actions and reveals what he was feeling and thinking at the time, thereby finally explaining many of his so far mysterious behaviours to the heroine (and by extension the reader). Travis' speech from *Irish Thoroughbred* serves as a good example of this conventional element: ““Did you think I'd let you go after all I've been through to get you? ... Now, you little spitfire, keep your mouth shut and listen. Margot came here this morning without invitation. She brought up the subject of divorce, not I. In the first place ... I had never considered marrying her; any plans in that direction were her own. We have a fairly compatible relationship for a while ... She got it into her head that I should marry her and give up my work here, with some crazy notion about travelling the world and living in high style. I told her she was out of her mind, and she took for Europe, telling me it was her or the horses. ... The horses won, hands down. She got it stuck in that small brain of hers that I married you to spite her, and when she came here this morning going on about divorce and settlements, I let her ramble, curious to see how big a fool she'd make of herself. ... Now, if you had listened to the entire conversation, you would have heard me tell her that I had no intention of divorcing a wife I loved, now, or any time within the next thousand years.” ... “well, you might have told your wife you loved her. It would have saved a great deal of trouble.” “How could I tell her I loved her five minutes after she raged at me, standing there looking like an outraged urchin?... My first thought was to gentle you so you could stand the sight of me and go from there. Did you really think I took you to Kentucky and New York just for [the horse] Majesty? ... I didn't dare let you out of my sight; someone might have come along and snatched you away. I decided to wear you down slowly. ... I thought I was making some headway, but Paddy's heart attack changed everything. I felt the best way to help him was to assure him of your welfare, so I railroaded you into marriage with the promise of an annulment. Of course ... I never intended to give you one. ... It appears ... we have wasted a great deal of time.” “You seemed so far away. All those weeks you never even touched me. You never even said you loved me last night.” “I didn't dare touch you. I wanted you so much it was driving me mad. If I had told you I loved you last night – and how I wanted to! – you might have thought I said it just to keep you in bed.” “I won't think that now, Travis.”” (original edition, 186-188) As is conventional, Travis' speech resolves all misunderstandings that still existed between him and Adelia, and directly enables their HEA, which follows immediately upon this speech. For a similar scene in *Blithe Images*, see 216-219 (2003 edition).

<sup>5</sup> Janice Radway (1984) extensively discusses this process of reinterpretation, which is a crucial pillar of the scholar's overall claim that the romance reading act stimulates women to accept the status quo of patriarchy precisely because it teaches them, in Radway's interpretation, this dynamic of reinterpretation.

consummate their relationship in the novel at all and Adelia and Travis only sleep together once, a scene that is described sparingly and euphemistically. Both novels, as is traditional in the early 1980s, strongly tie the heroine's experience of sexuality to true love and marriage; indeed, the main reason Hillary and Bret do not sleep together is because they are not married. The novels do not endorse this sex-love connection for the heroes, both of whom are unmarried yet sexually quite experienced. This sexual double standard is widespread in category romance novels in the early 1980s.

It is then clear that in her first dozen or so novels, Nora Roberts only uses traditional forms of the category's narrative conventions. These classic representations locate these texts in the more conventional or traditional zone of the category romance format, which, as studies by amongst others Margaret Jensen (1984) and Carol Thurston (1987) extensively demonstrate and discuss, is starting to undergo many changes in the early 1980s. That Roberts' novels initially do not take part in these changes is not surprising since as a new, mostly not-yet-established category romance author Roberts lacks the commercial power and development of authorial identity to do so. However, with about a dozen category romances under her belt and a first Rita award to her name – *The Heart's Victory* (Silhouette Special Edition, 1982) wins for Best Contemporary Sensual Romance in 1983 – Roberts' position in the genre is quickly changing. A 1983 *Romantic Times* article indicates that barely two years after her first novel was published, Roberts is already a figure of note in the romance community and is considered by many to be a rising star in the genre (Petruzzi and Levy 10). This slightly higher position in the genre's community, in combination with the fact that the American category romance format is going through a time of (narrative) turmoil and change in any case, enables and allows Roberts to abandon her slavish incorporation of the most traditional forms of the established narrative conventions and to start introducing both small and larger variations upon these conventions in her category romances.

One of the first novels in which Roberts introduces a serious deviation from the traditional narrative conventions is *Dance of Dreams* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/1983), in which hero point of view is used for the first time in Roberts' oeuvre. Even though *Dance of Dream* is most likely not the very first category romance novel to feature the hero's point of view, as this is a narrative variation that features more widely in the American category romance throughout the 1980s (Jensen 89; Thurston 98), the use of this technique was still decidedly

unusual in category romance.<sup>6</sup> With this novel Roberts then establishes herself as one of the frontrunners in the introduction of this very important and influential change of convention that, once it becomes more commonplace, fundamentally changes some of the narrative dynamics at the core of the popular genre.

*Dance of Dreams* is the love story of Ruth Bannion, a twenty-two year old ballerina and Nickolai Davidov, her thirty-three year old occasional dance partner and artistic director of the dance company of which they are both members. Ruth and Nick have danced together for several years when, at the start of the novel, romance and sex enter their relationship. One of the main barriers to the definitive establishment of their romantic union is their age difference and the concomitant difference in life experience. Ruth, who is more than a decade younger than Nick, is a virgin at the start of the novel; while she has experienced her share of heartbreak, losing both her parents in a car crash when she was barely sixteen, she is rather naïve and inexperienced in comparison to Nick, who fled Russia as a young man and built a life for himself in the States. Via the use of hero point of view the novel quite early on establishes that Nick has been in love with Ruth for years, but has restrained himself from acting on his attraction and feelings for her because he considered her to be too young. When, spurred on by a fake romantic rival, Nick gives in to his feelings for Ruth and the tone of their relationship changes to include a romantic and sexual component, the novel shows Nick to be both terrified Ruth won't reciprocate the depth of his feelings and impatient to urge her on a fuller form of commitment. Ruth, for her part, is both thrilled – she has had a secret crush on Nick for years – and overwhelmed – Nick is considerably older, more experienced, her immediate professional superior and a living legend in the ballet world they both inhabit. Ruth's insecurities about being able to match Nick's larger than life persona, both professionally and personally, together with Nick's ambivalent feelings of frustration at the lack of commitment in their relationship, guilt over wanting Ruth to commit to him for life while she is still so young and initial inability to eloquently express his feelings for her lead to the outburst of the conflict and the temporary dark moment. This is resolved when in a conversation Ruth firmly establishes their equality as romantic life partners (which stands in contrast to his continued professional superiority over her) and proposes to Nick, who expresses his fear of losing her and thereby exposes the fundamental vulnerability his love for her creates in him. Nick accepts Ruth's proposal and they live happily ever after.

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<sup>6</sup> When I asked Roberts if there was opposition from the Silhouette editors towards this element, she answered she managed to “slip it in”, indicating that while editors did not specifically ask for hero point of view at this time, neither did they actively oppose it.

The use of hero point of view in *Dance of Dreams* changes some of the traditional narrative dynamics that characterize the classic category romance novel in the early 1980s. Revealing Nick's inner thoughts, feelings and motivations quite early on in the narrative, the novel demystifies the hero and is open about why Nick behaves the way he does. This has two important narrative consequences. First, the conflict between Ruth and Nick is not one that is, as was traditional at this time, mainly based on misunderstandings or miscommunication; with the reader having insight into Nick's inner thoughts, feelings and motivations, such misunderstandings would probably appear contrived and unconvincing. Instead, the barrier of age difference and difference in life experience is a more or less realistic and solid obstacle to Ruth and Nick's immediate romantic happiness. Second, compared to many earlier heroes, Nick is a more complex, complete, and slightly more realistic character. His emotional and psychological constitution, which is shown to drive many of his actions and decisions, is more elaborately developed than is the case, for example, with heroes such as Travis Grant or Bret Bardoff, whose inner emotional and psychological functioning is only discussed in the big revelation scene. Leading to among other things changes in the constitution of the barrier and the demystification and emotional and psychological expansion of the hero, the introduction of hero point of view is then a variation on established romance conventions that has considerable repercussions for the romance narrative as a whole.

While *Dance of Dreams* is then marked by an important and influential variation upon one of the most established category romance conventions, hero point of view is the only important deviation of the established conventions it includes. Indeed, in many other regards this story adheres to rather more traditional forms of the relevant narrative conventions. The young, virginal, naïve and inexperienced heroine, the older, more experienced, professionally superior hero, the various kinds of power difference between them, the figure of the romantic rival, etc. are all quite traditional embodiments of the romance category conventions. As a whole, *Dance of Dreams'* narrative is then a combination of very traditional narrative elements with one or two significant variations upon these established conventions. This pattern of introducing variations on narrative conventions and, as it were, mitigating these by including numerous more traditional narrative elements is used very frequently in Roberts' category romance novels in the 1980s and early 1990s. While initially these narrative mixes are, as in *Dance of Dreams*, characterized by an preponderance of the more traditional elements, over time the balance often shifts towards the newer variations, which become more and more frequent and dominant in Roberts' category romances. Of course, this implies that after a while elements that started out as new and convention-defying become commonplace



and conventional themselves; this is, for example, the case with hero point of view, which from mid 1983 onwards Roberts uses in very many of her category romance novels and which by the mid 1990s has become a widespread convention in the American category romance novel (Thurston 98).

Next to the introduction of hero point of view, there are various other variations on traditional narrative conventions in the category romances Roberts writes in this period. Roberts' narratives participate in and contribute to the overall trend of featuring a stronger, more emancipated heroine (Jensen; Thurston). Roberts' heroines grow slightly older – they are often in their mid instead of early twenties –, more experienced and less naïve. One of the areas in which the emancipation of the heroine is most visible is her profession, which is an increasingly important aspect of her identity. In the course of the 1980s and early 1990s Roberts' narratives increasingly feature heroines who have outspoken professional ambitions and important careers. The kinds of profession these women practice vary a great deal; these jobs include, for example:

- reporter (*Endings and Beginnings*, 01/84, *Partners*, 05/85, *Second Nature*, 01/86)
- model (*Blithe Images*, 01/82, *Sullivan's Woman*, 03/84)
- actress (*Dual Image*, 12/85, *Dance to the Piper*, 07/88, *Skin Deep*, 09/88)
- shopkeeper (*First Impressions*, 04/84), *A Matter of Choice*, 05/84, *Taming Natasha*, 03/90)
- director (*Rules of the Game*, 10/84)
- blackjack dealer (*Playing the Odds*, 03/85)
- lawyer (*Tempting Fate*, 05/85, *Night Shadows*, 03/91, *Falling for Rachel*, 04/93)
- artist (*All the Possibilities*, 07/85, *One Man's Art*, 09/85)
- chef (*Summer Dessert*, 11/85)
- surgeon (*For Now, Forever*, 02/87)
- secret agent (*The Playboy Prince*, 10/87)
- civil engineer (*Best Laid Plans*, 03/89)
- scientist (*Without a Trace*, 10/90)
- car mechanic (*Courting Catherine*, 06/91)
- CEO (*Luring a Lady*, 12/91, *Night Smoke*, 10/94),
- private investigator (*Entranced*, 10/92)

- police officer (*Nightshade*, 11/93)

As we can see from this more or less chronological list, some of Roberts' heroines practice traditionally female jobs (model, shopkeeper, actress), but many of them, certainly towards the second half of the 1980s and early 1990s, have jobs which are traditionally not thought of as typical for women, such as surgeon, secret agent, car mechanic, civil engineer, scientist, CEO, private investigator and cop. This is obviously an important factor in the heroine's increasing emancipation.

Jobs and careers become, moreover, also increasingly important in the romance narrative as a whole. Heroes and heroines more frequently meet in a professional context or are structurally brought together via shared or opposing professional interests. In *Endings and Beginnings* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 01/84), for example, the protagonists are rival reporters in Washington D.C. who are trying to outdo one another in their quest for exclusives and scoops; in *Boundary Lines* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/85) the protagonists are rival ranchers, and in *Best Laid Plans* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/89) the heroine is a civil engineer who clashes with the hero-architect in charge of designing the building she is working on. Although the professional connection between hero and heroine is as such not completely new – in both *Irish Thoroughbred* and *Blithe Images* the protagonists meet in a professional context as well, for example – the heroine's position in this relationship changes significantly. Whereas in early novels such as *Irish Thoroughbred*, *Blithe Images* and *Dance of Dreams* the heroine is explicitly cast as the hero's professional subordinate, in later novels, such as *Endings and Beginnings*, *Boundary Lines* and *Best Laid Plans* (and many, many more) the heroine is more frequently the hero's professional equal.

In such situations of professional equality, the external conflict is not infrequently located in the professional sphere. In *Best Laid Plans*, for example, the initial conflict between civil engineer Abra Wilson and architect Cody Johnson is based on her lowly opinion of architects in general and the particular problems she has with the design he developed for a construction they are building together. This initial professional conflict contrasts with their immediate physical attraction to one another and sets up the push-and-pull dynamic of the romance narrative from the very start of the novel. Sometimes the professional connection between hero and heroine is as such developed as one of the barriers to their romantic relationship. This is for example the case in *Summer Desserts* (Silhouette Special Edition, 11/85), in which world renowned chef Summer Lyndon is hired by hotel magnate Blake Cochran to redesign the menu of his flagship hotel. While strongly attracted to each other, Summer and Blake initially refuse to give in to these feelings precisely because they are

working together. That their professional connection functions as a barrier to their romantic involvement implies that initially the protagonists' (including the heroine's) professional identities take precedence over their romantic ones. Although the novel of course does not sustain this interpretation, *Summer Desserts* is the first novel by Roberts in which professional issues are shown to at least temporarily trump romantic ones for not only the hero, but also the heroine.

Sometimes, although this is still rare, Roberts puts the heroine in a position of professional authority over the hero. *Rules of the Game* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/84), a novel in which the heroine is the director of a series of TV commercials in which the baseball player hero reluctantly stars, is one of the first novels in which Roberts features this at the time very unusual professional dynamic between hero and heroine. That this reversal of the traditional power dynamics is a difficult element in category romances is suggested, in my view, by the fact that it takes Roberts almost a decade before she tries it again. In *Luring a Lady* (Silhouette Special Edition, 12/91) heroine Sydney Hayward is the newly appointed CEO of a big real estate company that owns the building in which hero Mikhail Stanislaski, who is both a carpenter and a successful sculptor, lives. Sydney and Mikhail first meet when he angrily storms into her office to demand she takes care of the renovations his apartment building urgently needs; after inspecting the premises Sydney agrees and hires Mikhail to carry out the work – a move that firmly establishes him as her employee and thus consolidates her professional superiority over him. Although this dynamic is slightly countered by the fact that the hero has a double professional identity – besides carpenter he is also one of the top artistic sculptors on the American art scene, a position that enables him to still develop considerable professional, cultural and financial power and capital – the novel dwells much more on Sydney's professional activities and career than on Mikhail's and consistently shows her to be the structural superior in the professional interactions between the two of them.

Although, as Whylene Rholetter has argued, the figure of Sydney Hayward might signal what Roberts herself calls "the end of the Cinderella era" for the category romance heroine<sup>7</sup>, the extent of the professional emancipation she embodies for the heroine is not immediately a widespread trend in Roberts' category romances at this time. Indeed, although over the course of the 1980s and early 1990s the heroine quite consistently grows stronger and more independent, becoming a true romantic equal to the hero, her professional structural superiority over him is rare. In fact, in many of the novels Roberts writes in this period the

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<sup>7</sup> Rholetter refers to "Paradoxa Interview" (157).

heroine is in a position (professional or otherwise) which requires her to somehow be protected, rescued or saved by the hero. This is a common narrative pattern that Roberts resorts to frequently throughout this entire period. It is present in relatively early novels such as *A Matter of Choice* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 05/84) – the hero is an undercover cop who infiltrates the heroine’s life to protect her from the smugglers that are using her antique shop as a cover – and *Affaire Royale* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 05/86), in which the heroine is a princess with amnesia who is protected from terrorists by the hero/bodyguard. Later novels with this conventional pattern include *Skin Deep* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/88) – heroine Chantel O’Hurley hires security expert and body guard Quinn Doran to protect her from the antics of a deranged stalker and killer -, *Without a Trace* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/90) – scientist Gillian Fitzpatrick hires bounty hunter Trace O’Hurley to track down her brother and young niece who have been kidnapped by a criminal organization; when she accompanies him on a quest through a South-American jungle he effectively becomes her protector and lifeline -, *Night Shift* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 01/91) – hero Boyd Fletcher is the cop who is in charge of investigating the violent stalker who is pursuing local radio DJ Cilla O’Roarke and ends up falling in love with Cilla and acting as her personal bodyguard – and *Night Smoke* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/94), in which fire inspector Ryan Piasecki is investigating a series of arsons of buildings belonging to the company of CEO Nathalee Fletcher, who soon ends up being a target herself. All these novels, and many more in Roberts’ oeuvre, incorporate a narrative situation in which the heroine is structurally located in a position of vulnerability or danger from which the hero is set to rescue or protect her. Although this does not automatically make the heroine a weak character – on the contrary, many of these novels go out of their way to emphasize the heroine’s various kinds of strength by portraying her as a sympathetic, strong-willed woman with, often, a well-developed professional identity and extensive life experience – the frequent occurrence of this pattern does indicate, I find, that the hero’s structural superiority over the heroine – a superiority that is positively embodied in his attempts to protect, save, and/or rescue her – is a narrative structure that is more in tune with the core narrative impulses of the popular romance novel at this time than is the reversed situation.

Another area in which the emancipation of the heroine manifests quite clearly is sexuality. As I have indicated earlier, the representation of (female) sexuality undergoes quite significant changes in the American category romance as a whole in the course of the 1980s (Jensen; Thurston). Roberts’ novels fully participate in this format-wide evolution. One of the most

significant changes of the category's sexual conventions concerns the treatment of female virginity. Whereas at beginning of the 1980s the heroine is invariably a virgin – and often remains in this immaculate state throughout the narrative – by the mid 1990s her virginity is no longer a prerequisite; even when it is present at the beginning of the story, it is rarely maintained. The amount of sex scenes in category romances not only increases in this period, but the way in which sexuality is represented also evolves and becomes on the whole (considerably) more explicit.<sup>8</sup> These developments, which occur more generally in the American category romance throughout the 1980s and 90s, can be traced in Roberts' oeuvre.

As is traditional at the time, Roberts' early novels, such as *Blithe Images* feature virginal heroines who remain in this untouched state throughout the story. Although erotic tension is an important aspect of the relationship between hero and heroine in these conventional novels, the protagonists' sexual involvement does not proceed beyond numerous (punishing) kisses. It should be noted that whereas in these novels the heroine is clearly portrayed as a virgin, the hero is equally clearly portrayed as a sexually experienced man and adept lover. As these conventions are quickly evolving at this time, Roberts' category romances soon start including actual sex scenes in which the protagonists make love. Heroines are still virgins at the start of these novels, but they lose their virginity in the course of the narrative when they sleep with the hero for the first time. Although the actual inclusion of these sex scenes implies a significant change in Roberts' representation of sexuality, this evolution is slow going. These early sex scenes are often rather short and rendered in a discourse that is often steeped in euphemisms and metaphors. The heroine's sexual emancipation in these narratives is, moreover, restricted by the fact that her experience of sexuality is always firmly tied to the concept of true romantic love. Indeed, in Roberts' category romance novels the heroine only sleeps with the hero when she is (aware of being) in love with him. This is a firm convention of the format that remains in place in Roberts' work over the course of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s (and, we shall discuss later, even beyond this time). When the heroine is a virgin at the beginning of the novel, as she quite often is in the novels from the 1980s, this implies that the hero is the only man the heroine ever sleeps with, or indeed responds to in a sexual way. This sexual exclusivity is to an extent gender-specific – the hero has had sex with other women in the past – but applies to the hero from the moment he meets the heroine, at which time other women essentially cease to awaken his sexual response. While this notion of sexual exclusivity – not simply as a practice,

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard importance differences of course exist between different lines.

but as a factual experience – is then an important aspect of the romantic utopia that is created by these stories, its gender-bias is indicative of the limits of female emancipation enacted in Roberts' novels (and in the American category romance at large) at this time.

This utopian sexual exclusivity very often remains in place even when the heroine is not a virgin at the start of the story and thus has had sex with at least one man other than the hero. The first of Roberts' category romances to feature such a non-virgin heroine is *Endings and Beginnings* (Silhouette Intimate Moment, 01/84), in which the heroine, Olivia Carmichael, is a divorcee who has slept with her now ex-husband before meeting the hero. It is quite remarkable that, given the strength of the female virginity convention in the category romance at this time, neither *Endings and Beginnings*, nor any of the other novels that feature non-virginal heroines, dwell on the heroine's non-virginal status. This is simply represented as a fact that is questioned nor problematized. In the following years, the non-virgin heroine initially remains a rather elusive figure in Roberts' novels, the vast majority of which continue to feature female virgins. Slowly, however, the non-virginal heroine gains ground and by the early 1990s she is a common figure in Roberts' category romances. Very often the past sexual experiences of these women are quite limited – usually they have had sexual interactions only with one man other than the hero -, took place within a committed relationship (often a marriage) and are represented as having been unsatisfying. Indeed, even when a heroine is not a virgin at the start of the novel, she very rarely has had satisfying, pleasurable sexual experiences in the past. Instead, most of these heroines have never enjoyed sex, have become convinced they are sexually inadequate – some even think they are frigid – and consequently lack sexual self-confidence. In this sense, these heroines are what I call *metaphorical* virgins whom the hero in a very real way still sexually awakens. He is presented as the first man they sexually respond to and with whom they, as the conventions of the genre require, experience stupendous sexual pleasure. This figure of the metaphorical virgin is rather common in Roberts' oeuvre at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s; she is featured for example in *The Last Honest Woman* (Silhouette Special Edition, 05/88), *Night Shift* (01/91), *Suzanna's Surrender* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 09/91), *Luring a Lady* (12/91), and *Nightshade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 11/93).

A particular version of the metaphorical virgin is the raped or abused heroine. This is a heroine who does not simply suffer from an unsatisfying or disappointing sexual past, but who has been sexually abused and is as a result sexually traumatized. In the period under discussion two of Roberts' category romances feature such a raped heroine. The first is *The Last Honest Woman* (Silhouette Special Edition, 05/88), a novel that tells the love story of

Abby O'Hurley, a widow with two young sons who was raped once by her late husband, and hero Dylan Crosby, a freelance author who is writing a biography on Abby's famous deceased husband. Roberts' second category romance novel to feature a raped heroine is *Nightshade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 11/93). In this story police officer Althea Grayson is working with Private Investigator Colt Nightshade as they are searching for a missing teenage girl who has fallen victim to a prostitution ring. As a young teenager Althea was systematically sexually abused for years by her foster brother. The novel shows how her severe sexual, emotional and psychological traumas are reawakened by the search for the missing girl and her budding romantic and sexual relationship with Colt. While both novels refuse to put their heroine solely in the position of victim – instead portraying them as exceptionally strong and successful women (Abby's success is mostly defined in terms of motherhood, while Althea's success is more of a professional order) who have managed to overcome their traumatic past and build a successful life for themselves – both stories recognize, to varying degrees, the horror of sexual abuse and explore some of the ways in which it continues to affect the lives of its victims.

In the figure of the raped heroine these novels then explore some of the darker and twisted sides of sexuality; in doing so they deviate to an extent from the light-hearted, essentially optimistic tone that conventionally pervades the category romance novel (Jensen 80). Although these novels do not completely abandon the category romance's conventional optimism – they of course feature the generic HEA and focus on the fact that the sexual abuse is overcome – their treatment of this highly sensitive topic does set them somewhat apart from many other category romances of the time. While the raped heroine is still a rare figure in Roberts' category romances of this time, in much of her later, post-1994 work, Roberts revisits this figure and, as I shall argue in the next two chapters, to an extent even turns her into a recognizable and rather prominent figure in her oeuvre. In a certain way these figures can, moreover, be interpreted as reversals or rewritings of the infamous rape scenes present in many bodice rippers, which, as I remarked before, are in many accounts considered to be one of the American category romance's generic precursors.

Next to the virgin, the metaphorical virgin and the raped heroine, there are heroines with a fourth type of sexual history in Roberts' novels in this period. The sexually confident heroine who has a healthy sexual past in which she experienced satisfying sexual pleasure at the hands of one or more lovers other than the hero is, however, still a rare figure in Roberts' category romances. In the 1980s only very few of Roberts' novels feature such a heroine. In *Summer Desserts* (Silhouette Special Edition, 11//85), Roberts' first category romance novel

to feature a sexually self-confident and experienced heroine, Summer Lyndon has had a satisfying love affair with an older, more experienced French chef when she was attending one of the top culinary schools in Paris. Although the novel is open about Summer's satisfying sexual past, it places this past explicitly in an exotic, foreign, romantic locale – the culinary scene in Paris, while the present story is set in Philadelphia – and represents it as part of Summer's somewhat eccentric and French characterization that fits her profession of world famous chef. Although *Summer Desserts* was published in 1985, the sexually self-confident heroine remains an elusive figure in the rest of Roberts' work of the 1980s. By the early to mid 1990s she has, however, become more frequent, appearing in novels such as *Night Shadow* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 03/91), *Captivated* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/92), *Entranced* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/92); *Falling for Rachel* (Silhouette Special Edition, 04/93), *Convincing Alex* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/94) and *Night Smoke* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/94). Although the heroine with a positive sexual past no longer explicitly supports the notion that the heroine's sexual response and pleasure is exclusively tied to the hero, these narratives nonetheless always represent the sexual relationship between the hero and the heroine as far surpassing any other sexual experience either of them has ever had before. As I remarked in part I of this dissertation, this notion is a strongly established convention of the popular romance genre and one that Roberts' novels do not deviate from, even when they participate in the evolution of many of the other conventional aspects of the representation of sexuality in category romances.

It is then clear that a lot of variation exists in the representation of (female) sexuality in Roberts' novels published between 1981 and 1994. Although in the above discussion I have established some more or less coherent and chronological patterns of evolution that occur in this regard in the period under discussion, I emphasize that most of these developments do not take place in a chronologically very straightforward order but crisscross in Roberts' oeuvre. For example, although on the whole virginal heroines are more common in the 80s than they are in the first half of the 90s, the virginal heroine never really disappears from Roberts' work and is a figure that Roberts revisits throughout her oeuvre. The sexually confident heroine, on the other hand, is more common in the 1990s than in the decade before, but does put in appearances in the 80s too, etc. In short, the changes in the representation of female sexuality that take place in Roberts' work and in the American category romance more at large do not happen strictly chronologically, but are a chronologically fuzzy development. This is not the case for the representation of male sexuality, which remains more or less constant throughout this period in Roberts' oeuvre. Roberts' hero is always sexually experienced – indeed, while



female virginity is a very common and at times even prerequisite convention in category romances, male virginity seems to be an equally strong taboo<sup>9</sup> -, always sexually self-confident and invariably a very skilful, selfless lover who manages to not only sexually awaken the most frightened virgins but in the process also unfailingly provides her with sexual pleasure beyond anything she has ever imagined. While the introduction of hero point of view generally reveals that heroes, like heroines, tend to sleep with the heroine when they are already in love with her, the necessity of the connection between love and sex is overall less strongly established for heroes than it is for heroines in Roberts' work in this period.

The representation of sexuality then changes significantly in Roberts' oeuvre in the course of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Where her earliest novels do not include full-out sex scenes, love scenes become a standard ingredient of Roberts' category romances by the mid 1980s. Over the course of the following decade the scenes become longer, go into greater detail and change in tone from rather oblique and euphemistic to more explicit and erotic. In this regard Roberts' work mostly follows the evolutions that, as the aforementioned studies by Margaret Jensen and Carol Thurston have established in detail, are more generally taking place in the American category romance in the course of the 1980s, where the more explicit representation of sexuality is overall rapidly gaining ground. This overall trend is accompanied by a logical diversification of the representation of sexuality in category romance novels, which increasingly differentiate between different levels of sensuality. While Roberts' oeuvre takes part in these evolutions, Nora Roberts is not, in my view, one of the authors who is a frontrunner in this regard – as she is, for example, with regard to the introduction of hero point of view and to an extent also with regard to the increased professionalisation of the heroine. Although from the mid 1980s on Roberts' category romance novels can hardly be described as chaste or sweet, they are neither extremely sexually explicit. Instead, the level of sensuality in Roberts' work at this time can perhaps best be characterized as conventional and average.

## 2.2 Paratextual Conventions

In the paratext, as well as in the narrative, the relationship between genre and authorship is influenced and even constituted by the extent to which the author's texts respect or deviate from the applicable conventions. As I remarked earlier, such paratextual conventions are more rigid than narrative conventions and, consequently, change more slowly and less fluently than

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<sup>9</sup> For more on (the taboo of) male virginity in popular romance, see Jonathan Allan (2012).

their narrative counterparts. In other words, the paratext of an individual category romance is less likely to deviate from the applicable conventions than its narrative. This implies, of course, that deviations from paratextual conventions that do occur are in a sense more significant and potentially have a greater or more immediate impact on the peritextual construction of the textual identity than their narrative counterparts. These patterns are clearly present in the category romances Nora Roberts writes in the period under discussion. Whereas, as I have established earlier, many of these texts incorporate variations on the ruling narrative conventions of the American category romance, in comparison to this narrative situation the books' paratexts are far more conventional and standardized. Indeed, a brief perusal of the paratextual characteristic of Roberts' category romances in this period reveals clearly that the paratext of the vast majority of these books does not significantly deviate from the conventional practices that I described and analyzed in part I of this dissertation. However, towards the end of the period under discussion, a few such variations or deviations do occur and, as I argue below, I consider these to be particularly significant to and indicative of Roberts' changing relationship to the popular romance genre that these paratextual zones both reflect and construct.

In the period between 1981 and 1994 Roberts' category romance appear predominantly in two Silhouette imprints: Silhouette Special Edition (thirty-two novels) and Silhouette Intimate Moments (twenty-nine novels).<sup>10</sup> On the narrative level<sup>11</sup> both lines are characterized by relatively long stories (these novels average around 250 pages instead of the standard 185 pages) with a high level of sensuality; Roberts' novels in these lines comply with both conventions. Silhouette Special Editions novels are furthermore characterized by an increased sense of realism, more extensively developed characters and a sophisticated style; these conventional elements are indeed present in Roberts' Silhouette Special Edition novels. Think for example of relatively extensively and complexly developed characters such as Nick Davidov (*Dance of Dreams*) and Sydney Hayward (*Luring a Lady*) and the more or less realistic professional conflicts in Silhouette Special Edition novels such as *Summer Desserts* and *Best Laid Plans*. Silhouette Intimate Moments narratives are marked by a sense of grandeur and scope and regular hints of adventure, glamour, drama or suspense; again Roberts' novels in this line generally incorporate these characteristics. As I discuss more

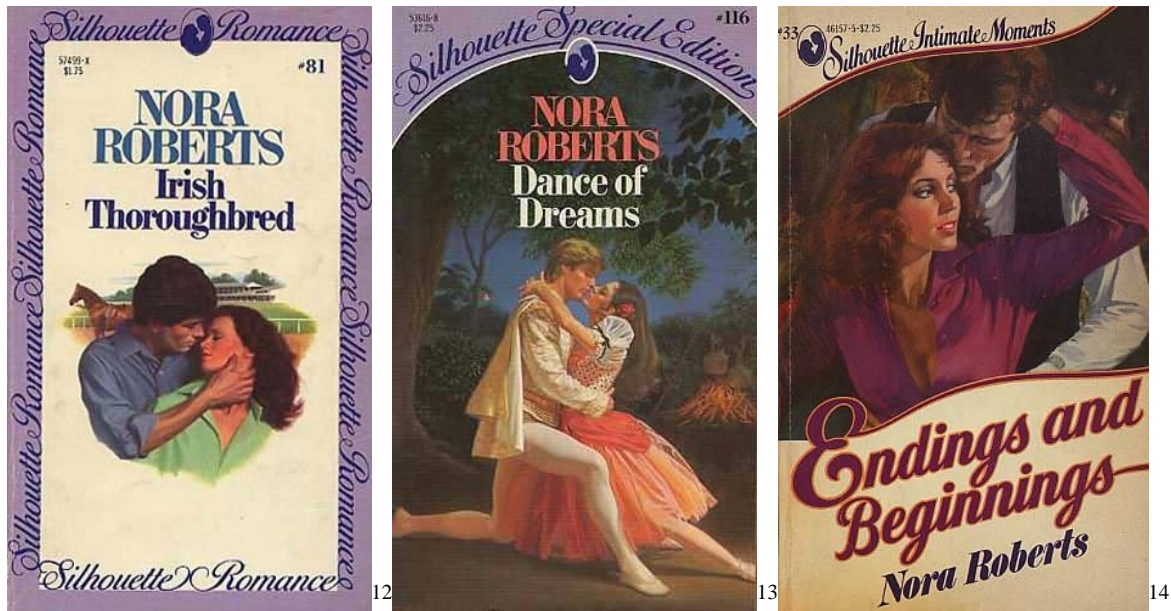
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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, thirteen of Roberts' category novels appear in the Silhouette Romance line, two in Harlequin Historical, and one in both Silhouette Desire and Harlequin Intrigue.

<sup>11</sup> I have determined the narrative characteristics of both lines not only by reading all of Roberts' novels that were published in these imprints, but also on the basis of descriptions of the line profile that appear in the prefaces to numerous of Roberts early category romances.

extensively in the next section, many of Roberts' Intimate Moments novels include, for example, generically other subplots that create the sense of adventure, suspense or glamour that characterizes the line.

Roberts' category romance novels furthermore display all the peritextual conventions that characterize the format and the particular line in which they appear. Thus, as we can see in the images below, their front covers are for example composed according to the lines' particular respective cover templates and design styles.

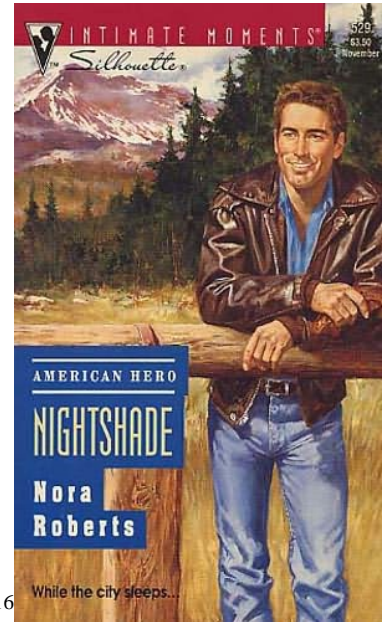
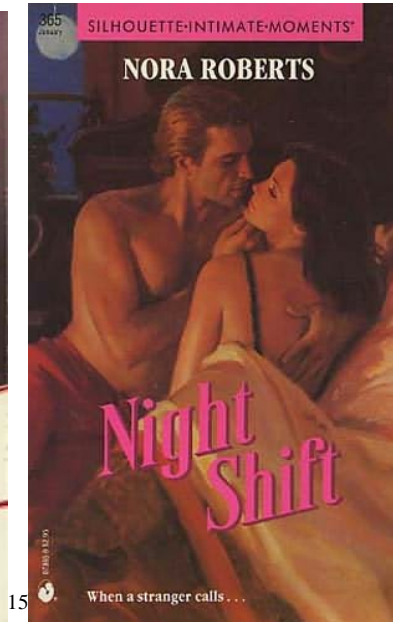


These images, all from front covers published in the early 1980s, are marked by the fashion and design style that was conventional at the time. As I remarked in part I, these conventional elements evolve over time as category romances always strive to adopt a fresh, modern, up-to-date look. Roberts' novels follow the conventions and thus partake in such overall transformations; see for example the evolving style of the Intimate Moments front cover template as displayed by some of Roberts' novels published in the line between 1983 and 1993:

<sup>12</sup> Front cover image original edition *Irish Thoroughbred*. Scan.

<sup>13</sup> Front cover image original edition *Dance of Dreams*. Scan.

<sup>14</sup> Front cover image original edition *Ending and Beginnings*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/endings-and-beginnings.htm>



These novels by Roberts, published in 1983, 1991 and 1993 respectively, reflect the minor shifts that occur in the line's overall template and general design style in the decade between 1983 and 1993. These books' covers are, in other words, perfectly conventional – as are the other aspects of their respective peritexts.

Roberts' category romances also display and partake in the evolving style and composition of the category romance's preface. As I remarked in part I, the preface is one of the few convention-driven peritextual elements of the category romance novel that over time undergoes not superficial but significant changes. In the period under discussion in this chapter this evolution is indeed on-going. At the beginning of the 1980s the category preface, written by one of the line's editors, is preoccupied with a general description of the line's particular narrative profile and with explicitly soliciting reader feedback. Towards the middle of the 1980s the first references to particular authors appear in category prefaces and by the second half of the 1980s this focus has become more dominant. At this time the preface conventionally consists of only brief general sketches of the line's profile (which disappear from the preface by the end of the 1980s) and more elaborate discussions of two or more particular novels that are released in the line that month. I believe that this evolution of the conventional format of the category preface is indicative (and constitutive) of the wider evolution that is taking place in the format in the course of the 1980s in which individual

<sup>15</sup> Front cover image original edition *Once More With Feelings*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/once-more-with-feeling.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Front cover image original edition *Night Shift*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/night-shift.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Front cover image original edition *Nightshade*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/nightshade.htm>

authors become increasingly prominent. Although, as I have argued earlier, the category romance novel remains at its core a format that is preoccupied much more with genre than with the individual author, in the course of the 1980s this author does slowly emerge from the near-invisible position she took up at the end of the 1970s and becomes slightly more prominent. The changes in the conventions of the category's preface reflect and partially constitute this wider evolution. They are also present in the prefaces to Roberts' category romances that are released in this period. Her early novels, such as *Irish Thoroughbred* for example, carry prefaces that are solely preoccupied with the line<sup>18</sup>; mid 1980s novels such as *Affaire Royale*<sup>19</sup> have prefaces that make a mention of individual authors and prefaces in Roberts' category romances from the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s adopt the then-standard form of a discussion of two or more individual novels released in the line that month.

In this latter format Roberts' own increasing prominence in the popular romance genre is apparent and performed. Whereas prefaces in the second half of the 1980s might or might not make a mention of her novels – the preface to *Playboy Prince* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/87) discusses two other novels, for example – by the early 1990s Roberts' novels are quite consistently amongst those discussed in the preface. Very often, Roberts' novel is the first one to be discussed, which is a further indication and performance of her increasing prominence in the genre. The ever-increasing accolades<sup>20</sup> with which Roberts' name and novels are introduced to the reader are a further indication of the fact that Roberts' star is rising in the romance community and that her individual authorial identity is becoming increasingly prominent in the textual identity that is both reflected and constructed in these peritextual zones. While such prefaces then contribute to the increasing importance of Roberts' individual authorial presence in the text's identity, we should note that these prefaces are still conventional; that is, the focus on the individual author that they display is, by this

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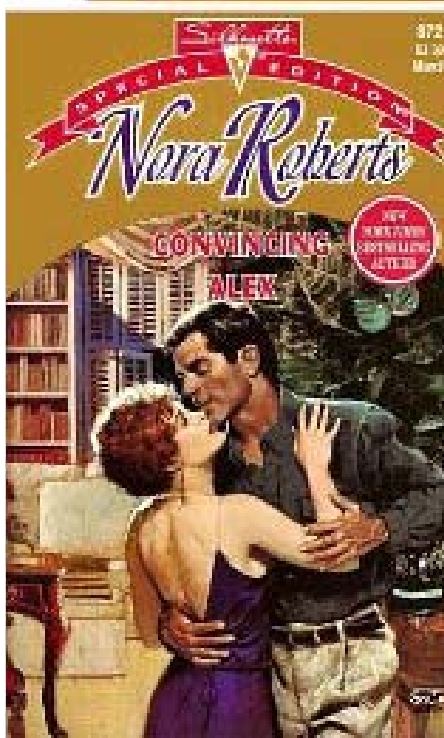
<sup>18</sup> An example of such a preface is the one that appears in the original edition of Roberts' *Irish Thoroughbred*: "Dear Reader: Silhouette Romances is an exciting new publishing venture. We will be presenting the very finest writers of contemporary romantic fiction as well as outstanding new talent in this field. It is our hope that our stories, our heroes and our heroines will give you, the reader, all you want from romantic fiction. Also, *you* play an important part in our future plans for Silhouette Romances. We welcome any suggestions or comments on our books and I invite you to write to us at the address below. So, enjoy this book and all the wonderful romances from Silhouette. They're for *you!* Karen Some, Editor-in-Chief." (original emphasis, *Irish Thoroughbred*, original edition, 2)

<sup>19</sup> Following a description of the line's narrative profile, this preface closing paragraph reads: "In coming months look for novels by your favourite authors: Maura Seger, Parris Afton Bonds, Elizabeth Lowell and Erin St. Claire, to name just a few" (2).

<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1989 she is referred to as "one of your very favourite authors" (*Time Was*, 2), in 1991 she is described as "one of your all-time favourites" (*Night Shadow*, 2) and in 1993 the preface to *Nightshade* opens with "We've got a book this month that every romance reader will want to add to her personal collection" (2) and then goes on to praise Roberts' novel.

time, as such not a deviation from the applicable format convention. Roberts' authorial identity is then being constructed and raised within the innate confines of the format.

This changes in 1994 when the cover of Roberts' *Convincing Alex* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/94) displays a significant deviation from the line's conventional front cover template as displayed by the second image below.



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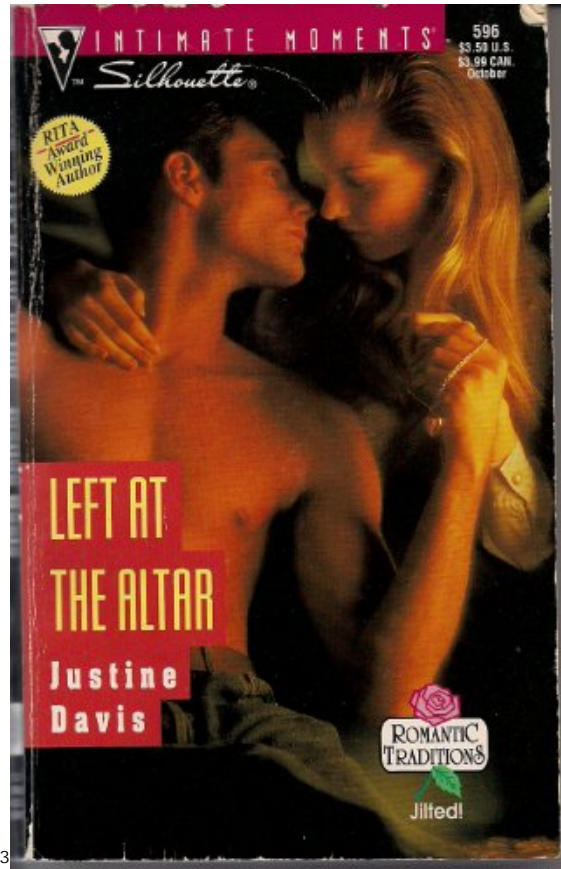
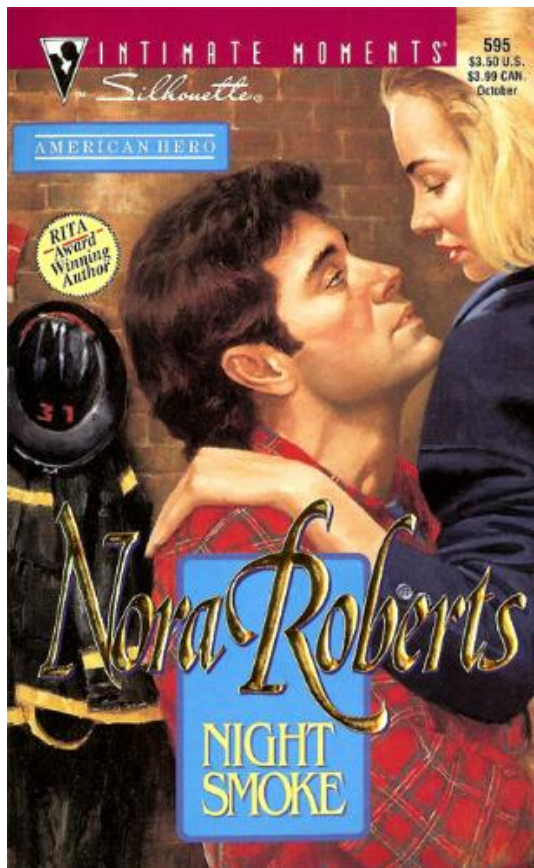
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*Convincing Alex*'s front cover deviates from the standard Silhouette Special Edition front cover template, which is used for Elizabeth August's novel that is published in the same line and at the same time. Roberts' name is slightly bigger than August's, and it is printed in a different, more eye-catching and raised typeface. The golden banner is drawn lower than is standard, which places Roberts' name in the banner – a place that is conventionally reserved for the line name. The cover's colour scheme of gold and purple also visibly deviates from the then standard pink. In short, the deviation of the template serves to make Roberts' name more prominent on this front cover. This deviation from the conventions is not a coincidence or a one-time occurrence. From 1994 onwards the front covers, and other peritextual elements, of many of Roberts' category romance novels systematically deviate from their line templates in order to increase the performative presence of Roberts' name and authorial identity. These deviations are increasingly outspoken and prominent, as we can see for example in the front

<sup>21</sup> Scan of front cover original edition *Convincing Alex*. Scan.

<sup>22</sup> Front cover image original edition *One Last Fling*. Source: <http://www.amazon.com/Last-Fling-Special-Woman-Silhouette/dp/0373098715>

cover of Roberts' *Night Smoke* (Silhouette Intimate Moments), published only six months after *Convincing Alex*.



As emerges clearly from the comparison of the two front cover images above – both of novels published in the Silhouette Intimate Moments line in October 1994 – deviations from the front cover template in terms of the size, colour, type-face and place in which Roberts' name is printed make her name a much more prominent and important presence on this front cover. A cover such as this one clearly indicates that Roberts' name has become an important part of the identity that is peritextually reflected and performed in this cover space. This notion is reinforced by the prefaces of both *Convincing Alex* and *Night Smoke*, which highlight Roberts' novel and extensively praise the author. While both the front cover and the preface then contribute to performatively raising Roberts' authorial profile, the front cover is likely to have more impact on this process not only because it takes up a spatially more prominent position, but also because it clearly presents a *deviation* from the standard conventions; this

<sup>23</sup> Front cover image original edition *Night Smoke*. Scan.

<sup>24</sup> Front cover image original edition *Left at the Altar*. Source: <http://buggysbookblog.blogspot.com/2011/05/review-of-justine-davis-left-at-altar.html>

act of deviation marks Roberts as a special case. This is less so for the preface, where the praising and raising of Roberts' profile happens within its conventional format.

Finally, Roberts' rising status in the popular romance genre and its community of users is also apparent in the genre-specific awards that she wins in this period. Between 1983 (the first year the Ritas are awarded) and 1994 eight of Roberts' category romances win a Rita award:

- 1983: *The Heart's Victory* Best Contemporary Sensual Romance
- 1984: *Untamed* Best Traditional Romance
- This Magic Moment* Best Contemporary 65-80.000 words
- 1985: *Opposites Attract* Best Short Contemporary Romance
- A Matter of Choice* Best Long Contemporary Series Romance
- 1987: *One Summer* Best Long Contemporary Series Romance
- 1992: *Night Shift* Best Romantic Suspense
- 1994: *Nightshade* Best Romantic Suspense

Roberts' series romances win Ritas in various categories, but she clearly excels specifically at the Long Contemporary Romance category. Having won four<sup>25</sup> awards in this category in barely five years, Roberts is inducted into RWA's Hall of Fame in 1987. She is the first member. As I indicated earlier, such awards have a double effect. On the one hand a Rita award performatively claims, as it were, the novel for the popular romance genre and thus contributes to the construction of the text's generic identity as popular romance. On the other hand, Rita awards of course distinguish individual novels and authors from others in the same genre and community and thereby raise the author's (and the novel's) individual profile. In this way they also contribute to the performative development of the author's idiosyncratic authorial identity; indeed, Roberts' status in the genre – her presence as an individual author in this community – is raised by these awards. Roberts' induction into RWA's Hall of Fame, finally, has a similar effect, but with a wider scope. It “claims” Roberts for the popular romance genre – establishing a strong link between the author's name Nora Roberts and the genre popular romance – and it raises Roberts' profile within this genre, indicating that she is considered one of the best members of the generic category.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Both the Rita for *The Heart's Victory* (Best Contemporary Sensual Romance) and *This Magic Moment* (Best Contemporary 65 -80.000 words) count towards this win as well since they essentially win in the same category, which name was changed numerous times (“RWA Hall of Fame”).

<sup>26</sup> For this period in Roberts' oeuvre I do not consider reviews of these novels. Given that these are category romances it is very likely these books were only reviewed in fanzines such as *Romantic Times*. It falls outside of the scope of this dissertation to unearth the archives of this publication to access these texts. In the next two chapters I do consider reviews.



### 3. Generic Hybridization

The constitution of a romance novel's generic identity – and, consequently, of the relation between genre and authorship in its textual identity – is not only influenced by the ways in which the romance genre's generic conventions are present (or absent) in the text, but also by the extent to which the text incorporates conventions that are considered typical of genres other than the popular romance genre. Such a generically hybrid text simultaneously performs different generic identities, which implies that the generic identity performed by the text is fragmented. This fragmentation not only multiplies the text's generic identities, but in doing so also fundamentally points towards the relativity of each of these identities. That is, the fact that the romance identity is not the only one that is performed reveals or establishes the relativity of this romance identity. This dynamic in turn reduces the relative importance of the romance generic identity in the overall textual identity that is performatively constructed. The extent to which this is factually the case of course depends on the particular constitution of each individual text – and specifically on what kind of generic elements are present and their relation to other generic elements – but the principle described here conceptually applies to all popular romance novels in which generically other elements are present.<sup>27</sup> This process of generic fragmentation also has the effect of potentially increasing the relative importance of the author in the textual identity that is constructed because this part of the text's identity is, unlike the generic one, not fragmented. Again, the extent to which this is factually the case for any individual text depends on this text and the particular oeuvre in which it figures. For example, when an author frequently uses a particular generic mix in his or her texts and becomes particularly well known for this tendency – when, in other words, this generic hybridity is as such a characteristic element of the authorial identity – the presence of this particular generic mix presumably raises the importance of the authorial identity in the text's overall identity and vice versa.

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<sup>27</sup> Clearly, this kind of discussion raises the question how we determine which element is considered conventional of which genre. The elaborate discussion in part I of this dissertation indicates, I believe, the complexity and multifaceted nature of such a process of describing and determining generic conventions. It falls outside the scope of this dissertation, however, to apply this process to each genre that is discussed here. Consequently, in the discussion of genres other than popular romance I rely on the understanding I have of their conventions as a participant in the culture in which these genres are situated. In doing so I acknowledge that this understanding is likely considerably less nuanced and comprehensive than the one that would emerge from an exhaustive study of the conventions of each of these genres such as the one I carry out for the popular romance genre in the first part of this dissertation.

In the matter of generic hybridity in Nora Roberts' novels a firm distinction exists between Roberts' category romances on the one hand and her single title novels on the other. As I discuss in part I of this dissertation, these romance formats treat generic hybridity in significantly different ways and this is no different for Roberts' oeuvre. Consequently, my discussion first focuses on generic hybridity as it occurs in Roberts' category romance novels – where it is mainly a narrative matter – and then considers its role in Roberts' single titles, where it is present on both the narrative and the paratextual level of the text.

### 3.1 Category Romances

Roberts starts writing category romance novels with generically hybrid narratives quite early in her career at time when such generic hybridity is still somewhat of a novelty in the American category romance format (Jensen 65; Thurston 191). The first of Roberts' categories in which narrative elements traditionally associated with another genre play a significant role is *Storm Warning*, which is published in the Silhouette Romance line in February 1984. Combining traditional romance and suspense narrative elements, the novel tells the love story of heroine Autumn Gallagher, a young photographer, and hero Lucas Mclean, a successful novelist, whose romantic courtship takes place against the backdrop of the suspenseful search for a murderer. *Storm Warning* develops the romance and the suspense plot lines in more or less equal measure. Thus, on the one hand it brings the courtship story of Autumn and Lucas, who share a muddy romantic past that stands in the way of their present happy union. On the other hand, and rather separately from this romance narrative, the novel develops a classic whodunit in which Autumn, Lucas and a number of secondary characters are looking for the killer of one of their fellow guests at the inn at which they are staying. Both storylines are marked by the presence of fairly traditional generic conventions. This is certainly the case for the romance narrative which features a young and naïve heroine and an older, richer, more experienced alpha man hero; the novel is told exclusively from the heroine's point of view, features numerous fake romantic rivals and a conflict that is essentially based on lack of communication. This big misunderstanding prompts the classic big revelation scene in which Lucas, in traditional hero-without-point-of-view style, reveals all his inner demons and thus resolves the conflict, which leads to the HEA. Although my knowledge of classic suspense elements is more intuitive, it seems to me that the murder, the whodunit plot structure, the hero as main but in the end false suspect and the suspenseful finale in which the true murderer reveals himself, corners the heroine and unravels the

mystery before he attempts to kill her – an attempt that is interrupted by the hero who risks his own life to save the heroine – are all equally classic narrative elements of the suspense genre. Via these traditional, very conventional narrative elements *Storm Warning*'s narrative then emphatically performs a double generic identity. This performance is, I find, further reinforced by what I consider to be a lack of narrative interwovenness between the two generically different plots. Indeed, the romance and the suspense story line, although ostensibly part of one story, are told quite separately from and even parallel to one another. While the resulting lack of narrative cohesion reinforces the text's performance of a double generic identity, this narrative performance contrasts quite strongly with the novel's paratext, which incorporates all applicable conventions of the category romance novel and thus performs a single generic identity. This contrast between the narrative and the paratextual performance of genre identity marks all of Roberts' category romance novels with generically hybrid narratives that are published before the mid-1990s.

While the tension between the narrative and the paratextual level remains in place for generically hybrid category romances throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, two other characteristics that typify Roberts' first attempt at generic hybridisation – *Storm Warning*'s very conventional embodiment of the romance narrative conventions and its lack of narrative interconnection between the generically different story threads – do evolve significantly in this period. Although *Storm Warning* is initially followed by a number of other hybrid narratives with similar characteristics – including *A Matter of Choice* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 05/84), *The Law is a Lady* (Silhouette Special Edition, 07/84) and *The Right Path* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 03/85) – soon Roberts starts writing hybrid narratives in which the generically different story lines are significantly more interwoven with one another. One of the first novels in which Roberts applies this technique is *Playing the Odds* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/85) in which heroine Serena MacGregor, a blackjack dealer, and hero Justin Blade, a casino and hotel owner, fall in love. Their courtship narrative is interlaced with a suspense storyline in which Justin is being stalked by an unknown man who sends him threatening letters and plants a bomb in one of Justin's casinos. While this suspense storyline is initially a minor and rather unimportant subplot in a narrative that is clearly dominated by the romance's conventional courtship plot, by the time Justin and Serena have established a romantic and tangible sexual connection, the suspense plot comes to the fore in the story. Justin, who realizes he is in love with Serena and that she is in danger when she is with him, attempts to drive Serena away by behaving carelessly towards her. Serena, although hurt by his ostensible carelessness, refuses to leave but does put an end to their relationship. This in

turn enrages Justin, who in a moment of intense emotion – fear for her life and rage over her refusal to leave him get the better of him – declares his love and reveals his fears. Serena reciprocates the declaration, but still refuses to leave. Here the suspense story line then plays a role in the concrete narrative embodiment of several of the romance’s conventional generic narrative elements; specifically, this long scene contains a barrier, a recognition and two declarations. This technique of connecting the generically different story threads by using generically other narrative elements to narratively embody some of the conventional romance elements obviously creates a much higher level of narrative cohesion between the two generically different plot lines as the generically other story is used to move the romance’s courtship narrative forward. Roberts, very many of whose category romances contain generically hybrid narratives<sup>28</sup>, uses this blending technique in all of these stories from this point onwards.

In these narrative mixes the romance genre is, as it is in *Playing the Odds*, always dominant. The way in which the romance narrative conventions are represented slowly shifts, however, from quite traditional and classic in the early hybrids to increasingly less traditional and more modern in later narrative hybrids. Although very few of Roberts’ narratively hybrid categories contain as many classic representations of romance conventions as does *Storm Warning*, some of the author’s other early hybrids still include various classic narrative elements. *Playing the Odds* and *Affaire Royale*, for example, both feature a young and virginal heroine who falls for an older, (sexually) far more experienced alpha man hero. The latter novel, which tells the love story of Princess Gabriella of Cordina and her body guard Reeve MacGee, also includes other classic elements such as an amnesia plot and a marriage of convenience story line. Although these traditional elements are accompanied by more modern variations on the conventions – both novels include hero point of view and heroines whose professions are not unimportant, for example – these romance narratives are on the whole fairly traditional. This traditionalism is, I believe, related to the fact that the generically hybrid category romance narrative is still unusual in the category romance, and thus in itself somewhat of a deviation from the format’s established conventions, at this time. Until the end

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<sup>28</sup> The most important of these are *Affaire Royale* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 02/86), *Treasures Lost, Treasures Found* (Silhouette Intimate Moment, 07/86), *Command Performance* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 07/87), *The Playboy Prince* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/87), *Irish Rose* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 03/88), *Skin Deep* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/88), *The Welcoming* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/89), *Without a Trace* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/90), *Night Shift* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 01/91), *Night Shadow* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 03/91), *A Man for Amanda* (Silhouette Desire, 07/91), *For the Love of Lilah* (Silhouette Special Edition, 08/91), *Suzanna’s Surrender* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 09/91), *Entranced* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/92), *Nightshade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 11/93) and *Night Smoke* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/94).

of the 1970s category romance narratives did conventionally not include narratively significant elements from other genres. While this convention starts changing by the end of the 1970s (Jensen 65), this increased narrative generic hybridity is not yet well-established by the mid-1980s when Nora Roberts starts to use it frequently. I then interpret Roberts' inclusion of such recognizably traditional romance elements (which are most dominant in early hybrid narratives such as *Storm Warning* and *The Right Path*) as an attempt to emphasize the popular romance identity of these narratives – which is indeed strongly performed by these classic elements – and mitigate, as it were, their slightly unusual narrative hybridity.

Changes happen quickly in the American category romance format in the 1980s, however, and within a few short years narrative generic hybridity is more common, as is indicated for example by the fact that Silhouette Intimate Moments starts including “a hint of adventure, glamour and suspense” in its narrative profile. Similarly, Roberts' hybrid categories begin featuring less traditional embodiments of the romance narrative conventions. An early example of this is *Skin Deep* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/88) in which the heroine, Chantelle O'Hurley, is a world famous actress whose public image oozes seduction and sexuality; although privately Chantelle is somewhat less sexually self-confident and provocative than her image implies, she is no virgin and wields considerable female power. Employing the hero, Quinn Doran, as the bodyguard who is to protect her from an increasingly volatile stalker, Chantelle also holds considerable financial and structural power in her relationship to Quinn. Since Quinn takes up a powerful position in his own right – he has the expertise, knowhow and physical power to protect her and as her bodyguard structurally acts as her saviour – theirs is an evenly matched relationship that is a far cry from the unbalanced power relationships that mark Roberts' early novels and the traditional conventions of the format.

By the beginning of the 1990s the generically hybrid narrative, still of course with a dominant romance identity, is a more or less established narrative form in the American category romance format. Roberts' categories not only increasingly often feature such hybrid stories, but the narrative representation of the conventional romance elements is no longer strictly traditional in these texts. A good example of this evolution is the romance narrative in Roberts' generically hybrid *Night Shift* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 01/91). In this romance story the hero, Boyd Fletcher, and the heroine, Cilla O'Roarke, display behaviour that in classic category romances is often ascribed to the other gender. Although Boyd is an alpha man and Cilla a metaphorical virgin – two conventional roles – Boyd's early realization and immediate complete acceptance of the fact that he is in love with Cilla as well as his

subsequent decision to hide this love for her because he is convinced it would scare her away are behaviours that are reminiscent of classic heroines. Likewise, Cilla behaves like a classic hero; she is fighting a variety of inner emotional demons and hiding a number of big secrets, all of which revolve around a disastrous earlier marriage, her concomitant belief she is frigid and, on a deeper level, her inability to cope with the death of her mother, a police officer who was killed on the job. Turning the classic gender roles upside down, this novel features what were the time clearly modern embodiments of some of the romance narrative conventions. Although these evolutions of the conventions had been on-going in Roberts' oeuvre, and the American category romance, for a while, as I discussed earlier, the fact that they now appear in a generically hybrid narrative is indicative, I believe, of the fact that these hybrids have become a more common, if not conventional, narrative form in the American category romance by the early 1990s. This is indicated again two years later by Roberts' *Nightshade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 11/93) As a novel with a generically hybrid story in which the romance courtship narrative is interwoven with the hero and heroine's quest for a missing girl who has fallen victim to a merciless prostitution ring, *Nightshade* stands out as a category romance novel because of the sensitive and dark themes it portrays. Exploring issues of child abuse, rape, sexual molestation, traffic in women, prostitution, involuntary participation in pornography, battery of women, and murder, the novel's overall dark tone and near-dominant suspense narrative is a significant deviation from the conventionally more optimistic and light-hearted tone of the category romance. While the story's publication in a category romance line is indicative, I believe, of the extent to which the format is now receptive to such generically hybrid narratives, the romance-convention-defying nature of the themes explored in its suspense narrative and the story's darker tone also indicate the extent to which Roberts by this time is able to stretch the always-evolving boundaries of the format.

As I mentioned earlier, a tension of course exists between the double romance and suspense generic identity that these narratives perform and the single romance generic identity that their paratexts perform. And although in the period from 1981 until 1994 the generically mixed or hybrid narrative becomes, as I have just discussed, a more or less accepted narrative form in the American category romance, the format's paratextual conventions are less quick to incorporate these evolutions. Thus, the paratexts of all of Roberts' categories with hybrid narratives perform a singularly romance generic identity. Their front covers, for example, are marked by various romance cues but do not, as a rule, contain references to the suspense

aspects of the narrative.<sup>29</sup> There is one very significant exception to this general observation and that is the Rita for Best [Romantic] Suspense that RWA first awarded in 1989 (Roberts wins with *Brazen Virtue*, one of her single titles that is discussed later). That RWA creates a separate award for the romantic suspense subgenre is indicative and constitutive of the extent to which this subgenre – and thus the principle of generic mixing and hybridity – has become common and conventional within the wider American popular romance genre at the end of the 1980s. Both *Night Shift*, in 1992, and *Nightshade*, in 1994, win this Rita Award and thereby acquire a paratextual element that does reflect and perform (unlike the rest of the novels' paratexts) their double generic identity. Even while doing so, these Rita awards of course also performatively reinforce the novels' romance generic identity – the Rita is, after all, the romance genre's most important award – and thereby establish an institutional acceptance of what I have described as the novels' modern and non-traditional representation of the romance genre's narrative conventions.

Although in the period discussed in this chapter romantic suspense is the generically hybrid subgenre that Roberts most frequently writes in, from the early 1990s onwards she widens her subgeneric scope to a few paranormal category romances. These narratives combine the conventional elements of the popular romance genre with narrative elements that are conventionally associated with the genres of fantasy or science fiction. Roberts' first paranormal romance, *Time Was* (Silhouette Intimate Moments), is published in December 1989 and is immediately followed by a second paranormal, *Times Change* (Silhouette Intimate Moments), in January 1990. Both category romances combine the conventional romance narrative with futuristic elements; the latter mainly consist of the fact that the heroes in both novels are time traveling men from the twenty-third century who end up in the twentieth century. In an effective use of the generic narrative blending technique both novels use this narrative given as one of the main, and quite substantial, barriers to the protagonists' happy romantic union. However, aside from this functional use of the futuristic narrative element in the romance's courtship plot, the extent to which futuristic elements are present in the narratives, both of which are set at the end of the twentieth century, is quite limited.

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<sup>29</sup> In this regard these front covers differ from some of examples of the category romance front covers that were discussed in part I in which the second generic identity is, to a small extent, acknowledged and represented (e.g. by including an image of a gun on the front cover or by the particular color scheme that is used on the cover). These secondary generic are, however, not yet used in the category's paratext in the period that is discussed in this chapter.

This changes in Roberts' next paranormal, 1991's *Night Shadow* (Silhouette Intimate Moments 03/91), in which the hero, Gage Guthrie, is a Batman-like figure with a double identity. By day he is a rich and respected business man, but by night he unleashes his superpowers and turns into the masked vigilante Nemesis. The novel initially uses Gage's double identity as a barrier to the happy romantic union between Gage/Nemesis and heroine Deborah O'Roarke, a young prosecutor who falls in love with both Gage and Nemesis before she learns they are one man. Although Deborah's simultaneous attraction to, in her experience, two different men is strongly at odds with the popular romance's defining fantasy of the complete exclusivity of true romantic love, the breach of this core romance generic convention – raised by the generically other superhero convention of the double identity – is never really substantiated in the narrative, which establishes the true nature of the Gage/Nemesis connection from the very start via the use of hero point of view. Tightly interwoven with its romance and paranormal storylines, *Night Shadow* also develops a suspense plot in which Deborah and Gage/Nemesis try to take down organized crime in their city. The novel extensively uses this suspense plot line – itself a convention of the (comic-book) superhero genre – to further develop the conflict between Gage and Deborah, whose fundamentally opposing views on the best way to deal with crime – Deborah firmly believes in the public justice system in which she works, while Gage uses Nemesis to seek justice in a personal, revenge-fuelled quest that circumvents the law – is another substantial barrier between them. *Night Shadow* stands out as the first novel in which Roberts successfully blends narrative conventions associated with three different genres (romance, suspense, and paranormal/superhero); while the novel hints at the potential risks such a blend might entail for the integrity of each of these generic identities – indeed, the romance identity is shown to potentially be at odds with conventions of the superhero genre – Roberts skilfully manages this generically complex narrative and the story successfully preserves and performs its dominant romance identity.

The final set of paranormal romances Roberts writes in this period - *Captivated* (Silhouette Special Edition, 09/92), *Entranced* (Silhouette Special Edition, 10/92) and *Charmed* (Silhouette Special Edition, 11/92) – are published in 1992. Each of these novels tells the love story of a supernaturally gifted protagonist and a mere mortal who, at the start of the novel, has no idea the other's magical powers are real. In each of these novels this lack of knowledge is part of the barrier that stands in the way of the happy romantic union; this manner of narratively blending the romance genre with another one in the barrier element has by this time become a more or less standard element of Roberts' generically hybrid narratives.



Although each of these stories fully performs the paranormal generic identity – the novels e.g. extensively portray the various magical powers the characters have at their disposal – the narrative performance of the romance identity is always dominant. The narrative embodiment of the romance conventions is neither particularly traditional, nor outspokenly modern, but rather a kind of blend of both that is featured in numerous other (non-paranormal) Roberts category romances in this period as well. The narratives then do not display a sense of anxiety about their dominant romance identity. This dominance is reflected in their paratext, which follows the conventions of the category romance format. It thus ignores the narratives’ paranormal identity and performs a singular romance identity. This is the case for Roberts’ other paranormal romance narratives that are published in this period as well. Paranormal romance is a little bit behind romantic suspense in developing into an established subgenre of the American category romance novel, which is indicated by the fact that RWA awards the first Rita for “Best Futuristic/Fantasy/Paranormal Romance” in 1992. None of Roberts’ paranormal novels wins this Rita award, however.

### 3.2 Single Title Romances

As I remarked before, the single title romance novels that Nora Roberts writes between August 1987 and October 1994 cannot be considered separately from the issue of generic hybridity on both the narrative and the paratextual level. In fact, each of Roberts’ eleven single titles<sup>30</sup> that are published in this period has such a thoroughly hybrid generic identity that the term “single title romance novel” with which I refer to these novels in this dissertation is in itself not a self-evident identification. Indeed, although all of these novels feature both narrative and paratextual conventional generic cues that perform the popular romance generic identity, in some cases their identification as romance novels that the term “single title” implies is nonetheless not a self-evident matter because, as I discuss below, some of their (generically) other features problematize the romance identity. In fact, I would suggest that the identification of some of these novels as single title romances is perhaps not in the first

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<sup>30</sup> In order of publication, these are: *Hot Ice* (Bantam Books, 08/87), *Sacred Sins* (Bantam Books, 12/87), *Brazen Virtue* (Bantam Books, 05/88), *Sweet Revenge* (Bantam Books, 01/89), *Public Secrets* (Bantam Books, 07/90), *Genuine Lies* (Bantam Books, 09/91), *Carnal Innocence* (Bantam Books, 01/92), *Honest Illusions* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 07/92), *Divine Evil* (Bantam Books, 10/92), *Private Scandals* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 07/93), *Hidden Riches* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 07/94). In 1984 Pocket Books’ published Nora Roberts’ novel *Promise Me Tomorrow*; while this is officially Roberts’ first single title romance, the novel has long been out of print and copies of it are extremely rare and all but impossible to obtain. This is due to the fact that the rights have reverted back to Roberts, who dislikes the work to the extent that she refuses to have it be published again. Since I have not managed to obtain a copy of this book – and it remains, consequently, the only novel by Roberts that I have not read – I do not further include it in my discussion.

place based on their particular generic properties – although all of these books do feature numerous romance generic conventions – but is also, and sometimes more importantly, related to the particular authorial oeuvre of which they are a part and in which they are, certainly today, conceptually placed. Indeed, the strong connection that exists between the author’s name “Nora Roberts” and the generic identity popular romance – a connection that was already established within the romance community at the time of these novels’ original publication and that has, in the two decades since, also become a part of Roberts’ authorial identity outside of this community, in so-called mainstream (popular) culture (see also the next chapters) – contributes, I believe, to our current perception and identification of these books as single title popular romance novels.

This is not to say, of course, that the identification of these novels as single title popular romances is totally unfounded. On the contrary, all of these novels do feature numerous conventional generic cues that perform the popular romance identity; this is most obvious on the narrative level, where each of these stories includes (most of) the conventional narrative elements that characterize the popular romance genre. This basic narrative structure is, however, invariably combined with (generically) other narrative elements that perform a (generically) different identity; in a number of the novels discussed here these other elements are equally or even more important to the narrative as a whole than the conventional romance elements. There are two big narrative strategies that Roberts quite consistently uses in these narratives which significantly influence the (generic) identities that the texts perform. A first strategy is the extensive inclusion of narrative elements conventionally associated with the suspense genre. As I discussed above, this is a generic hybrid mix that is present in many of Roberts’ category romance novels as well, but whereas in the categories romance is always the dominant narrative identity, in some of these single titles the suspense identity is equally or even more important to the narrative than the romance one. A second narrative strategy is the significant extension of the narrated time or story time. Many of these single title novels depict several periods in the lives of one or both protagonists and/or their relationship, which leads to more complex characterizations and an overall increased sense of emotional and psychological realism. Although these are not as such at odds with the romance generic identity, I argue that the general tone of some of these narratives differs significantly from the one that Roberts, following the conventions of the format, develops in her category romance novels from this period. As a result of the interactions between these two narrative strategies and the conventional romance elements, the *kind* of (romance) identity that these single title

narratives perform differs significantly from the type of identity dominantly performed in Roberts' category romance published in the same period.

All single title romance novels that Nora Roberts writes in this period feature narrative elements that are conventionally associated with the genre of suspense or mystery. In these significantly longer single title novels these suspense plots are developed more extensively than in Roberts' generically hybrid category romance novels. In a number of Roberts' single titles from this period – including *Hot Ice* (1987), *Sacred Sins* (1987), *Sweet Revenge* (1989), *Public Secrets* (1990) and *Genuine Lies* (1991) – the suspense plot tends to dominate the romance's courtship plot; while these narratives perform a double generic identity – both romance and suspense – the latter then often emerges as the dominant one. This identity is reinforced in some of these novels by the dark and sensitive themes they focus on. *Sacred Sins*, for example, explores themes of religious fanaticism, mental illness, depression and (teenage) suicide in the story of a cop hero who is still haunted by the suicide of his Vietnam veteran brother, a psychiatrist heroine who faces the suicide of one of her teenage patients and the mentally deranged, religiously fanatic killer they are reluctantly pursuing together. Containing, among other things, rather detailed depictions of murder victims and one long, uninterrupted scene that delves deep into a tertiary character's point of view to depict the depth of depression that leads this teenage character to suicide, *Sacred Sins'* narrative repeatedly departs from the essentially optimistic tone that is conventional in Roberts' category romances to focus on darker themes. While the novel also contains the conventional elements of the romance courtship plot – hero and heroine meet, are attracted to one another, fall in love and overcome a number of barriers to eventually live happily ever after – its romance identity, the narrative performance of which is interspersed with these darker themes, is less straightforward and more ambiguous than it is in Roberts' generically hybrid categories.

While I find that in the majority of these single title narratives with a more dominant suspense identity the romance identity is essentially not disrupted, there are two novels in this period in which, in my interpretation, such a disruption does take place. This is most obviously the case in *Public Secrets* (1990). This long novel – at 480 pages it is amongst Roberts' most lengthy works – relates part of the life story of its heroine Emma McAvoy, who is the daughter of a famous rocker and grows up in the shadows of the 1970s and 80s rock scene. Emma is depicted at several different stages in her life, from early childhood, over puberty into adulthood. *Public Secrets* is marked by a multitude of plot lines. One of these is a

suspense storyline that revolves around the accidental murder of Emma's baby half-brother when she is six years old and the fallout from this experience throughout her life. Another long plot relates how in her early twenties Emma falls head over heels in love with Drew, is wooed by him and marries him; Drew, however, turns out to be violent and abusive husband and before Emma realizes what is happening she has become a battered wife stuck in an abusive marriage. In a sequence of increasingly disturbing scenes, the novel relates in detail Emma's increasing terror of Drew, who both physically and sexually abuses her. Eventually, Emma escapes Drew, but when he tracks her down and attempts to strangle her, Emma shoots him dead in self-defense. In another storyline at times interwoven with the other two, a teenage Emma meets Michael, who is the son of the cop investigating the death of Emma's baby brother and the true romance hero of the story; Emma and Michael become friends and throughout much of the novel they meet each other intermittently and briefly – this happens once when they are teenagers, again when she is bound for college (they share their first kiss then) and again years later again when Emma is fleeing Drew. At this time Michael, who has been in love with Emma since they met as teenagers, actively pursues a romantic relationship with Emma, who is, however, very weary of this since she just recently escaped her abusive marriage. Realizing what has happened to her Michael, now a police officer himself, is very patient and careful with her and eventually Emma does start a sexual and romantic relationship with Michael; it is during this time that Drew finds Emma and she is forced to kill him. In yet another set of more minor plot lines, *Public Secrets* also relates the lives of Emma's father and his fellow band members, who function as Emma's extended family; these briefer stories deal, among other things, with homosexuality, AIDS, drug abuse, divorce and reconciliation, and the devastating effects the loss of their son has on Emma's father and his wife. *Public Secrets* ends in a suspenseful finale in which Emma unmasks her brother's killer, who subsequently attempts to murder Emma who is at the last possible moment saved by Michael.

As this summary establishes, *Public Secrets* is a complex and long-winded novel with a multitude of interlacing plot lines that explore different themes and genres. Although in the depiction of Emma's and Michael's relationship the novel features the conventional narrative elements of the popular romance genre and thus *formally* performs the romance identity, as a whole I find that the narrative can hardly be termed a romance. Not only are the generically other elements much more dominant – indeed, the courtship plot between Michael and Emma takes up only about one sixth of the novel's narrative – but the events that in these other plots befall the characters are thus that, in my interpretation, the HEA Michael and Emma formally

do reach lacks the emotional and narrative credibility on which the true romance HEA is predicated. A similar problem, though on a smaller scale, is, I find, present in *Carnal Innocence* (1992), in which the courtship plot between hero Tucker Longstreet and heroine Caroline Waverly is overshadowed by the suspense plot that relates how a serial killer is attacking the small Southern town in which the novel is set. While throughout the narrative *Carnal Innocence* develops a much better balance and narrative cohesion between its suspense and romance story lines than *Public Secrets* manages in its rambling plot, the ending to the suspense story line undermines, in my reading, the happiness of the HEA and thereby puts the narrative's romance identity fundamentally at risk.

This ending reveals that the killer is Tucker's sister, Josie Longstreet, a secondary character who throughout the novel has been portrayed as sympathetic and loveable. Although Roberts' killers are quite frequently familiar secondary characters – it is a twist that is included in e.g. *Sacred Sins*, *Public Secrets*, *Genuine Lies*, and *Private Scandals* as well - *Carnal Innocence's* use of this plot device is contrived. Moreover, for both Tucker and Caroline, who in the novel's final pages is attacked by Josie in a type of finale that itself has become a staple of Roberts' romantic suspense narratives, the emotional consequences of this eventual revelation undermine the romantic happiness that these protagonists are (in my reading unconvincingly) portrayed to experience at the novel's formally HEA ending. Tucker, who is depicted as deeply loving his sister throughout the story, is thoroughly devastated by the uncanny revelation of her double identity and psychopathic personality. Caroline, for her part, is deeply disturbed by the multiple attempts on her life made by her lover's sister and her friend. In short, both protagonists are left in an emotionally shaken and unsettled state. And although the novel attempts to immediately quell the emotional issues it raised in its finale, the HEA that is created by Tucker's declaration of love in the final scene of the novel is in my interpretation contrived and emotionally unconvincing. This disrupts, I argue, the novel's narrative performance of the romance generic identity. Although in my interpretation *Public Secrets* and *Carnal Innocence* are then not popular romance novels, these two novels are exceptions in Roberts' oeuvre which, in their "failure" as romance novels, also point towards the skillful generic balancing act that Roberts' other narratives achieve in their performance of multiple generic identities.

The significant extension of narrated time or story time, like the extensive incorporation of suspense elements, influences the overall tone of the identities that these narratives perform and creates romance narratives that are in certain ways significantly different from the type that Roberts writes in her category romances in this period. Two good

examples of such novels are *Honest Illusions* (1992) and *Private Scandals* (1993). *Honest Illusions* portrays both of its protagonists, heroine Roxanne (Roxy) Nouvelle and hero Luke Callahan, and their relationship at different stages in their lives. The novel's first part (of three) relates how Roxanne's father Max, a magician, takes in Luke when he is a young runaway and how Luke and Roxy, who is four years his junior, essentially grow up together. The almost sibling-like bond Luke and Roxy develop is shown to significantly alter in the novel's second part, which takes place when Luke and Roxy are teenagers. Discovering each other as potential romantic partners, Luke and Roxy eventually establish a romantic and sexual relationship that results in Roxy's pregnancy when she is in her early twenties. Before Roxy can tell Luke about this he is, however, forced to leave her by Sam, the novel's antagonist, who catches Luke red-handed during a jewel heist – the novel's suspense plot deals with Max's, Luke's, and Roxanne's adventures as professional jewel thieves. Unaware Roxy is pregnant Luke gives in to Sam's blackmail and disappears completely from Roxy's life in order to protect her. When Luke turns up again seven years later to attempt to salvage his relationship with Roxanne, their shared past and subsequent secrets – he never told her why he left her, she never told him she was pregnant – are a formidable barrier to their happy romantic union. Although *Honest Illusions'* extensive story time is significantly different from the quite brief period of time that is conventionally covered in (Roberts' and others') category romances, in many ways this narrative strategy reinforces the novel's romance performance. It allows for a near-complete doubling of the romance plot: Roxanne and Luke experience two courtships, one as teenagers (with an unhappy but provisional ending) and another one as adults (with a happy and final ending). It also reinforces and makes more emotionally convincing the multiple barriers that stand in the way of the protagonists' romantic union – in the first courtship, for example, Luke's deep-rooted reluctance to give in to his sexual and romantic feelings for Roxanne and his feelings of guilt towards Max make sense as they resonate strongly with the entire first part of the narrative; likewise, Roxanne's deep mistrust of Luke when he reenters her life seven years after abandoning her and her initial attempts to keep their son's existence secret for him make sense within the chain of events the narrative has previously described. Overall, *Honest Illusions'* extensive story time then stimulates the narrative's performance of its romance identity as it enable, among other things, the development of more complex, emotional and credible barriers.

The effects of the extensive story time on *Private Scandals'* performance of the romance identity are slightly different. While this novel too develops a strong performance of the romance identity, here the extensive story time is used to slow down the development of

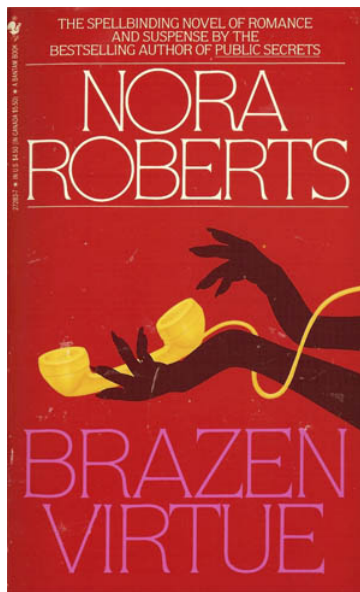
the romantic relationship between the protagonists. Covering about a decade in the lives of its protagonists, journalist Finn Riley and talk show host Deanna Reynolds, the novel portrays how Finn and Deanna's relationship slowly develops from being colleagues and acquaintances over friends to becoming romantic life partners. While their attraction to each other is established from the very first moment they meet (a strong romance convention) numerous developments – amongst them first Deanna's superficial involvement with another man and later the revelation of the sexual trauma Deanna sustained when she was raped as a college student – delay (the sexual materialization of) their romantic union. After taking a long time to establish the romantic union *Private Scandals* fully explores what such a union entails. The novel does not stop at the declaration of love and the overcoming of the (initial) barriers between Finn and Deanne but portrays how their relationship evolves over numerous years. It depicts how the protagonists' love for each other intensifies, how their relationship slowly grows more serious – the decision to move in together is, for example, portrayed as taken over time – and how they only fully commit to each other for life after having been together for a number of years. This is obviously a more realistic portrayal of the development of a romantic relationship than is common (even conventional) in popular romance novels, which often portray relationships that evolve from zero to lifelong happiness in a remarkably (and unrealistically) short period of time. Moreover, this novel is one of Roberts' first and still tentative narrative explorations of the post-HEA as the narrative goes on for a while still after Deanna and Finn become engaged. Portraying its romance protagonists in an established and committed relationship in which all barriers to the everlasting romantic union are overcome, *Private Scandals* uses the further development of its suspense plot (which has not yet been resolved) to offer one of the first narrative actualizations of the post-HEA in Roberts' oeuvre. While a rarity at this time in her oeuvre, over time this narrative portrayal of the post-HEA becomes an increasingly important aspect of Roberts' writing and the narrative performance of her authorial identity.

One final element that marks Roberts' single titles from this period is that often they focus more on the heroine than on the hero. Although each novel features hero point of view and none of these heroes are merely functional characters, in many of these narratives the heroine is still a more complex and prominent character than the hero. This is most obviously the case in *Public Secrets* (Michael is significantly less present in the story than Emma, who carries this entire narrative), *Genuine Lies* (1991), *Divine Evil* (1992) and *Private Scandals* (Deanna's struggle with overcoming her sexual trauma is one of the most important character arcs in the story; Finn has no similar emotional issues to work through and is overall

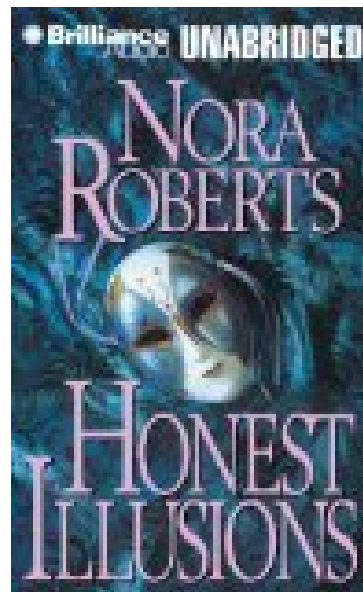
represented as an emotionally stable and steadfast man). This focus, which is reminiscent of the older (category) romance novels without hero point of view in which the heroine is always the most important character, changes in the final single title romance novel Roberts publishes in this period, *Hidden Riches* (1994). This is the story of Dora Conroy, the owner of an antique store who is the target of a violent gang of smugglers, and Jed Skimmerhorn, an FBI agent who is recovering from an assignment gone horribly wrong in which Jed was seriously injured and his longtime partner killed. Jed, who is struggling with survivor guilt, rents an apartment above Dora's shop and unwillingly becomes involved with her and her affairs when the store and later Dora herself are attacked by criminals and his professional and protective instincts kick in. Exploring Jed's complex emotional trauma over his partner's death and, on a deeper level, his fraught relationship with his parents, *Hidden Riches* is Roberts' first single title novel in which the hero and not the heroine is the most emotionally complex character who undergoes the most significant character growth. Although this is in itself a minor shift, I find it an important step in the overall changing position of the hero in Roberts' romance novels (and the genre more broadly). Beginning with the introduction of hero point of view in the early 1980s – which, as I have remarked earlier, implies a slow demystification of the hero – the hero becomes an increasingly complex and important character; more and more Roberts' romance novels (and others) show his emotional development to be as important to the narrative as the heroine's. As Roberts' first single title to participate in this slow evolution, *Hidden Riches* marks an important step in this (generic) transformation that runs throughout Roberts' entire oeuvre.

The double generic identities that these novels' narratives perform are to varying degrees also present in their paratexts. This is for example the case on the front covers, which are devoid of images that perform a single, clear generic identity (such as the clinch image, the semi-naked solo man, the seductive woman for romance or an image of a gun, fleeing/chasing people or an explosion for suspense). Instead, the most dominant element on these front covers is quite consistently Roberts' name.

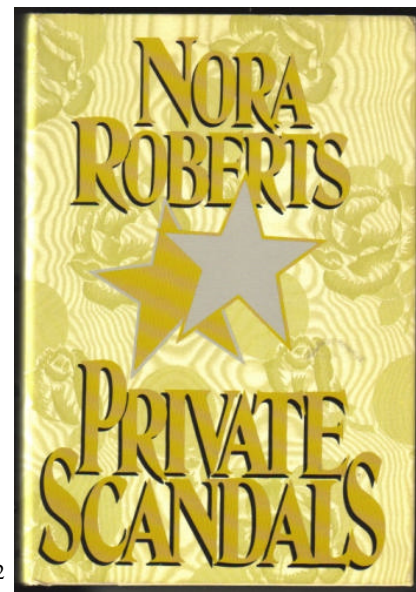




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Such cover designs, which emphatically place Roberts' author's name at the spatial and conceptual top, perform the dominance of Roberts' authorship in the paratextually constructed textual identity; as I remarked in part I of this dissertation, such a dominant position of the author's name is not unusual on the single title front cover but does of course indicate the author's increasing importance in the construction of the text's identity. This name and the often equally dominant title appear against an often strikingly colored background and are accompanied by smaller images of certain artifacts. The combination of these color schemes, which often strike a quite clearly feminine tone (see above) and the smaller images of mysterious objects (gloved hands and a telephone, a mask, stars, ...) creates an impression of feminine mystery. While none of these images perform a clear generic identity, the covers' overall design, in my reading, then does construct these books as targeted at a female reader. The novels' titles, which often consist of an outright contradiction (genuine lies, honest illusions, divine evil, hot ice, etc.), further reinforce this impression.

The format in which Roberts' single title romances are published undergoes a change in this period. Initially, while Roberts is with Bantam, these novels are released in the mass market paperback format; this is the case for *Hot Ice*, *Sacred Sins*, *Brazen Virtue*, *Sweet Revenge*, *Public Secrets*, *Genuine Lies*, *Carnal Innocence* and *Divine Evil*. When Roberts moves to Putnam in 1992, this publisher decides to publish Roberts' single titles in a hardcover edition first and release a mass market paperback edition within a year of the

<sup>31</sup> Front cover image original edition *Brazen Virtue*. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553272837/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553272837/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

<sup>32</sup> Front cover image original edition *Honest Illusions*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/honest-illusions.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Front cover image original edition *Private Scandals*. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0399138285/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0399138285/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

novel's original publication. Accordingly, *Honest Illusions*, *Private Scandals* and *Hidden Riches* first appear as hardcovers and are subsequently re-released as paperbacks. As I discussed in the first part of this dissertation, this change to the hardcover format is significant as it performatively places these books in a different, more mainstream segment of the market that is differentiated from genre fiction. That Roberts is indeed beginning to gain some fame – i.e. authorial identity – outside of the romance community in mainstream popular culture is also evidenced by the fact that in 1991 *Genuine Lies* becomes Roberts' first New York Times bestseller. Although the novel appears on the list for only a single week in September of 1991, this signifies a huge breakthrough for Roberts, who from now on is very often referred to as “the New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts”. Since, as far as I have been able to determine, *Genuine Lies* does not contain any particular narrative or paratextual elements that would explain why this is the first of Roberts' novels to become an official bestseller, it seems to me the novel's entry on the list is the result of the consistently increasing popularity of Roberts' mainstream, single title novels. Roberts' subsequent novel, 1992's *Carnal Innocence* is also a New York Times bestseller, indicating that *Genuine Lies*' achievement is no fluke but that Roberts is really starting to gain some ground in the mainstream popular book market. We should note that none of the hardcover editions of Roberts' novels that are published in this period become similar bestsellers.

While the bestselling status of a number of Roberts' single titles from the early 1990s onwards indicates that Roberts has a foot in the door of the mainstream scene, these novels also make a splash in the romance genre and its community of users. Indeed, four of these eleven novels win a Rita Award: *Brazen Virtue* in 1989 for Best Romantic Suspense, *Divine Evil* in 1993 for Best Romantic Suspense, *Private Scandals* in 1994 for Best Contemporary Single Title (Roberts' category *Nightshade* wins Best Romantic Suspense that year) and *Hidden Riches* for Best Romantic Suspense in 1995. As we can see, many of these Rita awards acknowledge and perform the novels' double generic identity, even as, of course the act of winning a Rita award is in itself a performance (of the dominance?) of the romance identity. Moreover, since Roberts wins as many as five of the first eight Ritas that are awarded for Best Romantic Suspense and is accordingly inducted in the RWA Hall of Fame for Romantic Suspense in 1995, she becomes particularly well-known for this generically hybrid subgenre within the romance community.

## 4. Narrative Serialization

As I remarked in the previous chapter, being part of a narrative series is an aspect of the text's identity that is constituted by interrelations between its narrative and paratextual properties. As such seriality potentially influences the relationship between genre and authorship that is the focus of this study. Indeed, narrative seriality provides a third form of (collective) textual identity that is both related to and differentiated from the authorial and generic parts of the text's identity. It is a form of textual identity that prominently encloses authorship and as such it is a part of the textual identity that foregrounds the role of authorship in this identity. In other words, the authorial presence of the author's name "Nora Roberts" in the identity of Roberts' texts is increased by these texts' seriality. This is in part due to the fact that narrative serialization is predicated on the connection between originally separately published texts that exists in part of shared authorship; indeed, one of the more prominent and distinguishing identity properties that installments in a narrative series often share is that they are penned by the same author. Since such narrative series are, moreover, quite rare and unusual – i.e. unconventional – in the popular romance genre when Roberts starts using the form, seriality functions (certainly initially) as a distinguishing element in Roberts' authorial identity that significantly differentiates Roberts' romance novels from romance novels by other authors. Consequently, narrative seriality cumulatively develops into a characteristic and, to an extent, distinguishing element of Roberts' authorial identity in the context of the popular romance genre. Finally, as I have remarked in the previous chapter, the concept of seriality is in certain ways at odds with some of the conventional and characteristic properties of the popular romance genre, most importantly regarding the notion of the HEA as definitive narrative end and the popular romance novel as a discretely published text. This implies that narrative seriality might influence the performance of the romance generic identity.

### 4.1 On the Narrative Level

As I stipulated earlier, the narrative series is constituted by one or more narrative connection(s) between two or more texts that are originally published separately. In the numerous series Nora Roberts writes between 1981 and 1994 these narrative connections consist of shared characters and, consequently, shared fictional universes between the different installments in a series. A same group of characters – usually a family, sometimes a group of friends or colleagues – are featured in each installment of the series. Each separate installment relates the courtship and romance of one member of the group with a new

character who is external to the group and who is usually introduced in the beginning of their own romance narrative. Each member of the group – e.g. each sibling of a family – thus takes up the role of (romantic) protagonist in their own romance narrative and is featured as secondary character in the other installments of the series. This narrative structure implies that many of these characters turn up in narratives before, during and after the development of their own everlasting romantic union. For example, Roberts' hugely popular MacGregor series relates the courtship narratives of a number of members of the MacGregor family. The first installment of the series, *Playing the Odds* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/85), relates the courtship narrative of Serena MacGregor and Justin Blade, who are the protagonists in this novel. Serena's bachelor brothers, Cain and Alan MacGregor, are introduced in this story as secondary characters as are Serena's mother and father Anna and Daniel MacGregor. In the series' second installment, *Tempting Fate* (Silhouette Special Edition, 05/85), Cain becomes the protagonist as he meets his romantic match in Diana Blade and the novel relates their conventional courtship narrative; Alan as well as the now married Justin and Serena and Cain's parents are featured as secondary characters in this novel. Likewise, in the series' third installment, *All the Possibilities* (Silhouette Special Edition, 07/85), Alan is the romance protagonist; he meets and becomes romantically involved with heroine Shelby Grant. Again, the other MacGregor family members and their spouses – Serena and Justin and Cain and Diana – are secondary characters in this novel.

This series structure in which each installment of the series relates the complete romance narrative of one member of a group of characters who are, as either protagonist or secondary character, part of all installments in the series is a type of serializing structure that Roberts uses in all narrative series she writes in the period discussed in this chapter. As I remarked earlier, Roberts writes many such narrative series; forty-four of the ninety-four Roberts novels that are published between May 1981 and October 1994 are part of a narrative series. They make up a total of fourteen different series that range in number of installments from two to seven. An overview:

- Irish Hearts
  - *Irish Thoroughbred*                      Silhouette Romance                      05/81
  - *Irish Rose*                                      Silhouette Intimate Moments              03/88
- Reflections and Dreams
  - *Reflections*                                      Silhouette Special Edition              06/83
  - *Dance of Dreams*                              Silhouette Special Edition              09/83
- MacGegors

- |                                |                             |       |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| ○ <i>Playing the Odds</i>      | Silhouette Special Edition  | 03/85 |
| ○ <i>Tempting Fate</i>         | Silhouette Special Edition  | 05/85 |
| ○ <i>All the Possibilities</i> | Silhouette Special Edition  | 07/85 |
| ○ <i>One Man's Art</i>         | Silhouette Special Edition  | 09/85 |
| ○ <i>For Now, Forever</i>      | Silhouette Special Edition  | 02/87 |
| ○ <i>Rebellion</i>             | Harlequin Historical        | 08/88 |
| ○ <i>In From the Cold</i>      | Historical Novella          | 12/90 |
| ● Top Chefs                    |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Summer Deserts</i>        | Silhouette Special Edition  | 11/85 |
| ○ <i>Lessons Learned</i>       | Silhouette Special Edition  | 06/86 |
| ● Celebrity magazine           |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Second Nature</i>         | Silhouette Special Edition  | 01/86 |
| ○ <i>One Summer</i>            | Silhouette Special Edition  | 04/86 |
| ● Cordina                      |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Affaire Royal</i>         | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 05/86 |
| ○ <i>Command Performance</i>   | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 07/87 |
| ○ <i>The Playboy Prince</i>    | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 10/87 |
| ● Washington DC Police         |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Sacred Sins</i>           | Single Title                | 12/87 |
| ○ <i>Brazen Virtue</i>         | Single Title                | 05/88 |
| ● O'Hurley's                   |                             |       |
| ○ <i>The Last Honest Woman</i> | Silhouette Special Edition  | 05/88 |
| ○ <i>Dance to the Piper</i>    | Silhouette Special Edition  | 07/88 |
| ○ <i>Skin Deep</i>             | Silhouette Special Edition  | 09/88 |
| ○ <i>Without a Trace</i>       | Silhouette Special Edition  | 10/90 |
| ● Loving Jack:                 |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Loving Jack</i>           | Silhouette Special Edition  | 01/89 |
| ○ <i>Best Laid Plans</i>       | Silhouette Special Edition  | 03/89 |
| ○ <i>Lawless</i>               | Harlequin Historical        | 05/89 |
| ● Time                         |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Time Was</i>              | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 12/89 |
| ○ <i>Times Change</i>          | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 01/90 |
| ● Stanislaskis                 |                             |       |

- |                                |                             |       |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| ○ <i>Taming Natasha</i>        | Silhouette Special Edition  | 03/90 |
| ○ <i>Luring a Lady</i>         | Silhouette Special Edition  | 12/91 |
| ○ <i>Falling for Rachel</i>    | Silhouette Special Edition  | 04/93 |
| ○ <i>Convincing Alex</i>       | Silhouette Special Edition  | 03/94 |
| ● Night Tales                  |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Night Shift</i>           | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 01/91 |
| ○ <i>Night Shadows</i>         | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 03/91 |
| ○ <i>Night Shade</i>           | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 11/93 |
| ○ <i>Night Smoke</i>           | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 10/94 |
| ● Calhouns                     |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Courting Catherine</i>    | Silhouette Romance          | 06/91 |
| ○ <i>A Man for Amanda</i>      | Silhouette Desire           | 07/91 |
| ○ <i>For the Love of Lilah</i> | Silhouette Special Edition  | 08/91 |
| ○ <i>Suzanna's Surrender</i>   | Silhouette Intimate Moments | 09/91 |
| ● Donovans                     |                             |       |
| ○ <i>Captivated</i>            | Silhouette Special Edition  | 09/92 |
| ○ <i>Entranced</i>             | Silhouette Special Edition  | 10/92 |
| ○ <i>Charmed</i>               | Silhouette Special Edition  | 11/92 |

Each separately published instalment in these series – i.e. each of these novels – contains a conventionally complete romance narrative that relates the courtship narrative and formation of an everlasting romantic union of one couple. All these (originally) separate narratives thus feature the conventional narrative elements of the popular romance genre, from the first meeting until the final HEA, and as such narratively perform the popular romance identity. The concrete narrative embodiment of these conventions is generally in line with the representation of conventions in Roberts' non-serialized texts in this period. That is, in a number of areas – such as hero point of view, the emancipation of the heroine and the resulting changes in the barrier – many of these novels offer (slight) variations upon the traditional forms of the conventions, but these variations are often combined with more traditionally conventional representations within one text – e.g. there are still numerous (metaphorical) virgins and an abundance of alpha man heroes in these narratives.

There are, however, a number of ways in which these narratives do deviate from some of the format-specific conventions of the category romance novel. One of the most obvious deviations is that these narratives feature more characters than is conventional in the category romance. While a large cast of characters is typical for serialized narratives (Hayward, 20), it

is decidedly unusual for category romances. As I discussed in the first part of this dissertation, category romance narratives conventionally feature few characters and are characterized by the dominant presence of the two protagonists, one of whom is usually present in every scene. In these short narratives, secondary characters are usually superficially developed and narratively functional. Roberts' serialized narratives often deviate from this principle. They tend to feature a relatively large cast of characters that, moreover, expands as the series goes on to include the new partners and the children many of these established couples have. The MacGregor series, for example, features a group of four well developed secondary characters in its first installment; by the series' fourth novel this group has expanded to eight supporting characters, which is a massive number of characters for a category romance novel. Likewise, in the Night Tales series the number of supporting characters increases from three in the first novel to nine in the final installment. Another element that differentiates these secondary characters from the ruling category convention is the extent to which they are developed. Instead of being drawn as superficial stock characters whose portrayal in the narrative is confined by their narrative function – The Best Friend, The Meddling Mom, The Other Woman, etc. – Roberts' secondary characters in her series are well-developed, round characters who stand out as individuals and systematically surpass the stereotypes that characters in this position conventionally embody. Although these secondary characters are a smooth and generally rather unobtrusive deviation from the format specific conventions of the category romance novel – one that is less eye-catching than for example the introduction of the hero point of view – it nonetheless importantly contributes to the increasing presence and performance of Roberts' individual authorial identity in these narratives.

These non-stereotypical secondary characters are often relatively important to and strongly present in the narrative. They are featured in numerous scenes throughout the narrative and are consequently relatively elaborately depicted. Moreover, Secondary characters regularly function as partial focalizers of some of the scenes of which they are part. In *Lessons Learned*, for example, the narration of the scene in which secondary character Summer Lyndon (heroine of the series preceding installment *Summer Desserts*) meets her friend and hero Carlo Franconi (who appeared as a secondary character in *Summer Desserts*) and his new lover Juliet Trent is intermittently focalized through Summer's eyes. In *Skin Deep* heroine Chantelle O'Hurley attends the wedding of her sister Maddie and Reed Valentine, the protagonists in the series' preceding installment; throughout the wedding-related scenes the narration regularly though briefly delves into both Maddie's and Reed's point of view and reveals how they are experiencing these moments. In *Convincing Alex*, the

fourth installment in the Stanislaxsi series, now-secondary character Mikhail Stanislaski (hero of installment two) serves as one of the focalizers in the dark moment scenes when hero Alex believes his relationship with heroine Bess is over. Although such moments of focalization are usually brief – they often consists of just a few sentences at a time – they increase the secondary character’s presence in the narrative and construct this character as relatively important. While secondary characters who serve as focalizer are often ex-protagonists – Summer, Maddie, Reed and Mikhail were all romance protagonists in an earlier installment of the series – in some serialized narratives the narration delves into the point of view of a secondary character who has not (*yet*) taken up a protagonist role. In *Falling for Rachel*, the third installment in the Stanislaski series, secondary characters with (sometimes quite elaborate) point of view include Rachel’s brother Alex (hero of the series’ fourth installment), her stepniece Freddy and the hero’s stepbrother Nick (both Freddie and Nick are protagonists of the series’ fifth installment, *Waiting for Nick* (Silhouette Special Edition, 03/97), a novel that is discussed in the next chapter). Focalization through a secondary character is not only a rather strong deviation from the category romance’s traditional conventions, but is moreover also a way in which the narrative implicitly evokes its seriality. Indeed, these unconventional focalizations, which make conventionally unimportant characters more important and present in the narrative, are narrative gestures towards the other installment(s) in the series – past or future – in which these characters more elaborately take up the role of focalizer they in these moments only briefly fulfill.

Roberts’ serialized narratives contain more such (self-reflexive) evocations of their serial character; in fact, there are numerous both obvious and more subtle ways in which these stories reference their belonging to a narrative series. One of the most obvious ways in which this happens is via direct references to events that take place in earlier installments in the series. Such direct references are a typical and functional feature of serialized narratives and of course abound in Roberts’ series as well. For example, in *Tempting Fate*, second in the MacGregor series, hero Caine recounts for heroine Diana how his sister, Serena, was recently kidnapped and held for ransom and thereby recapitulates events that unfold in the suspense subplot of the series’ previous installment, *Playing the Odds*. In *Night Smoke*, the fourth installment in the Night Tales series, now-secondary character Deborah is shown to be thinking about her husband Gage’s superpowers and how she found out about them in the series’ second installment, *Night Shadow*. In *Charmed*, novel number three in the magical Donovans series, now-secondary character Nash recounts how he discovered the magical abilities of his wife Morgana, protagonist in the series’ first installment. Often such direct



references to events that happened in other installments in the series are summaries or recapitulations that condense a series of scenes; in the first example above Caine recounts in just a few sentences an entire subplot that unfolds in a number of scenes in *Playing the Odds*; similarly, Deborah's discovery of Gage's secret superpowers is a storyline that develops in a number of stages in *Night Shadow* but that is condensed in the recollection scene features in *Night Smoke*. Sometimes, however, these references refer to one specific scene that is depicted in one of the series' other installments. For example, when Nash is telling Boone about discovering Morgana's ability he remarks:

“I thought she was pulling my leg until she tossed me up in the air and left me hanging there.” The memory made him grin, even as Boone shut his eyes (*The Donovan Legacy*, 560).

This remark refers to an actual scene that is included in *Captivated*, the series' first installment that relates the courtship narrative between Morgana and Nash. Such a remark thus almost recreates these scenes and as such quite strongly and directly invokes the other installment in the series and thereby both of the narratives' serialized character.

Sometimes, references to other installments in the series are even more specific. In rare occasions these references are located on the level of the discourse. In *Lessons Learned*, the second installment in the *Top Chefs* series, now-secondary character Summer Lyndon reminds hero Carlo Franconi of two earlier interactions between them, both of which are narrated in *Summer Desserts*, the novel that contains Summer's own romance narrative.

[Summer:] “You remember, not so long ago when you came through Philadelphia on tour for another book?”

[Carlo:] “You were wondering how to take the job of redoing the American's kitchen when you were attracted to him and determined not to be.”

“In love with him and determined not to be,” she corrected. “You gave me some good advice here, and when I visited you in Rome. I want to return the favor.”

“Advice?”

“Grab the brass ring, Carlo, and hold onto it.” (*Table for Two*, 476)

There are numerous references to the events that unfold in *Summer Dessert*'s narrative in this brief passage. Summer and Carlo recapitulate events that happened in this story (“You were wondering ... she corrected”), Summer refers specifically to two scenes narrated in the series' previous installment (“when you came through Philadelphia” and “when I visited you in Rome”) and Summer uses the exact same expression – “grab the brass ring” – Carlo used in one of those scenes when he advised her to marry Blake (*idem*, 221). Although “to grab the

brass ring” is an established expression in English that generally means to live life to the fullest, in Summer’s use of it in this scene it has a more specific meaning as Summer is essentially telling Carlo to marry Juliet. This specific use of the expression to “grab the brass ring” is a re-enactment of Carlo’s use of this expression in the series’ other installment in which he used this phrase to advise Summer to marry Blake. It is thus a reference on the level of the discourse to this other installment in the series and thereby to its own seriality.

Next to such more or less direct, self-reflexive references to their seriality, Roberts’ narratives also reference their serial nature in more indirect ways. One of these more implicit references is the family scene that is featured in nearly every installment of every series by Roberts published in this period. The family scene is a scene in which all members of the family – or the group of characters around which the series is structured – are present; it usually depicts a family gathering or celebration of some kind that involves all members of the family. The characters are depicted doing very mundane, domestic things together such as cooking, sharing a meal, watching sports and simply enjoying each other’s company. These scenes, and the family interactions they depict, are invariably permeated by coziness, love and a boisterous kind of hominess. They are often partially focalized through the eyes of the new partner, who is invariably unfamiliar with these kinds of intimate, friendly, loving family interactions and in whose eyes the connectedness of the group is all the more striking. This type of scene is a true hallmark of Roberts’ writing. It is the pinnacle of the sense of community and togetherness around which many of Roberts’ narrative series in this period revolve and functions always as a kind of highlight of seriality. Featuring every member of the group around which the series is structured, including all past and future protagonists (except, of course, future protagonists external to the group) and their offspring, this scene references the narrative’s seriality implicitly – implicitly because it usually does not contain explicit recapitulations or references to narrative events that unfold in earlier installments but simply presents the community or family as it is at the present time of the narrative. Still, the scene often gives an overview and update of the lives of every member of the group, including previous protagonists who are now living their HEA.

All of these evocations of and narrative references to the narrative’s seriality contribute to an increased and more dominant performance of the serial and thus also the authorial identity in the narrative performance of textual identity. In referencing one or more other installments of the series, these elements constantly reference texts that are written by the same author and thereby thus performatively invoke the authorial part of the texts’

identity. This performance is in the category romance novels published in the period under discussion further reinforced by the fact that the serial structure itself is uncommon in category romances at this time. In the 1980s and early 1990s relatively few category romance novels – and, for that matter, also single title romance novels – are part of a narrative series. In this context Roberts' repeated and increasingly frequent use of this narrative format then in effect differentiates her narratives and the authorial identity they perform from the vast majority of other popular romance narratives and the authorial identities of other popular romance authors.

The serial structure furthermore also influences the narrative performance of the generic romance identity. Notwithstanding the fact that each separately published narrative in the series features all the conventional narrative elements of the romance genre – and in that way thus performs the popular romance identity – these romance narratives are also marked by transgressions of the narrative finiteness of separately published texts. That is, conventional elements of one romance narrative are frequently featured in another narrative in the series that is originally published separately. This happens with elements located at both the beginning (the first meeting, the first signs of the barrier) and the end (the HEA) of the conventional romance narrative. The most obvious and by far most frequent type transgression of the finiteness of the separately published text is the representation of the post-HEA – that is, the time in the fictional universe after the HEA has been established – with which Roberts' serialized narratives are rife.

When previously established couples turn up in later installments of the series, their presence in the story narratively actualizes the abstract promise of everlasting romantic happiness that ended their own romance story. In Roberts' numerous serialized novels, which of course contain many such representations of couples in the post-HEA, these representations systematically share certain characteristics. Many of Roberts' post-HEA couples have or are in the process of having children. Serena MacGregor, the heroine in the first installment in the MacGregor series, announces her pregnancy in installment two, is shown to be heavily pregnant in installment three and has just given birth to her first child in installment four of the series. Summer Lyndon tells Carlo she is pregnant in the second installment of Top Chefs series. Gabriella and Reeve, protagonists in *Affaire Royale*, the first installment of the Cordina series, are shown to have four children at the beginning of *Command Performance*, the series' second novel which is set seven years after the events of the first installment took place. *Command Performance*'s Eve and Alexander are, likewise, depicted as being happy parents to a baby girl and having another baby on the way in the series third novel. In some narratives

the birth of a child to a previously established couple is even made into a significant event in the present narrative; this is for example the case in *Convincing Alex* – which contains numerous scenes revolving around Rachel Stansilaski, heroine in the series' previous installment, giving birth to her first child – and *Night Smoke*, in which heroine Natalie Fletcher is with now-secondary character and *Nightshade* heroine Althea Grayson when the latter goes into labor. Such scenes explicitly present the established couple in their (new) role as parents, an identity that supplements and emerges from their previously established identity as romantic agents. Indeed, children are unabashedly represented in these texts as both the incarnation of the couple's romantic love and the pinnacle of their now domestic and domesticized happiness.

These pregnancies and children, which are a staple in Roberts' serialized narratives, are also tangible proof of the passing of time in the fictional world in which the series is set. Often several years go by in the fictional universe between the first and the final installments of a series. For example, the events depicted in the first installment of the Cordina series take place nine years before the events in the series' final novel; a similar amount of time separates the first and final installments in the Night Tales series and about five years pass between the first and final installments of the Stanislaski series. Children thus also prove that time has passed since an established couple's HEA was reached – that, in other words, narrative time goes on even when it is not narratively actualized or represented – and thereby puts the moment of the established couple's HEA squarely in the fictional past. This implicitly raises the question whether the passing of time has lessened the feelings of love that were presented as so strong, profound and, according to the romance's generic promise of the HEA, everlasting in the HEA. Perhaps to counter the doubts or questions implicitly raised by the passing of time children embody, Roberts' text always strongly emphasize the continuation of the romantic happiness as it was represented in the HEA, that pinnacle of true romantic love. Indeed, the established couple is always *explicitly* represented as still being very much in love. This love is, moreover, represented in a manner that is very similar to the way in which it is conceptualized in the original narrative. That is, it consists of the combination of strong sexual attraction – established couples are for example shown to kiss passionately, to touch each other lovingly and to make love frequently and uninhibitedly (although these scenes usually occur off-screen) – and profound feelings of attraction and love that are openly articulated – indeed, established couples habitually talk about their love for the other to both their partner and others in this fictional universe. By explicitly (re)depicting both the physical and linguistic aspects of the established couple's romantic love, these brief representations

depict this love as a clear *continuation* of the love that was reached in their HEA, where it was also fundamentally predicated on the combination of body and mind, and thereby establish the (romantic) connection between the HEA and the post-HEA.

These depictions of the continued love between couples in the post-HEA not only serve as implicit invocations of their HEA, but also as an example for the present narrative and its protagonists. Frequently a now-secondary character in an established relationship discusses romantic love with the current protagonist, who is in the process of establishing a similar kind of romantic relationship but has not yet managed to overcome all barriers. In such advise scenes the secondary character usually refers not only to the profound love they now feel for their romantic partner but also to the (interior) barrier(s) they had to overcome in order to reach this state of everlasting romantic happiness. In *Dance of Dreams*, for example, Seth, hero of the preceding installment *Reflections* and now happily married to Lindsay, remembers being “scared to death” (*Reflections and Dreams*, 484) when he first fell in love with Lindsay; he openly acknowledges to current heroine Ruth that being in love is “terrifying” (idem) but is also the best thing that ever happened to him. In *Lessons Learned* now-secondary character Summer confronts hero Carlo about his being in love with heroine Juliet and reminds him of the advice he gave her during her black moment, when Carlo told Summer to grab hold of true love and let go of her fears. In *Convincing Alex* Mikhail Stanislaski, brother to hero Alex and protagonist in *Luring a Lady*, advises Alex that in order to solve his conflict with heroine Bess Alex has to acknowledge the mistakes he made and apologize, just like Mikhail had to do two books earlier in the series when he was going through his own dark moment in his relationship with now-wife Sydney.

Such scenes not only serve as invocations of a previous installment in the series and thus of the present narrative’s seriality, but also function as (generic) examples for and, in a certain way, prefigurations of the definitive establishment of the everlasting romantic union of the HEA that is still to be reached within the present narrative. This is so on both the fictional and the metafictional level of the story. Within the fictional world the secondary character’s explicit discussion and linguistic evocation of their own experience with true romantic love confirms and reinforces the existential existence of this utopian notion in this fictional world and thus confirms to the protagonist, who is not infrequently in the middle of their dark moment, that true love not only exists but is attainable for people like them – they are, after all, peers. On the metafictional level this explicit evocation of the HEA and the ways in which it was reached in another installment of the series serves as a generic prefiguration of the as yet unachieved ending to the present narrative; these scenes explicitly remind the

reader, who together with the protagonist is often stuck in the present narrative's dark moment, that in romance narratives the HEA is an inevitable certainty and that the present narrative will, like the one that is being evoked, end happily. In a certain way these scenes then also cast the present narrative as a conceptual and generic reenactments of the previous installment(s) in the series. Both of these characteristics of the representation of the post-HEA in Roberts' serialized narratives reinforce the narrative performance of the popular romance generic identity.

However, the representation of the post-HEA also affects one of the most basic principles that drives the generically specific working of the HEA and thus potentially the performance of the romance generic identity. As I discussed in part I of this dissertation, the HEA that is reached at the end of each popular romance narrative is a utopia. That is, it is a conceptual ideal that consists, in this particular case, of a narrative promise – a conceptual implication – that is not made concrete. Indeed, conventionally the HEA is not narratively actualized or represented within the generic romance narrative. This unrepresentedness is a crucial aspect of the utopian character of the HEA. As Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch have argued, the utopia crucially depends on it not being concretized or represented. A utopia is only a utopia as long as it is a concept and not an actuality. This principle of the unrepresentability of the utopia – and thus of the HEA that generically functions as a utopia – is breached in the representation of the post-HEA that systemically takes place in Roberts' serialized narratives. Instead, these narratives actualize and concretize the promise of the HEA. In doing so these narratives deviate from one of the most fundamental narrative conventions of the popular romance genre, that of the utopian HEA. Like many of the other deviations from the established conventions, this deviation increases the performative narrative presence of Roberts' individual authorial identity in relation to the presence of genre in this identity. This particular kind of deviation, I argue, reinforces Roberts' authorial presence especially strongly because it narratively actualizes a type of content for which no concrete generic conventions exist. Indeed, to the extent that the generic convention precisely holds that the HEA is abstract, the concretization of this part of the romance narrative is a strong – and at this time in the category romance novel almost unprecedented – form of deviation from the conventions that significantly increases Roberts' authorial presence in the narrative.

Since, as I have argued earlier, the utopian aspect of the HEA is an important part of its generic functioning – the HEA qualifies as the generic HEA of popular romance in part because it is an end and is thus not further narratively actualized (cf. part I) – the question

might arise whether the concretization of the HEA's promise in these representations of the post-HEA disrupts the narrative performance of the romance generic identity. In the case of Roberts' texts I argue that this is not the case for two main reasons. First, these representations of the post-HEA take place in a narrative that is (originally) published separately from the narrative in which the HEA itself is realized. The text that relates the original narrative does as such not contain the representation of the post-HEA; in this original text the HEA is thus still the conventional utopian HEA that strongly contributes to the text's narrative performance of the popular romance identity. Second, as I just pointed out, the concrete narrative embodiments of the post-HEA in Roberts' serialized texts are always strongly in line with the conventions that govern the representations of romantic love in Roberts' romance narratives and as such work to reinforce the texts' narrative performance of the generic romance identity. This is why, in my interpretation, these representations of the post-HEA do not fundamentally disrupt the narrative performance of the generic romance identity. This does not alter the fact, however, that these representations are a strong and important deviation from the generic convention that further influences the relationship between genre and authorship in the performance of textual identity.

While the representation of the post-HEA is by far the most frequent and dominant way in which seriality leads to transgressions of the narrative finiteness of the separately published texts, it is not the only one. There are two other less frequent types of such transgressions. A first one consists of the prefiguration of the internal conflict of a future romance protagonist in a narrative that is not this character's "own" romance. Although such prefigurations are rather rare in Roberts' romance novels published in this period, *All the Possibilities*, the third installment of the MacGregor series, features a clear example of this type. In this story Grant Campbell, brother to current heroine Shelby Campbell, is introduced as a secondary character. During the dark moment in the romance between Shelby and hero Alan MacGregor, Shelby visits Grant, who is a reclusive artist living in a remote light house off the coast of Maine. In their subsequent discussion of Shelby's internal barrier – which consists of the fact that she is still traumatized by witnessing her father's assassination during his run for the White House and, as a consequence hereof, believes she cannot emotionally handle Alan's own plans of running for President one day – Grant's own internal barrier, which is very similar to Shelby's, is referenced and exposed.

“You've got to live with it [their father's assassination],” he [Grant] said harshly.

“We've both had to live with it, carry it around with us. I was there, too, and I haven't

forgotten. Are you going to shut yourself off from life because of something that happened fifteen years ago?"

"Haven't you?"

Direct hit, he thought ruefully, but didn't acknowledge it. "We're not talking about me." (*The MacGregors Alan –Grant*, 238)

In Grant's own romance, which unfolds in the series' subsequent installment *One Man's Art*, Grant's "shutting [him]self off from life" lies at the core of the internal barrier that for much of the narrative stands in the way of his relationship with heroine Gennie. *All the Possibilities* thus neatly prefigures the main internal barrier in the romance narrative related in *One Man's Art*.

A second type of transgression of the narrative finiteness of the separately published serialized text consists of two future protagonists meeting each other for the first time in a narrative that is not "their" romance narrative proper; in other words, the conventional narrative element of the first meeting is present in a separately published text. Again, this type of transgression of the material boundaries of the narrative is rare in Roberts' narratives published in the period discussed in this chapter; there are only two series in which this happens: *Reflections and Dreams* and *Cordina*. In *Reflections and Dreams* future protagonists Ruth and Nick meet each other for the first time in the narrative related in *Reflections*, the installment that precedes the novel that relates their own romance proper; in the *Cordina* series future protagonists Eve and Alexander meet each other in a scene in *Affaire Royale*, which is the series' installment that directly precedes the one with their romance. Both scenes feature the conventional elements of the first meeting: the first hints of both attraction and the barrier. This is most obvious in the first meeting between Ruth and Nick in *Reflections*, which clearly establishes Ruth's simultaneous attraction to and admiration for Nick. This is a prefiguration of the part of the later barrier between Ruth and Nick, which consists of the fact that Ruth is overwhelmed by Nick's professional success and imposing personality. The same scene also establishes Nick's attraction to Ruth and the first hints of his barrier:

And there was the girl.

He turned to watch Ruth warming up at the barre. The sun, slanting through the windows, flashed in the mirrors. It glowed around Ruth as she brought her leg up to an almost impossible ninety-degree angle. She held it there poised, effortlessly.

Nickolai frowned, narrowing his eyes. When he had looked at her outside, he had seen a lovely girl with exotic features and good bones. But he had seen a child, not yet out



of the schoolroom; now he saw a beautiful woman. A trick of light, he thought, taking a step closer. Something stirred in him which he quickly suppressed.

Ruth moved, and the angle of the sun altered. She was a young girl again. The tension in Nick's shoulders evaporated. He shook his head, smiling at this own imagination.

*(Reflections and Dreams, 218-219)*

This scene neatly foreshadows Nick's internal conflict that is developed in the course of their courtship narrative in *Dance of Dreams* and that mainly consists of the fact that he believes Ruth is too young to bind herself to him. The first meeting scene between Eve and Alexander in *Affair Royale* similarly establishes both the mutual attraction and the first elements of the barrier. It clearly shows how strongly they both disturb the other, which, I pointed out in my discussion of this convention in part I, is a typical element of the first meeting between the romance hero and heroine. The brief and sparse interactions between Eve and Alexander in *Affaire Royale* also prefigure part of their conflict as Alexander believes Eve is falling in love with his brother Bennett – a belief that in their own courtship narrative is an important part of the external barrier.

While the first meeting between both of these couples than occurs outside of their romance narrative proper, both of these narratives very explicitly refer to and recapitulate these first meeting scenes. *Dance of Dreams* contains a scene in which Nick extensively thinks back to the moment he first met Ruth; admitting to himself he has had feelings for Ruth “since that moment in Lindsay's studio when he had first watched Ruth at the barre” he realizes “[h]e should have known [he'd fall in love with her], with that first impossible stir of desire” (397). In *Command Performance*, the novel that contains Alexander's and Eve's main courtship narrative, the protagonists talk about the night they first met after making love for the first time. Free to express their true feelings now, they reveal their mutual attraction and jealousy as they discuss the events of the evening in detail. Via such detailed recollections and recapitulations of the original first meeting scene outside the romance narrative text proper, these original scenes are, as it were, recreated within the material boundaries of the text that narrates the couple's romance narrative proper; indirectly, the scenes are thus still a part of this text. For the narrative performance of the text's generic identity this is significant since, as I have argued earlier in this dissertation, conventionally the romance narrative starts *from the moment* the protagonists first meet. By recreating the first meeting scene originally external to this text these narratives feature all the conventional narrative romance elements and thus carefully preserve their full narrative performance of the romance generic identity -

despite the fact that in principle they are lacking one of the central conventional elements that constitutes this identity.

Although these recapitulations of and references to first meeting scenes are often quite specific – Alexander comments, for example, on the red dress that Eve was wearing the night he first met her – these references never disrupt the internal coherence of the text in which they occur. That is, they are always formulated in such a way that they are understandable even to the reader who has not read the other series installment that is being referenced. This principle of discrete understandability – that is, that each scene in each installment in the series is understandable and makes sense separately from the others and thus narratively functions independently from the other installments in the series – is paramount to Roberts' series in this period of her career. All of these narratives can be read and understood independently from one another. This principle is always true for the *romance* aspect of the narrative; each series installment contains the complete romance narrative of its protagonists (even in the few cases I just discussed in which the first meeting scene in fact occurs in another text). For the vast majority of Roberts' serialized romance narratives this principle of discrete understandability also applies to other strands in the narrative<sup>34</sup>; (generically) other subplots are wrapped up and resolved within the material boundaries of the text that is the narrative. This implies that narrative seriality that marks these stories is, as it were, kept in check. While it is an important aspect of the identity that these narratives perform – and one that is, as this discussion makes clear, regularly referenced in the narrative – it does not dominate this identity.

## 4.2 On the Paratextual Level

With one exception, all of Roberts' narrative series published in this period appear in the category romance format.<sup>35</sup> Usually, all installments of such a category series are published in the same line or imprint.<sup>36</sup> The extent to which the narrative seriality of these novels is

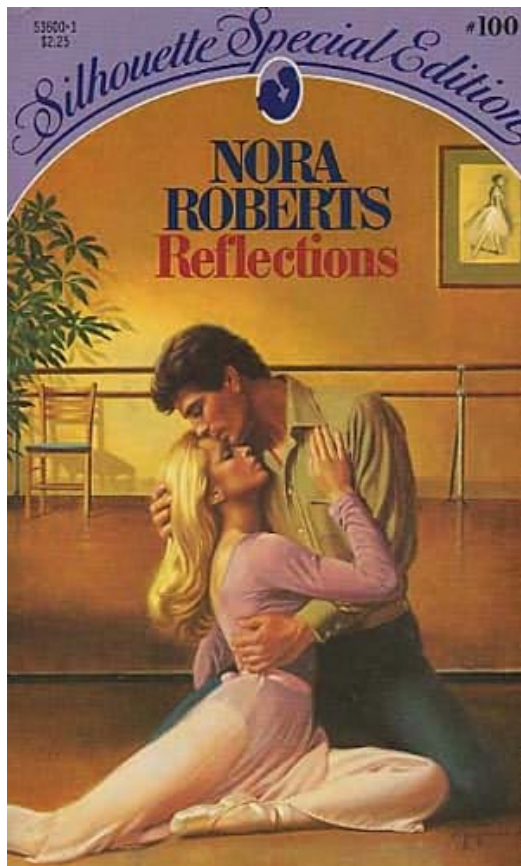
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<sup>34</sup> One possible exception to this observation is the Calhoun series, which is discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter.

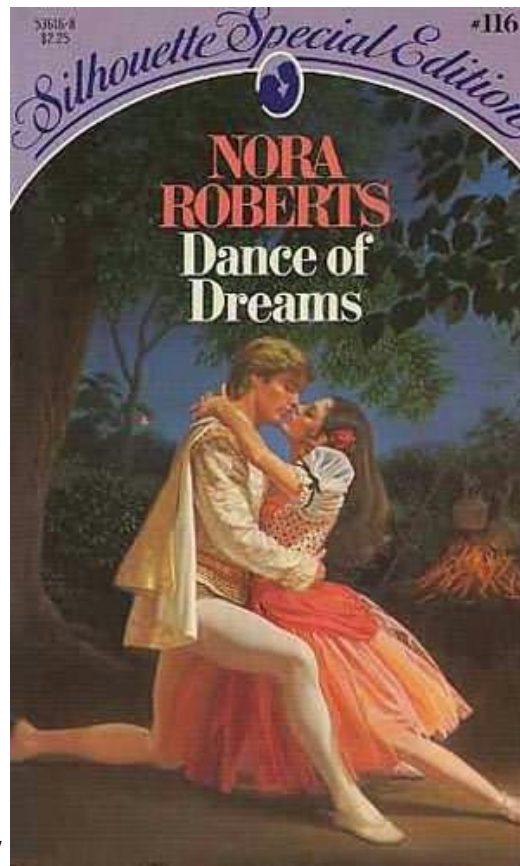
<sup>35</sup> The Washington DC Police series containing *Sacred Sins* and *Brazen Virtues* is published in the single title format.

<sup>36</sup> Again, there are a few notable exceptions: the installments in Roberts' first series, *Irish Thoroughbred* and *Irish Rose*, are published in the Silhouette Romance and the Silhouette Intimate Moments line respectively. This unusual change in line within a series is, I believe, due to the fact that by 1988 (when *Irish Rose* is published) Roberts predominantly writes for the Silhouette Special Edition and Silhouette Intimate Moment lines and has developed a tone and style of writing that is unsuitable for the more conservative Silhouette Romance line in which she initially published a fair amount of novels. The line shift in the MacGregor series - two installments, *Rebellion* and *In From the Cold*, appear in the Harlequin Historical line instead of the Silhouette Special Edition

paratextually recognized varies a great deal in the period discussed in this chapter. Initially, there is no paratextual recognition of these narrative connections between separately published novels. The peritext of the original editions of novels in, for example, the Reflections and Dreams series (1983), the Top Chef series (1985-86), and the Cordina series (1986-87) do not reflect the connections between the novels in any way. The front covers of these books are, for example, standardized and completely in line with the design template of the relevant line.



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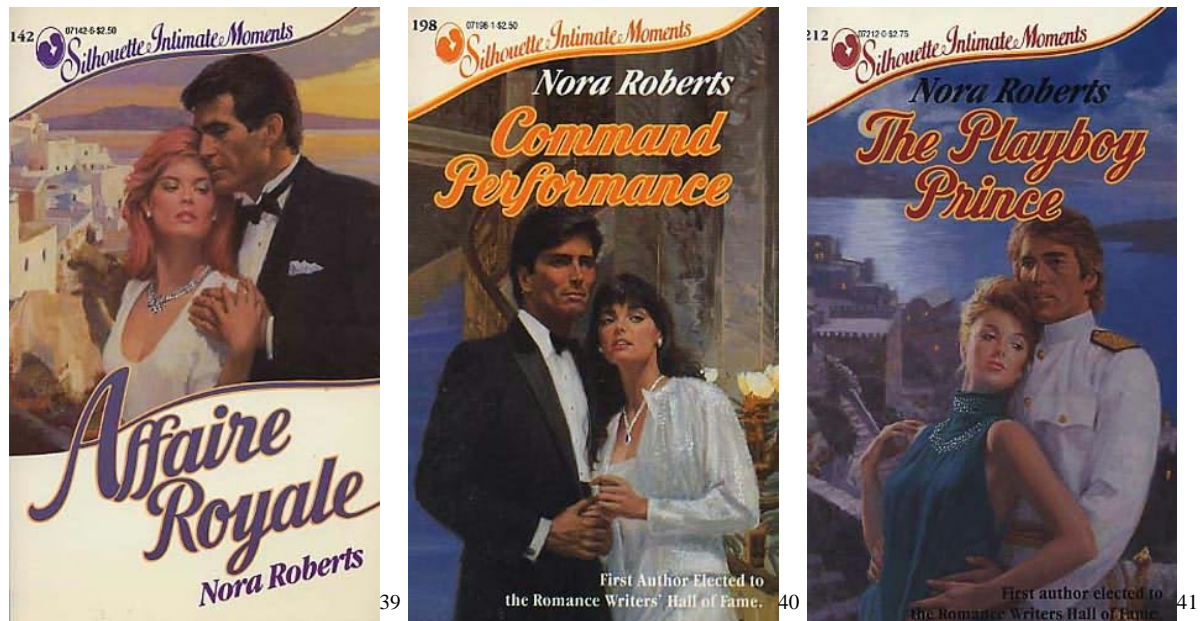


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imprint – is due to the change in narrative setting from contemporary to historical. The installments in the Calhoun series, finally, appear in four different lines; a discussion of this series follows at the end of this chapter.

<sup>37</sup> Front cover original edition *Reflections*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/reflections.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Front cover of original edition *Dance of Dreams*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/dance-of-dreams.htm>



Despite the fact that in some of these novels, such as the installments of the Cordina series for example, the narrative connections between the separately published installments take up a relatively important role in the narrative these connections are not paratextually acknowledged and hence not part of the text's paratextually performed identity. The same applies to the prefaces in these books, which are also in line with the ruling conventions of the format and do not acknowledge the narrative connections between the separately published installments in a series. Roberts' individual authorial identity is, in other words, only minimally performed in these peritexts – as is, of course, conventional in the category romance.

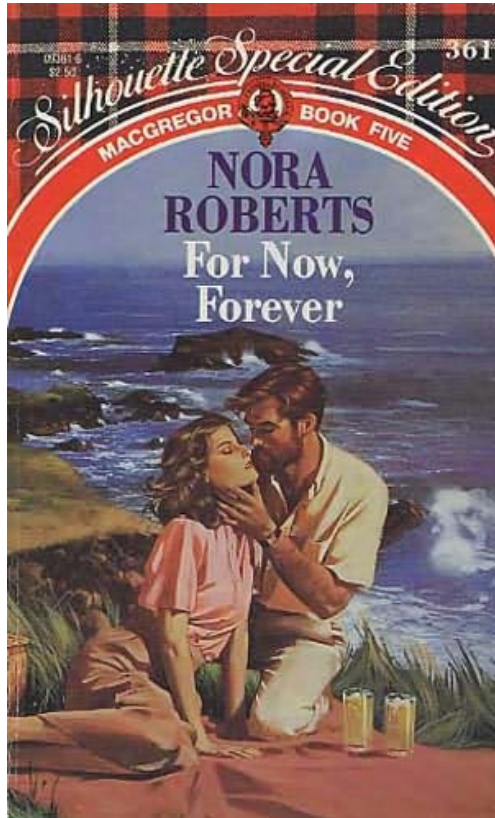
The first significant change in this practice – that is, the first significant paratextual recognition of the narrative seriality of one of Roberts' novels – occurs in February 1987 with the publication of *For Now, Forever*, which is the fifth novel in the MacGregor series. The novel takes up a special position in the series as it relates the courtship narrative of the parents of the group of siblings that make up the protagonists in the previous installments of the series; *For Now, Forever* is thus a kind of prequel to the already published installments. This prequel status, which implies that both protagonists are well-established characters with whom the reader of one or more of the previous installments in the series is quite familiar, influences the paratext of the novel's original edition. Like the four earlier installments of the

<sup>39</sup> Front cover original edition *Affaire Royale*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/affaire-royale.htm>

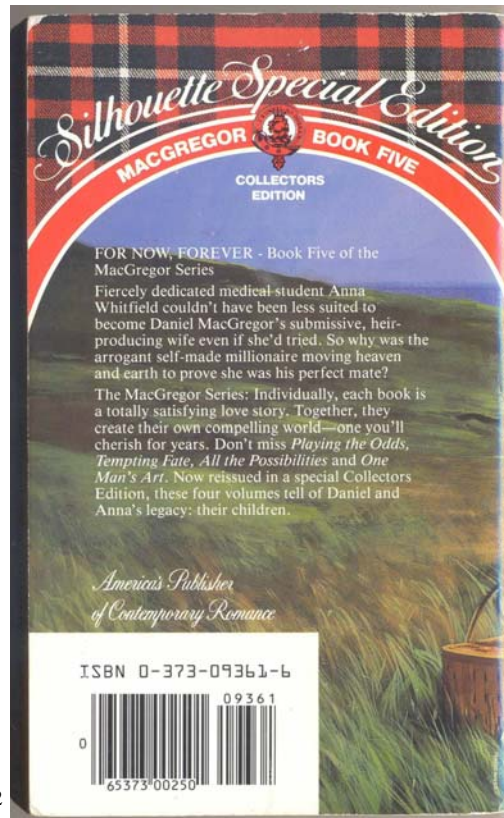
<sup>40</sup> Front cover original edition *Command Performance*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/command-performance.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Front cover original edition *Playboy Prince*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/playboy-prince.htm>

series, *For Now, Forever* is originally published in the Silhouette Special Edition line. Unlike the earlier installments, *For Now, Forever* is published with an epitext that strongly recognizes and performs its narrative seriality.



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In recognition of the MacGregors Scottish heritage – something that is repeatedly discussed in all narratives in the series – the conventionally purple banner of the Silhouette Special Edition line logo is changed into bright red Scottish tartan. Silhouette’s conventional logo is replaced by the MacGregor family crest and underneath the line’s name – note, indeed, that the line name does still take up a prominent position in this redesigned cover template – is printed the name of the series (“MacGregor”) and the number of the installment (“book five”).

The back cover is designed on the basis of the same special cover template and prominently features the term “collectors edition”, which indicates the special – i.e. unconventional – status of this particular book and further individualizes it. The back cover text opens with a repeat of the title followed by “Book Five in the MacGregor Series” which reestablishes the narrative’s seriality and this particular story’s structural place in the series.

<sup>42</sup> Front cover of original edition *For Now, Forever*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/for-now-forever.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Back cover of original edition *For Now, Forever*. Scan.

The first paragraph of the story summary is conventional; it starts by naming the protagonists - of course for the reader of (one of ) the previous installments in the MacGregor series the protagonists' names Anna Whitfield and Daniel MacGregor likely ring a bell since Anna and Daniel are quite prominent secondary characters in all of the previous installment in the series. The summary further, as is conventional, specifies some aspects of the barrier and ends on a taunting question which appears to cast doubt upon the romantically happy outcome of the narrative. Even this semblance of doubt – which is always only a semblance since the outcome of each category romance novel is always generically fixed – is, however, abandoned in the next paragraph which details that the other installments in the series (each of which is mentioned by title) “tell of Daniel and Anna’s legacy: their children” and as such unabashedly establishes the romantically successful outcome of this courtship narrative. The narrative tension of the romance story is then essentially broken on the cover in the space where, conventionally, the category romance attempts to create and/or reinforce this tension.<sup>44</sup> This sentence also reveals the somewhat odd narrative predicament of this prequel story. All of the series’ earlier installments in fact take place in this story’s post-HEA. Although each popular romance narrative to an extent deals with the somewhat peculiar given that the ending of the story is always-already determined before the narrative has started – each popular romance narrative ends happily in the HEA; it is a generic must and therefore never truly in doubt – in *For Now, Forever* this tension is particularly pertinent since the story’s post-HEA was originally narratively actualized before its HEA and pre-HEA was originally narrated. As this example indicates, the narrative prequel is then a somewhat odd and uncomfortable serialization format that does not always fit well with the particular narrative properties of the popular romance genre in which it is, consequently, relatively rare – Nora Roberts, for example, uses the format only this once.

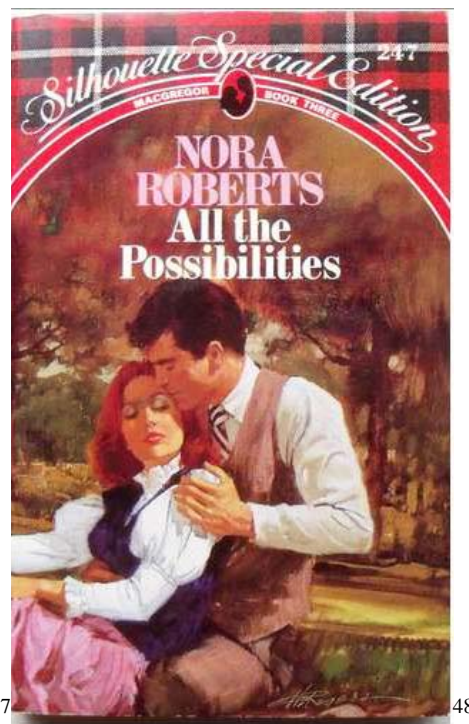
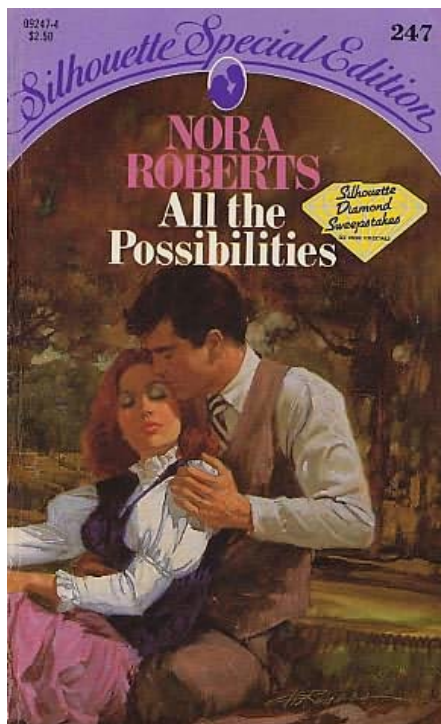
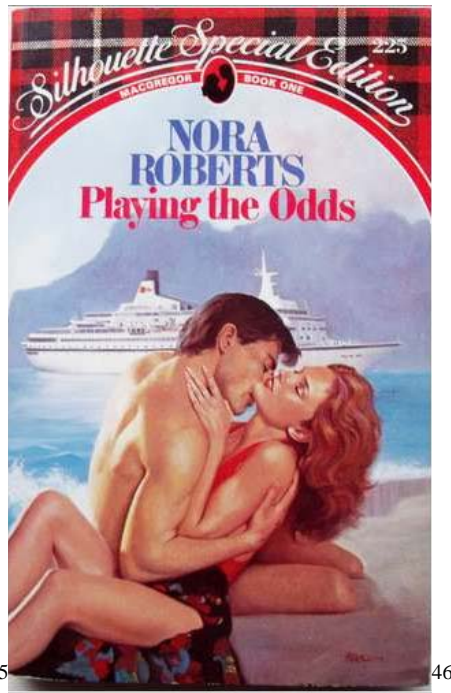
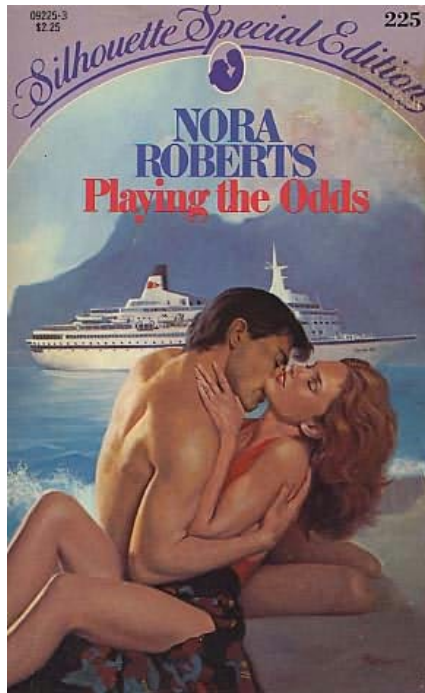
The epitextual recognition of *For Now, Forever*’s seriality – and thus its enhanced paratextual performance of the authorial identity – continues in its preface, which is entirely dedicated to a discussion of the series and this particular novel’s place in it. The preface again names the other installments in the series by title and, this time, line-number (thus also placing these books in the bigger identity-constituting conglomerate of the Silhouette Special Edition line). It details that the series’ first installment, *Playing the Odds*, was published in

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<sup>44</sup> Remember, conventionally this partial summary of the narrative ends with a recapitulation of the opposing forces of the attraction and the barrier and suggestively attempts to cast doubt upon the romantically happy outcome to the courtship narrative. Although this doubt is never really convincing because of the generic must of the HEA, the ostentatious gestures towards creating it are nonetheless part and partial of the category romance’s peritextual conventions.

March 1985 – in the fast-moving world of the category romance this implies that about 135 new Silhouette Special Edition novels have been published between the appearance of the first installment in the MacGregor series and the current novel – and emphasizes that these older novels are now re-issued carrying a “tartan cover” that is similar to that which graces this book. The final pages of the book again focus predominantly on the MacGregor series; they include, for example, a form to order the other installments of the series (this indicates that the MacGregor series here takes up the functional position conventionally taken up by the line since conventionally the order form that is printed in the final pages of the category romance narrative is for a subscription to the line) and a page filled with quotes praising the novel from, amongst others, *Romantic Times* and the romance fanzine *Affaire de Coeur*. While such individually praising quotes are unconventional for a category romance novel – they are indeed a promotional device more common in single title publishing – the quotes as such strongly place the novel in the popular romance genre. Overall, *For Now, Forever*'s epitext is then a blend between the Silhouette Special Edition line template – many aspects of which are preserved – and the specially designed MacGregor series template. As such it prominently performs a mixture of identities that consists of the romance generic identity (the tell-tale clinch cover is preserved, for example, as is the core design structure of the line template), the series identity and Roberts' authorial identity. The relative unconventionality of these latter two aspects – the fact that these epitextual recognitions of the series are highly unconventional in the category romance novel format – makes the series identity and, to a lesser extent, Roberts' authorial identity stand out all the more, of course.

This blended template is also used for the reissues of the four earlier installments in the MacGregor series that Silhouette publishes in February 1987 to accompany the appearance of *For Now, Forever*.



<sup>45</sup> Front cover original edition *Playing the Odds*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/playing-odds.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Front cover Tartan reprint *Playing the Odds*, 1987. Source: <http://uk.ebid.net/for-sale/playing-the-odds-nora-roberts-pb-47769669.htm>

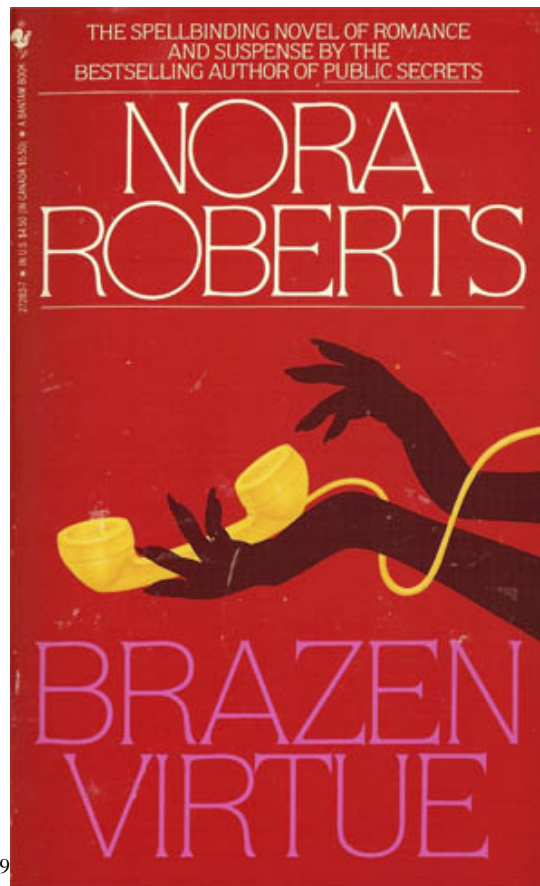
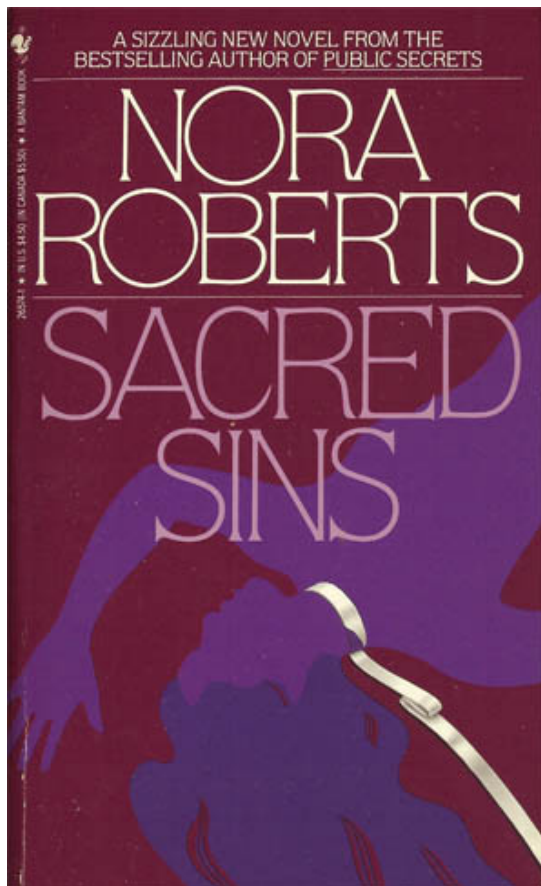
<sup>47</sup> Front cover original edition *All the Possibilities*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/all-possibilities.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Front cover Tartan reprint, *All the Possibilities*, 1987. Source: [http://www.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://im2.ebidst.com/upload\\_big/2/8/1/1259747084-15972-0.jpg&imgrefurl=http://uk.ebid.net/for-sale/all-the-possibilities-nora-roberts-pb-40037511.htm&usg=\\_\\_kcMRiHOMBKogfYQDOOFrE9bOEu0=&h=504&w=501&sz=34&hl=nl&start=4&zoo m=1&tbnid=DWCbQRZKI9yitM:&tbnh=130&tbnw=129&ei=NW5eTsuWO5C6-](http://www.google.be/imgres?imgurl=http://im2.ebidst.com/upload_big/2/8/1/1259747084-15972-0.jpg&imgrefurl=http://uk.ebid.net/for-sale/all-the-possibilities-nora-roberts-pb-40037511.htm&usg=__kcMRiHOMBKogfYQDOOFrE9bOEu0=&h=504&w=501&sz=34&hl=nl&start=4&zoo m=1&tbnid=DWCbQRZKI9yitM:&tbnh=130&tbnw=129&ei=NW5eTsuWO5C6-)



As we can see in these images, the MacGregor series' tartan template is slipped over the original Special Edition covers – the main imagery of which is thus preserved - to create a blend of old and new. Consequently, these peritexts perform multiple identities, including the category romance generic identity, the MacGregor series serial identity and the Nora Roberts authorial identity. This peritextual performance of identity differs significantly from the performance by the novels' original epitexts, which as traditional category epitexts are predominantly preoccupied with the category romance identity. This mechanism by which Roberts' narratives are reissued with peritext and epitexts that differ significantly from the original edition and that consequently perform a different mix of identities is one that in later phases of Roberts' career is very important. For now, this is a rarity since in the 1980s the reissuing of category romance novels is still a complete novelty. Indeed, as I have remarked before, these four MacGregor series novels are the first ever category romance novels that Silhouette republishes; at the time, remarks Silhouette Vice President Editorial Isabel Swift, the idea of reissuing a category romance was “revolutionary” (Companion, 47). The fact that it is Roberts' novels that prompt Silhouette to deviate from one of the core ideas of category romance publishing – namely that category romances are narratives that have very little or no use value beyond their immediate time of publication – is indicative of both the status Roberts has as an author in the romance community by 1987 and of the fact that her novels are slowly pushing the boundaries of the category romance format, not only in terms of narrative content but also, and perhaps more, in terms of reader appeal and commercial staying power.

Remarkably enough, although *For Now, Forever* is the first of Roberts' novels with a paratext that recognizes its seriality, for a long time it remains the novel that does so most extensively and strongly. Indeed, although after the publication of *For Now, Forever* in February 1987 more and more of Roberts' serialized category romance novels peritextually acknowledge and perform their narrative seriality, very many of these references are more visually subdued and subtle than the ones that mark the peritext of *For Now, Forever's* original tartan edition. This is true for both the category and the single title novels published at this time. The paratextual recognition of the narrative connection between the single titles *Sacred Sins* and *Brazen Virtue* – a connection that is based on shared characters, but does not include ongoing plotlines – simply consists of a shared design style for the front covers and shared font.



Although this recognition is very subtle and can easily remain unnoticed, the design style used in these covers does differ from the style used on Roberts' other single title front covers published in this period and as such marks these books as somehow connected to one another.

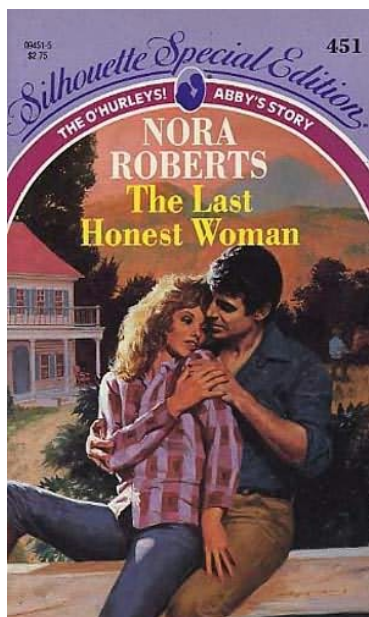
In Roberts' category romances other than those belonging to the MacGregor series, the paratextual treatment of seriality differs. While the complete lack of paratextual references to the seriality that regularly occurred before 1987 disappears, these references are never dominant. The most frequent type of paratextual recognition of seriality is a reference to the series in the preface to the novel; this the case for example in the original edition of the installments in the Time series, in the Night Shift series, the Stanislaski series, the Calhoun series and the Donovan series. Such references most often refer to previously published installments; the preface to the second installment in the Stanislaski series, for example, establishes the connection between this novel and the previous installment in the series: "This warm, tender tale introduces us to Mikhail – a character you met in *Taming Natasha* (SE#583). Yes, Natasha's brother is here to win you heart!" (*Luring a Lady*, 2) Such

<sup>49</sup> Front cover original edition *Sacred Sins*. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553265741/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553265741/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

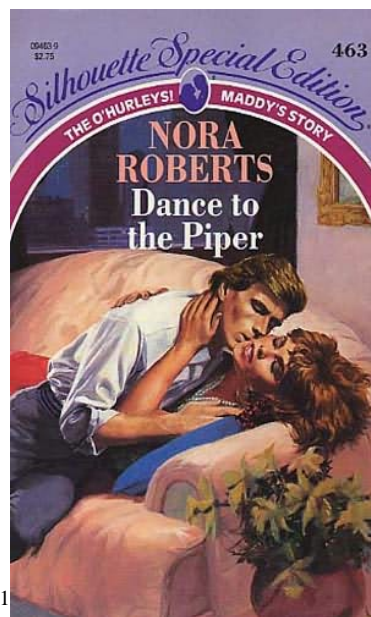
<sup>50</sup> Front cover original edition *Brazen Virtue*. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553272837/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0553272837/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

references often name the title of the series and/or one of its previously published installments; it might also, as in the example, mention a small individuating detail from the previous installment (here Natasha's name) and determine the precise type of connection between the two installments in the series ("Mikhail – a character you met in *Taming Natasha*"). Less often such a reference also refers to a future installment in the series; *Times Change*, the second installment in the Time series, is for example announced in the preface to *Time Was*; similarly, the publication of *Night Shadow*, second in the Night Tales series, is announced in the preface to the series' first installment *Night Shift*.

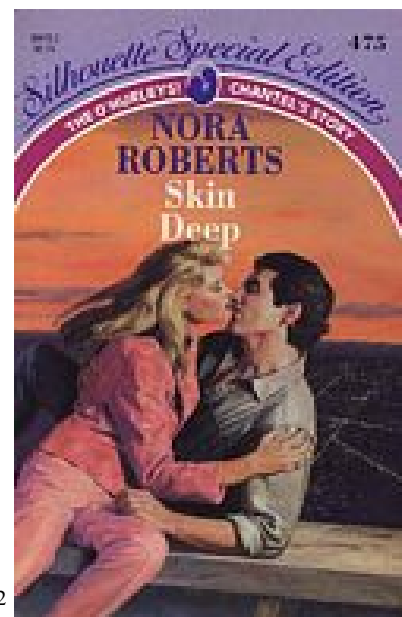
While references to the seriality of Roberts' category romance novels in the preface are then frequent from 1987 onwards, recognition of seriality in other, more prominent peritextual zones – particularly the front cover – is still considerably less common. Besides the already discussed tartan editions of the MacGregor series and the subtle design style similarities between the single titles in the Washington DC Police series, original editions of only three of Roberts' series published in this period reference their narrative seriality: *The O'Hurleys* (1988-90), the *Calhouns* (1991) and the *Donovans* (1992).



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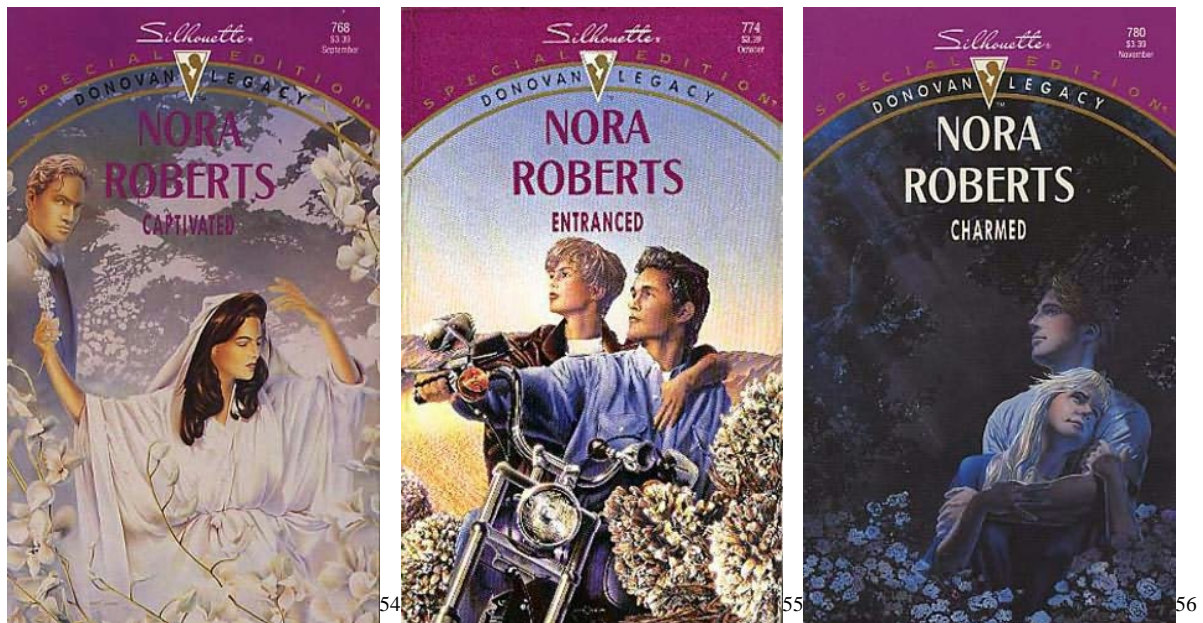


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<sup>51</sup> Front cover original edition *The Last Honest Woman*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/last-honest-woman.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Front cover original edition *Dance to the Piper*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/dance-to-piper.htm>

<sup>53</sup> Front cover of original edition *Skin Deep*. Source: <http://www.fictiondb.com/author/nora-roberts~skin-deep~31929~b.htm>



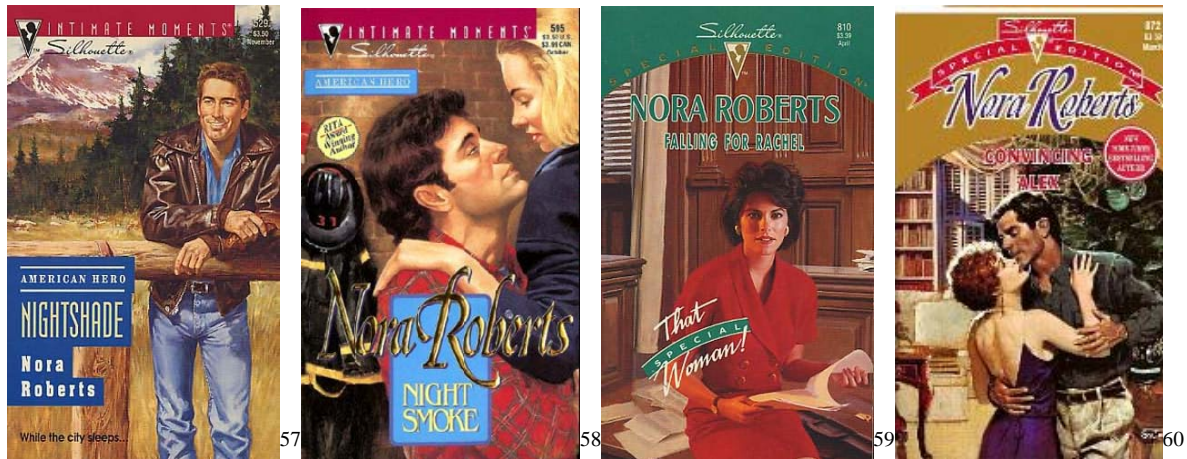
As we can see in these examples, such references are quite subtle. For both the O’Hurley and the Donovan series it exists mainly of an additional band that is placed underneath the line’s logo banner and that carries the series name. While such additions do not visually intrude on the line’s design template and are thus less striking than for example the enlargement of Roberts’ name on the cover discussed earlier, the underlying principle of deviating from the strong peritextual conventions of the category romance to acknowledge a particular individual trait of the text remains the same. To that extent, even such visually subtle references mark these novels as different and more individuated than the vast majority of completely conventionalized category romances and hence indirectly increase the presence of the author in the textual identity that is performed in these peritextual zones.

While the paratextual recognition of seriality in Roberts’ romance novels generally increases from the mid-1980s onwards, the introduction of these elements is initially not systematic. For example, while seriality is recognized on both the cover of and in the preface to the original editions of the installment in the Donovan series published in 1992, original editions of novels in both the Night Tales series (*Nightshade*, 11/93 and *Night Smoke*, 10/94) and the Stanislaski series (*Falling for Rachel*, 04/93 and *Convincing Alex*, 03/94) published in 1993 and 1994 completely lack these cover references.

<sup>54</sup> Front cover original edition *Captivated*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/captivated.htm>

<sup>55</sup> Front cover original edition *Entranced*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/entranced.htm>

<sup>56</sup> Front cover original edition *Charmed*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/charmed.htm>



To an extent these differences in the cover seem to coincide with difference in the publication rhythm – or lack thereof – in which these installments are published. Some of Roberts’ series are published in a set rhythm and installments in these series appear with regular intervals; these include the first four MacGregor novels (two months apart), the first three O’Hurley novels (two months apart), the Loving Jack series (two months apart), the Calhoun series (one month apart) and the Donovan series (one month apart). Other series, such as the Night Tales and the Stanislaski series, lack such a set rhythm; installments in these series seem to appear haphazardly, sometimes within a few months of each other (*Night Shadows* is published two months after *Night Shift*) and sometimes separated by more than a year (*Falling for Rachel* appears a year and three months after *Luring a Lady*; *Convincing Alex* appears another year later). Such a set publication rhythm, certainly when the interval is short, increases the paratextual connection between the different installments in the series and is another tool that contributes to making these category romances stand out from the crowd.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Front cover original edition *Nightshade*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/nightshade.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Front cover original edition *Night Smoke*.

<sup>59</sup> Front cover original edition *Falling for Rachel*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/falling-for-rachel.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Scan of front cover original edition *Convincing Alex*.

<sup>61</sup> Although it might be tempting to argue that a lack of publication rhythm has to do with a lack of planning a series on Roberts’ behalf – that she, in other words, might not have foreseen the number of installments she would write in a particular series from the very beginning – this seems unlikely to me. A series such as the Stanislaskis, which revolves around a family of four siblings – all of whom are introduced in the first installment of the series – is marked by this narrative potential for four installments from the very beginning of the series, yet these installments appear irregularly over the course of four years. Reversely, Roberts has repeatedly claimed – and repeated this to me in a personal interview as well – that when she wrote the first installment of what turned out to be the MacGregor series she did not plan for it to be a series (*Companion*, 48); yet the first four installments of this series are published in a strict schedule of two month intervals in the course of 1985. These differences in release rhythm are then, I believe, related more to how the publisher schedules the releases of certain novels than to Roberts’ personal writing process. As such they are a very good example of how the (paratextual) performance of authorial identity is not solely related to the acts of Nora Roberts personally, but is an ongoing process in which many factors and agents play a role.

## 5. Conclusion: Calhouns and Language of Love

In the period between 1981 and 1994 Nora Roberts develops from a semi-anonymous category romance writer into an author who is a star in the romance genre and has a first serious foot in the door of the mainstream popular culture scene. This development is in part based on the ways in which Roberts' novels deal with generic and other conventions. The discussions in this chapter demonstrate how the increasing presence and significance of Roberts' authorial identity in the textual identity of her novels is to a large extent based on the novels' intricate treatment of both narrative and paratextual conventions. I illustrate how Roberts' novels on the one hand respect and incorporate the established conventions of the popular romance genre and how they on the other hand deviate from these conventions; it is mainly in these deviations and variations, I argue, that a space is created in which Roberts' authorial identity becomes a manifest presence. Since these deviations remain located within the formal boundaries of the popular romance genre, this aspect of the text's generic identity is never truly at risk. The ongoing power play between genre and authorship that thus develops in the narrative and paratextual performance of textual identity in Roberts' texts is traced and discussed in three areas in this chapter: the texts' treatment of the generic romance conventions, of generic hybridization and of narrative serialization. In each area a similar intricate and well-balanced play of conventions takes shape in which Roberts' authorial identity increasingly comes to the fore first on the narrative and later on the paratextual level of the text. The combination of all these dynamics, which to a large extent come about more or less simultaneously but not systematically in Roberts' oeuvre in this period, enables Nora Roberts to develop into one of the most popular, famous and successful American popular romance authors by the beginning of the 1990s.

This development, the discussions in this chapter have established, is in part related to the specific historical and cultural context in which Nora Roberts entered the popular romance genre. At the beginning of the 1980s the American popular romance genre was poised towards change as introductions of variations upon the long-established traditions and conventions of the genre were, particularly in the category format, overdue. Roberts keenly uses the unusual space for variation and experimentation that thus comes into being in the otherwise so strictly confined category romance novel to establish, mainly on the level of the narrative, her individual voice and authorial identity. Although we should thus not underestimate the importance of this particular generic context in the initial developments of Roberts' authorial identity, the variations and transformations Roberts introduces in her

narratives soon surpass the strict conventional framework of the popular romance genre. The presence of Roberts' authorial identity in the textual identity performed by her novels is significantly increased by the fact that Roberts' texts contain variations not only upon the romance conventions proper, but also increasingly frequently and extensively introduce unusual elements of generic hybridization and narrative serialization. It is, however, noteworthy that amidst all these variations and transformations Roberts' texts systematically incorporate the core conventions of the popular romance genre and thus, with one or two exceptions, never relinquish this identity.

From 1987 on Roberts' authorial identity develops along two at this time strictly separated tracks. On the one hand Roberts continues to write category romance novels; within the innate boundaries of the format, many of these novels feature elements that increase Roberts' authorial presence. On the other hand Roberts starts writing single title romance novels in which she develops a decidedly different authorial identity and voice. With narratives that still feature the core elements of the popular romance genre but intensely combine these with conventional elements from the suspense genre – and are thus marked by a significantly different kind of tone and content than Roberts' more light-hearted categories – these narratives are clearly targeted at a different, broader, less niche and more mainstream audience. While after a few years these novels are relatively successful in mainstream popular culture – as is indicated by Roberts' first bestsellers and the shift to original hardcover editions of her single title novels – in this period Roberts clearly achieves her most resounding successes in the popular romance genre and its concomitant community of users. The author wins numerous Rita awards, becomes the first inductee in the RWA Hall of Fame and is the first author ever to have her category romance novels be republished by Silhouette. Roberts' authorial identity becomes an increasingly important aspect in the identity her novels perform both narratively and paratextually. All of this implies that by the beginning of the 1990s, about a decade after Roberts' first category romance novel was published, Nora Roberts is one of the biggest stars in the American popular romance genre.

Slowly, Roberts' fame, reputation and popularity – i.e. her individual authorial identity – outgrow some of the conceptual contours of the category romance format. More specifically, Roberts' author name increasingly starts to take over the place and function of the imprint in her category romance novels. While this is only a beginning development in the early 1990s, two publications at this seem to cement this development: the publication of the Calhoun series in 1991 and the publication of the Language of Love series between 1992 and 1994.

The Calhoun series, a four-part narrative series that is published between June and September 1991, is in two important ways different from the other narrative series that Roberts writes in this period: first, it features a suspense plot that is developed over the four installments of the series; this plot is introduced in the first installment, further complicated in part two and three and only definitively resolved in the fourth and final novel of the series. Second, each installment in this series is published in a different category imprint. These are two significant shifts in comparison to the publication practices and habits that are developed in Roberts' other narrative series published in this period. The continuous suspense subplot implies that these separately published narratives narratively do not function independently from one another; a coherent understanding of this story thread requires the reader to read all of the series' installments and to read these in a particular order. The Calhoun series is the first of Roberts' narrative series with such a strong and significant narrative interdependence between the separate installments in a series; as I remarked earlier, all of Roberts' other narrative series published in this period are precisely marked by a relative narrative independence which ensures that each installment in the series can be read autonomously from the other parts. Interestingly, this narrative interdependency only applies to the *suspense* subplot that is narrated in each installment. In other words, as *romance* narratives these stories do function independently from each other: each separate Calhoun installment features all of the conventional elements of the courtship narrative of one couple starting with their first meeting – indeed, protagonists do not meet each other outside of their own narrative proper – and ending on the conventional HEA. The series of course also represents the post-HEA of the first three couples in the subsequent installments.

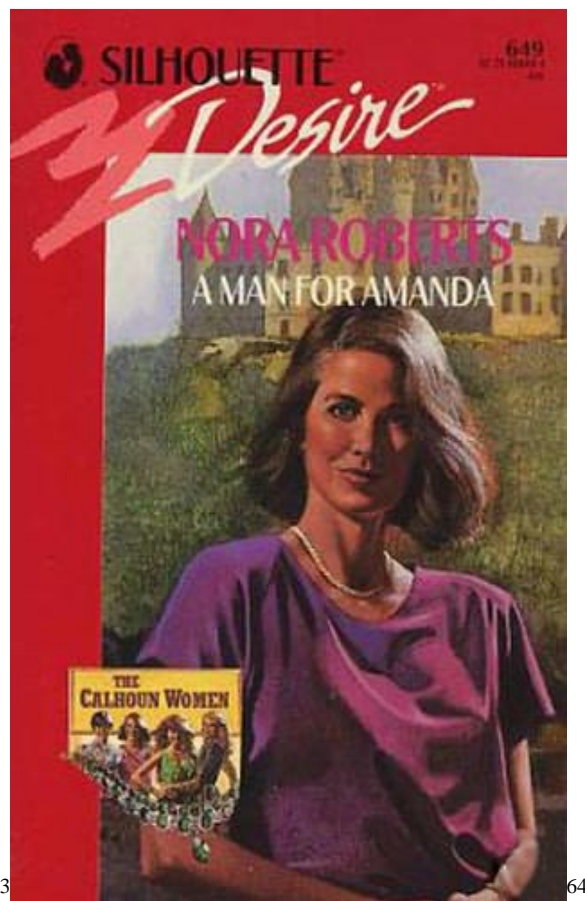
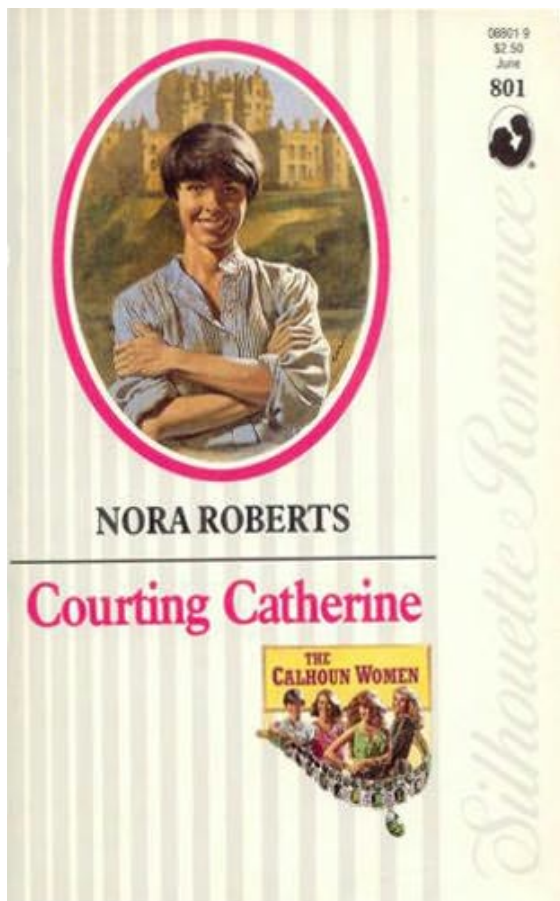
The exceptional significance of Roberts' authorial identity in the textual identity that is both narratively and paratextually performed by these texts is indicated, I find, by the fact that this relative<sup>62</sup> narrative interdependence occurs in series installments that are published in four different lines. It is the first time, for both Roberts and in the history of Silhouette, that installments from one narrative series are published in different lines (Little 47). This publication strategy is highly unconventional for the category romance as it runs counter to some of the core concepts of category romance publishing system. A coherent reading of the series requires readers not only to individually identify four particular category romance novels (an identification that is not as self-evident in the category romance system as it is for

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<sup>62</sup> I consider it relative because the interdependency only applies to the suspense narrative and not to the more dominant romance narratives.

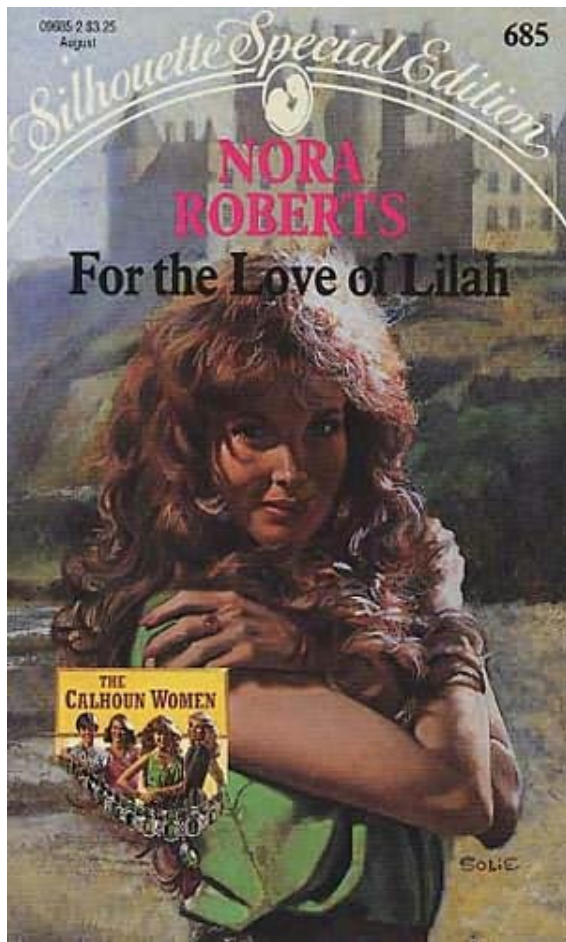


other kinds of literature), but also to identify these novels in four different lines – that is, in four different identity units within the category romance system. In this kind of identification the serial identity “Calhoun” and the authorial identity “Nora Roberts” with which this serial identity is tightly interwoven then take precedence over the line identity. This performance of the textual identity is perhaps most obvious in the narrative and the epitext – especially in the publication strategy – but is also part of the novels’ peritext.



<sup>63</sup> Original front cover *Courting Catherine*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/courting-catherine.htm>

<sup>64</sup> Original front cover *A Man for Amanda*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/man-for-amanda.htm>



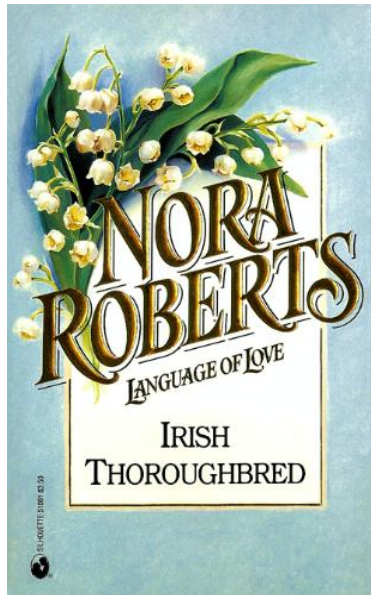
The front covers of these original editions of the four novels in the Calhoun series incorporate, as we can see, the conventional template of each line, but also prominently feature the Calhoun-series icon which references their serial identity. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Roberts' name is not enlarged on these covers but is printed in the place, size and manner that is conventional in the line template. The back covers feature the conventional partial summary of the narrative – which makes references to the continuous suspense subplot – and explicitly refer to the next installment in the series by title, line and month in which it is published. The current novel and the Calhoun series as a whole take up a prominent place in each the preface to each of these novels, all of which make a mention of the next installment in the series and the line in which this appears as well. Roberts is consistently praised in these brief discussions and presented as a star of the romance genre. In the preface to *A Man for Amanda* – the only novel by Roberts to appear in the Silhouette Desire line – Roberts' entry into the line is for example presented as an honor for Desire: “July is an extra-special month,

<sup>65</sup> Front cover original edition *For the Love of Lilah*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/for-love-of-lilah.htm>

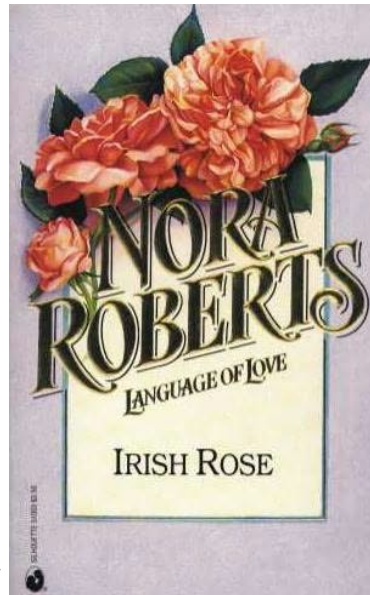
<sup>66</sup> Front cover original edition *Suzanna's Surrender*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/suzannas-surrender.htm>

because Nora Roberts – at long last – has written a much-anticipated Silhouette Desire” (2). The final pages of these original editions contain order forms via which the other installments in the series can be acquired. This is another element that indicates that the series – and via the series Roberts – is more and more taking up the functional position of the line. The novels’ titles, finally, always contain the first name of the Calhoun sister who is the female protagonist of the narrative and thus simultaneously refer to the narrative’s seriality and the installment’s particular position in this series.

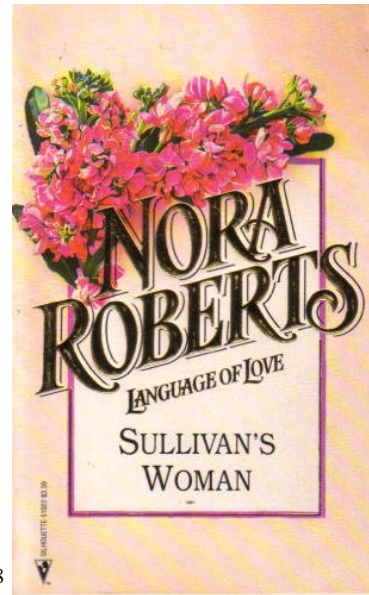
The publication of the four Calhoun novels in four consecutive months in the Summer of 1991 establishes quite clearly that Nora Roberts’ name and authorial identity are well known within the romance genre and its community and have come to function in this context in commercially interesting ways. This notion is confirmed and further reinforced the following year when Silhouette launches the so-called “Language of Love” series. This is a series that consists entirely or reissues of older category romance novels by Nora Roberts that were published in a variety of lines in the decade between 1982 and 1992. The series, in which two novels are published each month, runs between February 1992 and October 1994 and consists of forty-eight novels in total. For the series, which is not part of an existing Silhouette imprint, a special title and design template is developed.



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As we can see in these examples, Roberts’ name is clearly the most dominant visual element on the cover. Printed in golden, raised, flowery letters it immediately catches the eye and

<sup>67</sup> Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510012/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_1?ie=UTF8&index=1](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510012/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_1?ie=UTF8&index=1)

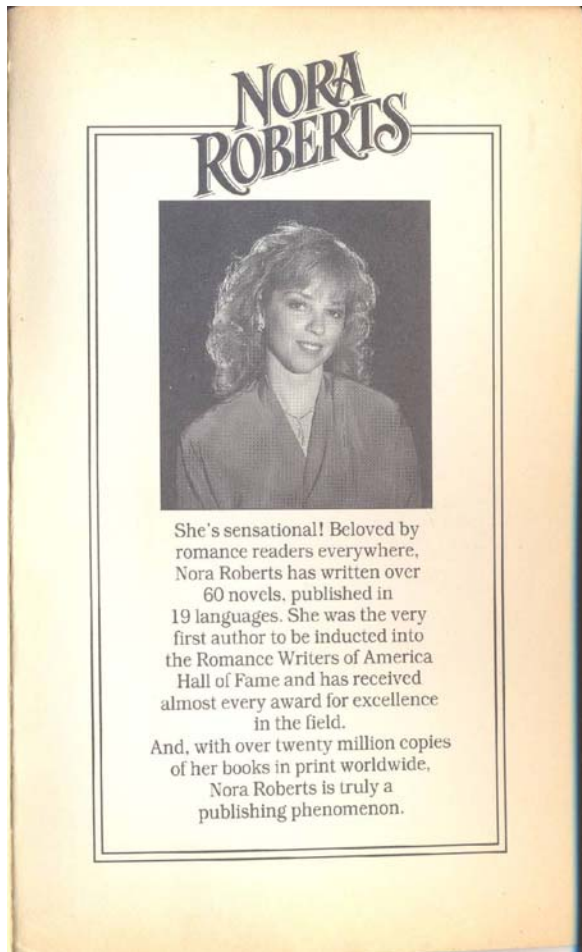
<sup>68</sup> Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510039/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510039/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

<sup>69</sup> Source: [http://www.amazon.com/SullivanS-Woman-22-Language-Love/dp/0373510225/ref=pd\\_sim\\_b\\_27](http://www.amazon.com/SullivanS-Woman-22-Language-Love/dp/0373510225/ref=pd_sim_b_27)

dominates the entire space. The always changing flowers – each installment of the series is renamed after a particular flower, an image of which is then printed on the cover – also take up a rather prominent position in this cover design. Given that this is a series of category romance novels, one of the most remarkable aspects of this cover is something that is missing, namely the clinch image. Indeed, none of the forty-eight novels in the *Language of Love* series features a kissing couple (or an image of any other kind of person) on its front cover. This kind of abstract cover is highly unconventional for the category romance novel – to such an extent even that the peritextual performance of the category identity is problematic in this space. Instead, the identity that is by far most dominantly performed in this space is Roberts' authorial identity.

The *Language of Love* series then essentially functions as an independent category romance imprint that consists solely of category romances by Nora Roberts: it has its own design template, a set publication schedule of a fixed number of novels that appear every month, these novels are awarded a line number and the novels that are scheduled for release the next month are announced in the back of the books. The (narrative) profile of this line is simple: Nora Roberts. Roberts' authorship is indeed the only distinctive feature that all novels in this series – which were originally published in a variety of imprints, years and romance subgenres – have in common aside from their more general romance identity. Roberts' prominence to the series is not only apparent in that her authorship functions as the most important selection criterion for inclusion in the line, but is also paratextually acknowledged and performed. Indeed, Roberts' author name is the single most prominent element in the paratexts of these books. This significantly reverses the conventional relations between authorial and generic identity in the category paratext. Whereas usually the generic and line identities are absolutely dominant – to the extent, as I have argued in the first part of this dissertation, that the individual authorial identity is quite systematically suppressed in the category paratext – in these paratexts the authorial identity is fully dominant and overshadows the narrative's generic and line identity – indeed, not a single reference is made to the line in which these stories were originally published.

The peritextual dominance of Roberts' authorial identity perhaps reaches its zenith on the inside of the back cover which features a photograph of Roberts; a short biographic text is printed underneath.



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Again, this is a strong breach of the peritextual conventions of the category romance novel, which never features a photograph of the author. In fact, the authorial picture is more typical of single title although even there it is far from a common feature. The biographical texts strongly praises Roberts and emphasizes her exceptional status in the romance genre: she is described as “sensational” and called a “publishing phenomenon.” Her exceptional success is established and detailed by a series of equally exceptional figures; the text elaborates that she has written “over 60 novels”, that her work has been translated in nineteen languages, that she was the first member of the RWA Hall of Fame and that there are over twenty million copies of her novels in print. Although these numbers are almost negligible in comparison to Roberts’ achievements in these areas today – she has written over two hundred novels, her novels appear in thirty-four countries, she a triple RWA Hall of Famer and there are currently over four hundred million copies of her books in print – these numbers nonetheless signify huge and at the time unprecedented success for a category romance author and as such implicitly establish the *Langue of Love’s raison d’être*.

<sup>70</sup> Inside back cover, *Tempting Fate*, Language of Love edition (1992).

With the publication of the Language of Love series Silhouette also definitively makes short work of the idea that category romance novels are unfit for republication because they are very temporary, almost transient, cultural artifacts that have a time-limited and time-sensitive use value. This notion, which had been a cornerstone of category romance publication policy for decades, had been problematized a first time in 1987 when Silhouette republished the first four MacGregor novels to accompany the original publication of the fifth novel in the series, but it is the publication of the Language of Love series that signifies the definitive end of this category publication policy. Although the 1987 reissuing of the MacGregor novels is a conceptually important step, the act as such is limited: it concerns only four novels which are reissued a single time to accompany the publication of a new and much-anticipated novel in a series. The Language of Love series is conceived of rather differently: it is a much bigger and longer project that encompasses almost fifty novels and three years of consecutive monthly publications. There are, moreover, no narrative connections between the novels in the series that would ensure an continuous interest from the reader. The Language of Love series revolves, in other words, much more around the author Nora Roberts, whose identity is no longer obscured by a series name that stands for a specific narrative content. The publication of this series then indicates that by 1992 the author name and authorial identity “Nora Roberts” is so strongly developed in the romance genre and its community of users that it is adopting the contours and features of a brand name comparable to the name of a line or imprint. Perhaps one of the most remarkable feats of this development is that it takes place solely in category romance novels, which are, as I have stipulated earlier, a format that structurally suppresses the individual authorial identity in favor of the generic and line-related identity of the text. In the course of the first fifteen years of her career Nora Roberts overcomes these structural restrictions of the format and manages to emerge as a hugely successful individual romance author.

Between 1981 and 1994 these developments of Roberts’ authorial identity take place within the rather strict confines of the romance genre and its community of users. While this is, as I have indicated at the beginning of this dissertation, a big community, it is not comparable to mainstream popular culture, where Roberts is still a considerably less significant author. While she has some bestsellers to her name by 1994, she is by no means a figure of significance in the mainstream American popular culture scene. This would, however, significantly change in the next fifteen years in which Nora Roberts develops from a

successful romance author into a global superstar. This development is analyzed in the next chapters.





## CHAPTER 7: NORA ROBERTS 1994 – 2008

### CATEGORIES AND TRILOGIES

#### 1. Introduction

In the period between 1994 and 2008 the relation between genre and authorship in the identity performed by the novels written by Nora Roberts changes further.<sup>1</sup> As Roberts' fame and popularity rise, her authorial identity becomes increasingly dominant in the identity performed by her novels. This is a somewhat self-perpetuating dynamic since the increasing presence of Roberts' authorial identity also leads to increasing fame and popularity. This development is most obvious in the paratext of Roberts' novels, where the author name "Nora Roberts" becomes the central and often singularly dominant element. In certain ways this shift takes place at the expense of the paratextual performance of generic identity, which becomes less prominent. On the narrative level the dominance of Roberts' authorial identity and the (concomitant) decline in the presence and performance of generic identity, in particular popular romance, are a less straightforward, more tangled matter. On the one hand, all of Roberts' narratives from this period prominently feature conventional genre elements; in the vast majority of cases these include the core narrative conventions of the popular romance genre – only in the novels published under Roberts' J.D. Robb pseudonym romance conventions are not always the dominant generic thread. All, or at least most, of Roberts' narratives from this period thus prominently perform the popular romance generic identity. On the other hand, many of these narratives also prominently feature elements of both generic hybridization and narrative serialization – elements that, as the discussions in the previous chapter indicated, increase the narrative performance of authorial identity (particularly in the context of the popular romance genre). The narrative prominence of these elements, and thus of Roberts' authorial identity, is constantly on the rise in the novels Roberts writes between 1994 and 2008. Roberts' authorial identity thus develops into an increasingly prominent aspect of her novels' identity but this development is consistently situated in the context and the framework of the popular romance genre. As such "Nora Roberts" and "romance" thus remain two tightly interwoven textual identities.

In comparison to the previous period, a number of significant new developments occur in Roberts' oeuvre between 1994 and 2008 which concretely embody these shifting identity

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<sup>1</sup> This introduction discusses all of the developments in Roberts' oeuvre between 1994 and 2008. To keep the chapter length manageable, the actual analyzes of these developments are split up over this and the next chapter.

dynamics. The most important change is undoubtedly the increase of single titles in Roberts' oeuvre. Whereas between 1981 and 1994 Nora Roberts predominantly writes category romance novels, from 1994 onwards her focus shifts to the single title format. Between October 1994 and December 2008 she publishes eighteen category romances, seventy-one single titles (twenty-six of which belong to the *In Death* series published under the J.D. Robb pseudonym) and nine romance novellas, which makes a total of ninety-eight novels. As I discussed in part I of this dissertation, the single title romance novel is a format in which authorial identity is accorded a structurally more prominent place in the overall identity performance than it is in the category romance novel. Hence, these single title romance novels develop Roberts' authorial identity more strongly than her category romances (can) do. Still, the romance generic identity remains a prominent aspect of the vast majority of Roberts' narratives published as single titles. This is most clearly so in Roberts' single title romance trilogies which she starts writing in the mid-1990s. The single title romance trilogy is a particular type of single title Roberts writes in which, as is discussed more elaborately in this chapter, both the narrative performance of the romance identity and the degree of narrative serialization are prominent factors. Many of these narratives are furthermore also marked by narrative generic hybridization. Generic hybridization is also a prominent feature of the so-called stand-alone – that is, non-serialized – single titles Roberts continues to write. These novels, which feature romantic suspense narratives, are largely in line with the type of single titles Roberts wrote between 1987 and 1994, although, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the narrative performance of the romance generic identity is often stronger in these narratives than it is in Roberts' earlier single titles. Although these two types of single title romances then develop somewhat different authorial voices and identities – a notion that is explored more deeply in this and the following chapter – both types of narratives and novels importantly contribute to the increasing emergence and prominence of Roberts' authorial identity in the textual identities performed by her novels.

A second important development in Roberts' oeuvre in this period which contributes to the rise to prominence of her authorial identity takes place in the relatively few category romance novels Roberts writes between 1994 and 2002. Roberts no longer writes stand-alone (non-serialized) category romances; all of the sixteen categories by Roberts that are published in this period are tied to a series. It concerns both the launch of entirely new category series and the publication of new instalments in series that were established pre-1994. Frequently, such new additions to series are accompanied by the reissuing of the earlier instalments in the series. In fact, the reissuing of Roberts' category romance novels, still rare before 1994,

becomes a more and more common practice even as Roberts continues to write new novels for Silhouette. Once Roberts leaves the publisher in 2002, Silhouette starts vigorously reissuing her older work in publications that often paratextually play up both the narrative serialization and the generic hybridity that are present in many of these texts. As I discuss more elaborately in these two final chapters, all of these practices – the new category series, the additional instalments of the older series, and the extensive reissuing of older category romance novels – contribute to the further development and expansion of the prominence of Roberts’ authorial identity in the romance community and beyond.

A third factor that, in a more complicated and initially indirect way, contributes to the further expansion and development of Roberts’ authorial identity in her novels’ identity performance is the ongoing, open-ended In Death series published under the pseudonym J.D. Robb. Launched in 1995 with the publication of *Naked In Death*, the series is marked by a high degree of generic hybridity, mixing conventional elements from the genres of suspense, futuristic science fiction and romance amongst others. While a new police procedural suspense narrative is launched and completed in each instalment, as a whole the In Death series is characterized by a high degree of narrative interdependence since characters and their (romantic and other) relationships are developed over the course of numerous instalments. Both characteristics, as well as the single title format in which the series is published, make for a relatively strong authorial presence in the novels’ identity performance. Part of this performance is the dark and often gritty tone in which the stories are narrated – a tone that is decidedly different from the tone adopted in any of Roberts’ other types of narratives, including the stand alone romantic suspense single titles which are in terms of their suspense-driven content perhaps closest to the In Death series. The way in which this series contributes to the overall development of Roberts’ authorial identity is complicated by the fact that these narratives are published under a pseudonym. As I discuss in more detail in the following chapter, then entanglements between the Nora Roberts and the J.D. Robb identities are complex. Although there are numerous indications Robb was never fully separated from Roberts, Roberts only officially “comes out” as Robb in 2001. At this time the Robb persona officially becomes a part of the Nora Roberts authorial identity – a shift that is, we will discuss, immediately reflected in and constituted by shifts in the paratext of the In Death series. The dynamics between Roberts and Robb are further complicated by the fact that even when Roberts’ connection to Robb is unwrapped and paratextually performed, the J.D. Robb identity is preserved in the publication of the In Death novels, which to this day feature the author name “J.D. Robb” on their covers. Unwrapping the complex relationships between

Roberts and Robb on the one hand and between Robb and the multiple generic identities performed by these novels on the other hand requires the more thorough and detailed discussion this chapter provides. This discussion will eventually show how precisely, on the whole and over time, the *In Death* series develops into an important aspect of the authorial identity that resides under the author name “Nora Roberts” and how it factors into the complex relationship between this author name/identity and the popular romance genre.

In the period between October 1994 and December 2008 that is discussed in these final two chapters the authorial identity that resides under the name “Nora Roberts” is then constitutively developed in what we could call four identity threads, strands or pillars: serialized category romances, single title romance trilogies, stand alone single title romantic suspense novels and the ongoing, open-ended, futuristic police procedural romance *In Death* series published under the J.D. Robb pseudonym. While, as I discuss in this chapter, each of these types of texts performs a (sometimes slightly, sometimes markedly) different kind of textual, and particularly authorial, identity, all of them are constitutive parts of the conglomerate authorial identity “Nora Roberts”. All of these texts also, to varying degrees, perform the popular romance generic identity. Roberts’ authorial identity then always in part develops in relation to this generic romance identity, which it consequently also incorporates. As I argued in the previous chapter, in such a strongly genericized context authorial identity partially and perhaps particularly takes shape in the way in which generic conventions are both respected and varied upon. It is, more precisely, embodied by and in the space that exists between the generic norm and the variation upon this norm that is a deviation but not an outright transgression of the convention. As the discussions in this chapter establish in more detail, all of the novels written by Nora Roberts in this period take part in this dynamic process of identity performance and consequently perform, in various ways and to various degrees, both the popular romance generic identity and Roberts’ authorial identity. The precise relation of these two identities in the novels written by Nora Roberts between October 1994 and December 2008 is the focus of the discussion in this and the following chapter.

These discussions first separately consider each of the four types of novels Roberts writes in this period. This chapter first focuses on Roberts’ category romances and then elaborates upon the author’s romance trilogies. The next chapter deals first with Roberts’ romantic suspense single titles and then looks at J.D. Robb’s *In Death* series. In a final concluding discussion the ways in which these four types of novels – and the four strands of authorial identity they constitute – relate to each other to make up the compound authorial identity that resides under the collective author name “Nora Roberts” is considered. In this

final discussion I also take consider the effects of the numerous reissues that appear of Roberts' earlier novels. I discuss both how the extensive reissuing of Roberts' older work (particularly her category romance novels) influences the synchronic development and constitution of her authorial identity in relation to the popular romance genre in this period and how the vast differences that exist between these publications' paratexts and the narratives' original paratexts perform a different kind of textual identity for the same narrative text.

## 2. Category Romance Novels

In comparison to the plethora of category romances that Nora Roberts writes between 1981 and 1994, her post-1994 output contains relatively few novels in this most quintessential of popular romance formats. Between October 1994 and February 2002, when with *Cordina's Crown Jewel* (Silhouette Special Edition, 02/02) Roberts' last original category romance novel is published, Roberts writes only sixteen new category romance novels. In terms of romance conventionality and generic hybridity these novels are overall characterized by a consolidation of the developments that are already taking place in these areas in Roberts' category romances published before October 1994. Thus, these narratives continue to feature strong, emancipated heroines who often have a well-developed professional identity and are not necessarily a virgin – although, as in the previous decade, the female virgin, both of the actual and metaphorical variety, remains a common figure in Roberts' category romances. The demystification of the hero also continues. Not only do all of these narratives extensively feature hero point of view, but in many of these stories the hero is perhaps a shade more prominently developed than the heroine is. This is most obviously so in the four instalments of the MacKade series, which is the first of Roberts' series to revolve around an initially exclusively male community made up of four brothers. In all of these novels these brother-heroes, slightly more than the heroines, carry the story and are the focus of the narration. While this does not at all imply that the heroine fades into the background – as the second protagonist she of course remains a very prominent and important character – a hero-centric series like the MacKades does indicate the consolidation of the fact that the heroine is no longer the most prominent character in the American category romance novel. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter this narrative emancipation and demystification of the hero is a long, slow and drawn-out generic evolution, which in Roberts' oeuvre now reaches a first climax in the hero-dominated MacKade series. Other shifts in narrative generic conventions

that are further consolidated in these sixteen narratives include the substantiation of the barrier – gone are the misunderstandings and the lack of communication – and the inclusion of explicit love scenes – all of these narratives are rife with sexual tension and include sex scenes in which the consummation of the relationship is explicitly depicted. Of course, whereas in the 1980s and even early 1990s many of these representations of the romance narrative conventions qualified as unconventional variations upon the existing established conventions, by the second half of the 1990s these variations have become more common in the American category romance novel, to the extent that they are now often part of the format's established conventions. Consequently, these representations performatively foreground Roberts' authorial identity less significantly than in the author's older category romances.

A similar development takes place in this group of novels with regard to generic hybridity, which continues to be an important aspect of many of these narratives. While romantic suspense remains a frequent form of generic hybridity – suspense subplots are featured in eight of these sixteen novels<sup>2</sup> – increasingly often the dominant romance narrative is mixed with paranormal elements; nine of these sixteen novels feature supernatural elements such as ghosts (in the MacKade series), divine diamonds (in the Stars of Mithra series) or straight-out magic (in *Enchanted* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 11/99), a new addition to the Donovan series). While in all of these stories the conventional courtship narrative of the romance genre is the dominant story line – this dominance is a very strong, format-constituting convention in the category romance novel – there are a few novels in which the suspense and/or paranormal story line is unusually prominent in the overall narrative. This is particularly the case in the three instalments in the Stars of Mithra series - *Hidden Star*, *Captive Star* and *Secret Star* – in which it is in part the suspense subplot, which is developed over the series as a whole, that ties the different instalments of the series together. More than in for example the earlier Calhoun series, which also has a suspense subplot that develops over the course of the different instalments, the stories in the Stars of Mithra series are driven by this suspense (sub)plot, which is almost as prominent in the narratives as each respective courtship narrative that unfolds in each separate novel. While the prominence of the suspense story line then makes the Stars of Mithra into somewhat of an exception, narrative generic

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<sup>2</sup> These are: *The Return of Rafe MacKade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 04/95), *The Heart of Devin MacKade* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 03/96), *Megan's Mate* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/96), *Hidden Star* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 10/94), *Captive Star* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 12/97), *Secret Star* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 02/98), *Irish Rebel* (Silhouette Special Edition, 06/00), and *Night Shield* (Silhouette Intimate Moments, 09/00).

hybridity is as such no longer a convention-defying element in the American category romance novel in the second half the 1990s, when particularly romantic suspense elements have become more or less commonplace in category romances. Consequently, again, as with the representation of narrative romance conventions, elements that in much of the preceding decade effectively served to highlight Roberts' authorial identity in her categories' narrative performance of textual identity have by now more or less evolved into conventions themselves and as such no longer have a similar effect on the relationship between genre and authorship in the textual identity that is being performed by the narrative. Narrative generic hybridity does of course still fracture the performance of the narrative's generic identity and as such remains an important factor in the narrative performance of textual identity.

By far the biggest and most important developments in Roberts' post-1994 category romance novels occur in the area of narrative serialization, which becomes significantly more prominent in these narratives than it is in Roberts' earlier category romance novels. As I remarked before, *all* category romance novels by Roberts published in this period belong to a narrative series. Roberts launches two entirely new series – the MacKades and the Stars of Mithra – and writes another nine novels that are additions to already-established series. An overview:

• <i>The Return of Rafe MacKade</i>	MacKades	SIM <sup>3</sup>	04/95
• <i>The Pride of Jared MacKade</i>	MacKades	SSE <sup>4</sup>	12/95
• <i>The Heart of Devin MacKade</i>	MacKades	SIM	03/96
• <i>The Fall of Shane MacKade</i>	MacKades	SSE	04/96
• <i>Megan's Mate</i>	Calhouns	SIM	10/96
• <i>Waiting for Nick</i>	Stanislaskis	SSE	03/97
• <i>Hidden Star</i>	Stars of Mithra	SIM	10/97
• <i>Captive Star</i>	Stars of Mithra	SIM	12/97
• <i>Secret Star</i>	Stars of Mithra	SIM	02/98
• <i>The Winning Hand</i>	MacGregors	SSE	10/98
• <i>The Perfect Neighbor</i>	MacGregors	SSE	03/99
• <i>Enchanted</i>	Donovans	SIM	11/99
• <i>Irish Rebel</i>	Irish Hearts	SSE	06/00
• <i>Night Shield</i>	Night Tales	SIM	09/00
• <i>Considering Kate</i>	Stanislaskis	SSE	03/01
• <i>Cordina's Crown Jewel</i>	Cordina	SSE	02/02

In all of these novels seriality is a prominent aspect of the identity performance on both the narrative and the paratextual level.

<sup>3</sup> SIM= Silhouette Intimate Moments. Bold = new series.

<sup>4</sup> SSE= Silhouette Special Edition.

## 2.1 Narrative

On the level of the narrative, major interconnections between the different instalments in the series are developed in two main ways. First, in the two new series series-wide subplots are developed which unravel over the course of all instalments in the series and consequently strongly tie together the narratives in separate novels. Second, in both the new series and the novels that are additions to already-existing series the community around which the series is structured – which is very often a biological family – is a much more prominent part of the narrative than it is in many of Roberts' older serialized category romance novels. This increased prominence of the fictional community also increases the narrative presence of the series and its prominence in the identity performed. As I have argued in the previous chapter, such serial identity entails the authorial identity to which it is also a performative reference and as such has the overall effect of increasing the narrative performance of this authorial identity. As I discuss in the following pages, what is rather new in Roberts' serialized category romance novels from this period is the increasing narrative entanglement of this seriality with narrative elements constituting the romance generic identity.

As I remarked earlier, the two new series by Roberts that are published in this period are both marked by series-wide subplots. The entanglements of these subplots with the narration of the conventional romance narrative vary between the series. It is most strongly developed in the MacKade series, which features two such subplots. One is a historically-oriented paranormal story about the ghosts of two young Civil War soldiers who fought each other in the woods of Antietam, the Maryland town in which the series is set, and continue to haunt the area. This subplot is of rather minor importance in the first three instalments in the series; while the occasional ghostly encounter in these narratives leads to latent questions of what eventually happened to the two Civil War soldiers, these paranormal occurrences are mostly instrumental in furthering the romance plot e.g. by literally driving the heroine into the hero's arms (as in *The Return of Rafe MacKade*) or establishing an emotional connection between hero and heroine (as in *The Pride of Jared MacKade*). In the fourth instalment this paranormal subplot comes to the fore as the rumoured ghostly activity brings scholar Rebecca Knight to Antietam to investigate these unusual occurrences. Rebecca's paranormal quest brings out the narrative's serial referentiality, as in scene after scene she asks the protagonists of the previous instalments to recount their ghostly encounters and thus, in effect, to recount scenes narrated in earlier instalments of the series. While these interviews enable Rebecca to put



together the story of what originally happened to the two Civil War soldiers and the local residents who helped them – thus resolving the historical storyline that is developed throughout the series – Rebecca’s interest in these ghostly matters is an important barrier in the romance that develops between her and Shane MacKade, whose persistent and complexly motivated refusal to acknowledge the ghosts and the history they tell threatens to drive them apart. That a previously minor subplot turns into one of the key ingredients of the conventional romance narrative in the series’ fourth instalment intensifies the narrative importance of the serial connections between the different instalments in the series and the entanglement between the narrative’s serial nature and its generic narrative.

This entanglement is even more complex in the series’ second series-wide subplot, which revolves around the character of Cassie Dolin, a young mother of two who at the beginning of the series is married to Joe Dolin, a good-for-nothing drunkard who physically and sexually abuses her. The series’ first instalment depicts the devastating psychological, emotional and physical effects of Cassie’s abusive marriage, featuring numerous scenes in which Cassie is bruised and battered, both literally and figuratively. For much of the novel Cassie suffers Joe’s abuse in silence and rebuffs attempts by other characters to help her. When, however, Joe nearly strangles Cassie, she flees him and moves in with Regan, the novel’s romance heroine. The narrative painfully details how years of abuse have completely undermined Cassie’s sense of self-worth and how she, convinced it is her duty to stand by her husband, initially refuses to file for divorce. When Joe eventually attacks and attempts to rape Regan, Cassie reaches rock bottom and is forced to face up to the reality of her situation. She goes to Devin MacKade, the local sheriff, to bring charges against Joe and start divorce proceedings. This scene contains the first subtle hints that Devin has romantic feelings for Cassie, but these feelings are only faintly implied. In the series’ second instalment Cassie is in the process of divorcing Joe, who is now in prison because of his attack on Regan; in a few key scenes the narrative establishes that while Cassie and her children are on the mend they continue to suffer emotionally and psychologically from the years of abuse. This novel is less subtle about Devin’s feelings and clearly establishes that his interest in and concern for Cassie and her children exceeds the bounds of both his profession and their platonic friendship. Both threads of this subplot come to a head in the series’ third novel in which Cassie finally learns of Devin’s feelings for her and falls in love with him. One of the main barriers to Cassie’s and Devin’s eventual romantic union is of course Cassie’s various emotional, psychological and sexual traumas, which are represented in often painful detail in the series preceding two instalments. An almost equally strong barrier to their union is, moreover, the near-constant

emotional and sexual restraint Devin has developed towards Cassie over the course of the years he has loved her from afar; like Cassie's trauma's, Devin's restraint is depicted in detail in the series' two preceding instalments. Much of Cassie's and Devin's courtship that develops in the series' third instalment focuses on how they manage to overcome these complex and sensitive barriers and reach their HEA. In the series' fourth instalment, Cassie and Devin are depicted in their post-HEA. Happily married, they are shown to be enjoying life with their three children, including new baby Ally.

As this summary indicates, the series-wide subplot revolving around Cassie and the development of the romance between Cassie and Devin in the series' third instalment are intensely intertwined. The most important barriers to their everlasting romantic union – Cassie's various traumas and Devin's corresponding self-restraint – are elaborately developed and depicted in the two instalments preceding that in which their actual romance takes off. While this implies that the courtship narrative that develops between Cassie and Devin in instalment three strongly refers back to and even depends on the narrative interconnections between the series' different instalments – Cassie's traumas and Devin's response to them are best understood when all three texts are taken into account – the *romance* between Cassie and Devin effectively does not develop before the events related in the third instalment, which take place about a year after the events in instalment one and two. Even though Devin is already portrayed as being in love with Cassie in the series' first and second novel, in these narratives Cassie's identity as a romance agent is completely unactualized. The emotional and psychological issues she is facing are so intense and directly related to her potential identity as a romance agent that in the course of the first and second instalment of the series they effectively prevent the (re)awakening of this part of Cassie's identity. Since it is integral to the portrayal of Cassie's character in instalments one and two of this series that she is not – cannot be – a romantic agent, the courtship narrative between Cassie and Devin only narratively materializes in the third instalment's narrative. While the narrative performance of the romance identity in *The Heart of Devin MacKade* is then closely connected to the novel's seriality – and thus indirectly to the authorial identity this seriality entails – as a romance narrative this story essentially still functions independently from the other instalments since it contains all conventional elements of the popular romance genre.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously the various barriers between Cassie and Devin are recreated within the material confines of "their" romance narrative by summaries and recapitulations of the events narrated in more detail in the previous two chapters. Perhaps the most problematic of the conventional romance elements is the first meeting since Devin and Cassie are repeatedly portrayed to interact in the series' other instalments. In my interpretation, however, the narrative related in *The Heart of Devin MacKade* does contain a scene that qualifies as the first meeting scene of

In Roberts' second new series from this period, *Stars of Mithra*, the entanglement between the romance narrative and the narrative's seriality is less extensive. As in the *MacKade* series, this seriality consists not only of a shared community of characters and a shared fictional world, but also of a continuous subplot. While this subplot – which relates how three female friends and the respective romantic partners they meet in the course of the story are being chased by a criminal mastermind who is after the priceless diamonds they have – creates the situation in which each heroine and hero meet, the courtship narrative of each couple is strictly contained to the instalment in which it is the dominant story. Each couple first meet at the beginning of this narrative and reach their respective HEA at the end of this narrative. Still, although the romance narratives develop independently from the other instalments, the series as a whole is marked by a high degree of seriality. This is mainly due to the relatively complex and prominent suspense subplot which is launched in the first instalment and definitively resolved in the series' third and final novel. As I remarked earlier, this suspense plot line is relatively important in these narratives and overall takes up a more prominent place than is conventional in category romances. More than previous serialized category romances, the instalments in the *Stars of Mithra* series then depend on their narrative interconnections to be understood. This degree of interdependence – which implies that a narrative is difficult, if not impossible, to understand independently from the other instalments in the series – is an important and all but unprecedented development in the use of seriality in Roberts' category romance novels.

The second significant way in which seriality in Roberts' category romance novels from this period is narratively realized and emphasized is via the much more prominent narrative depiction of the community around which the series is structured. In both the new series and in the novels that are additions to already-established series the fictional community of characters that is the structural backbone of the series has a very prominent place in the narrative. This prominence is developed in a number of ways. One is simply the increase in both the number of secondary characters and the number of scenes in which these characters are featured. In most of Roberts' category romances from this period the family community to which one of the protagonists always belongs is quite big. Consequently, in novels such as

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the courtship narrative. This is the scene in which Devin and Cassie kiss for the first time and she suddenly becomes aware of his attraction to her. Although Cassie and Devin technically meet earlier in the series (and in the earlier parts of their lives that are not actualized in these narratives), this is the very first scene in the series in which Cassie's identity as a romance agent is narratively realized. In effect this is then, I argue, the *romance's* first meeting scene.

*Waiting for Nick*, *The Winning Hand*, *The Perfect Neighbour* and *Considering Kate*, secondary characters simply abound. In what I call “second generation” narratives – these are narratives in which one of the protagonists is the child of a couple whose own courtship narrative is narrated in another instalment in the series<sup>6</sup> – this abundance of secondary characters is in part simply due to the fact that these communities are big. All original “first generation” couples have had children that by the time such a second generation narrative takes place are adults themselves who, sometimes, have married and have children of their own now. This creates not simply big, multi-generational families, but also fictional communities that are populated with many well-developed and therefore often narratively prominent characters. The parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles that invariably make an appearance in these second generation narratives are then characters that elsewhere in the series take up the role of protagonists and the extent of this development of the character usually shines through in their appearance in these newer stories.

Not only are there numerically more secondary characters, but these characters also appear in more scenes throughout these new narratives. Whereas in earlier serialized stories, the actual narrative appearance of most of the secondary characters is limited to the characteristic family scene, in Roberts’ post-1994 serialized category romances secondary characters appear in numerous scenes throughout the narrative. In *The Winning Hand*, for example, Mac’s parents, grandparents and one of his uncles are an integral part of the narrative and appear in many scenes throughout the story. In *Cordina’s Crown Jewel*, the entire Cordina family appears in various scenes in the second half of the story. Likewise, in *Night Shield*, heroine Ally’s parents, as well as numerous assorted aunts, uncles and cousins are featured in a number of scenes. This prominence of secondary characters is not exclusive to second generation novels in this period; both the Stars of Mithra and, particularly, the MacKade series are also characterized by these frequent appearances of secondary characters throughout narratives in which these characters are not the protagonists. The four MacKade

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<sup>6</sup> Many of these sixteen category romances are such a “second generation” narrative. An overview of the precise connections: *Waiting for Nick* features the courtship narrative between Nick Lebecq – stepbrother to Zachary Muldoon, hero in *Falling for Rachel* – and Freddie Kimball, daughter of Natasha and Spence Kimball, whose courtship is narrated in *Taming Natasha*. Mac Blade, hero in *The Winning Hand*, is the son of Serena MacGregor and Justin Blade (*Playing the Odds*) and grandson to Anna and Daniel MacGregor (*For Now, Forever*). Cybill Campbell, heroine in *The Perfect Neighbor*, is the daughter of Gennie Grandeau and Grant Campbell (*One Man’s Art*) and is treated as granddaughter to Anna and Daniel MacGregor. *Irish Rebel* is the courtship narrative of Keeley Grant, daughter of Adelia and Travis Grant, protagonists in Roberts’ first published novel *Irish Thoroughbred*. Ally Fletcher, heroine in *Night Shield*, is the daughter of Celia and Boyd Fletcher (*Night Shift*). Kate Kimball in *Considering Kate* is daughter to Natasha and Spencer Kimball and sister to Freddie. Finally, Camilla de Cordina, heroine in *Cordina’s Crown Jewel*, is daughter to Gabriella de Cordina and Reeve MacGee (*Affaire Royale*).

brothers, for example, appear regularly throughout all narratives in the series. Of course, the sibling or family member who is the romance protagonist proper is still more frequent and important in the narrative than the other members of the community. But this community is nonetheless a very prominent aspect of all of these narratives.

This prominence influences the representation and characterisation of the protagonists, particularly the one who belongs to this community. Their frequent interactions with the plethora of secondary characters narratively develop and represent a different aspect of the protagonist's identity. Instead of appearing in their primordial role as romance agent, in many of these scenes the protagonist is depicted in their identity as member of a community: a child, a sibling, a cousin and/or a friend to others. This identity is always represented as being very important to these protagonists. Freddie and Kate Kimball, for example, are both depicted as strongly identifying as members of the Stanislaski family in *Waiting for Nick* and *Considering Kate*. Likewise being a MacGregor is represented as a very important aspect of the identities that both Mac Blade and Cybil Campbell develop in the second generation narratives related in *The Winning Hand* and *The Perfect Neighbour* respectively. While such community identities are in themselves not new in Roberts' serialized narratives – indeed, in all of the author's earlier serialized stories one of the romance protagonists belongs to some kind of community that constitutes part of this character's identity – in the author's serialized category romances from this period this identity is both more strongly emphasized and, importantly, much more elaborately represented in the narrative itself. The numerous scenes with secondary characters actualize and perform this identity quite strongly and emphatically place the protagonist in this fictional community.

It is in the prominence of this community identity that the complex entanglement between the narrative's seriality and its generic identity is developed on both the fictional and the metafictional level. Fictionally, the community is presented as being permeated by the notion of true love. This concept is one of the crucial cornerstones on which the community itself is founded. Firmly located in the post-HEAs of the numerous couples who make up the first generation of these families, these communities are the very products of the parental (and other) HEA(s) that often precede the protagonist's existence. These foundations are actively acknowledged within the fictional world of the narrative; the retelling of the parental romance (and sometimes of other courtships that co-founded the community) is a standard element of these second generation narratives. In *The Winning Hand*, for example, Mac Blade tells heroine Darcy Wallace about how his parents and his grandparents met and fell in love. In *The Perfect Neighbour* Gennie tells her daughter about her romance with Grant, Cybil's father

– a story that Cybil already knows by heart but that, now told during Cybil’s own point of ritual death, has a soothing and comforting effect on her. In *Cordina’s Crown Jewel* heroine Camilla relates the unlikely story of her parents’ love affair to hero Delayne. These retellings characterize the community as one that is existentially steeped in true romantic love. This emotion not only determines the community’s foundations, but also dominates its present. Full of couples in their post-HEA – who, like the post-HEA couples in Roberts’ earlier categories, are depicted as still being very much in love – these communities brim with romantic love. As core members of these communities, protagonists such as Mac Blade, Freddie Kimball, Cybil Campbell and Camilla de Cordina are then intimately familiar with true love and are depicted as expecting to experience such true love themselves at some point in their life; they want what their parents have, although they rarely want it here and now.<sup>7</sup> This experience of true love is represented as being part and parcel of what it means to be part of this community, as being an inherent part of the community identity that these characters so actively take up. This notion of true love determines the existential boundaries, if you will, of the fictional universes in which these narratives take place as *romance* universes.

On the metafictional level the narrative prominence of this community of course implies that these narratives are full of implicit and explicit references to other instalments in the series. Such references generally take similar forms to the ones that are part of Roberts’ earlier serialized category romances, but are both more frequent and more elaborate. Instead of one family scene with characters featured in previous instalments, there are numerous such scenes. Instead of brief references and recapitulations of earlier courtships, there are many rather elaborate of such references and numerous detailed retellings of these earlier romance stories. A new, implicit type of reference is the parallel or re-enactment scene; that is, a scene in a second generation narrative that is very similar to a scene that is narrated in the parental courtship narrative. Many of Roberts’ second generation narratives contain such scenes and

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this prevalence of true love in the community does not mean that protagonists who are members of such communities are actively pursuing romantic love. Such an active pursuit would imply a strong deviation of the one the genre’s more implicit conventions, which is the romance protagonist’s resistance towards love – romance protagonists are conventionally not looking for love or a relationship at the beginning of the romance narrative. This convention is often reworked in these narratives as an insistence on delay – the protagonist considers love as something to be dealt with later in life – and the initial belief the other protagonist cannot be their true love. Mac Blade, in *The Winning Hand*, is a classic example of this: “He wasn’t inclined toward a serious relationship and certainly didn’t intend to become involved with an innocent, naïve woman who didn’t know the difference between a straight and flush. ... [H]e certainly had no intention of settling down and raising a family at this stage of his life as his sister Gwen was doing. For Mac love was something to be dealt with eventually, when there was time, when the odds were favorable and when there was a good chance of raking in all the chips. He wanted what his parents had. Perhaps he hadn’t realized that quit so clearly until Darcy had pointed out just what they did have together. But he could admit he had always used them as his yardstick where relationships were concerned. ... As far as Darcy Wallace was concerned, he’d decided it was a bad bet all around. She was too inexperienced, too vulnerable.” (136-37)

an open acknowledgment of the parallel within the narrative. In *Considering Kate*, for example, Kate Kimball meets hero Brody O'Connell in her mother's toy store where Brody is buying a toy for his son. Attracted to Brody Kate flirts with him and he responds; Kate is initially flattered until she learns he has a son and (mistakenly) assumes Brody to be married. This situation is a replica of the initial meeting between Spence and Natasha, Kate's parents, in *Taming Natasha*. When Kate tells her mother Natasha about meeting Brody, Natasha is depicted as happily recognizing the similarities between the two generations. In *The Perfect Neighbor* Cybill and Preston's final showdown – which is the scene that contains the recognition, the resolution and the HEA of their courtship narrative – is not only depicted as revolving around similar kinds of barriers as those that stood between her parents, but also takes place on the exact same beach as where Cybill's parents had their final showdown – and recognition, resolution and HEA – in their earlier narrative. In *Irish Rebel*, finally, heroine Keeley Grant is attacked and almost raped in the horse stables by a mean drunk before hero Brian Kelley intervenes and overpowers Keeley's would-be attacker. Again, the scene is an almost exact re-enactment of a scene narrated in her parents' romance narrative, related in Roberts' first novel *Irish Thoroughbred*, which contains a scene in which Adelia is cornered by a drunken stable hand and threatened with rape before Travis viciously intervenes. After Keeley goes through a similar experience, Adelia is depicted as recounting her own experience, which reinforces the bond between mother and daughter and also implicitly casts Brian in Travis' role of true love to the attacked woman. Indeed, such parallel scenes are not only implicit references to the other instalment, but also reinforce the generic similarities between the narratives and thus the generically unavoidable HEA that awaits.

The increased narrative presence of the community to which initially one and eventually both romance protagonists belong in Roberts' category romances from this period then influences these narratives in various ways. Perhaps one of the most important effects is the new layer that is added to the representation of the romance protagonist's identity. While their identity as romance agent is still the dominant one in which they are depicted, protagonists in these narratives are also consistently portrayed in their various identities as members of a well-developed and strongly identified community. In all of these narratives the communities to which these protagonists belong and that provide them with part of their identity are idyllic. These are harmonious, stable and happy communities that revolve around love, happiness, togetherness and unity and that provide a clear, stable and attractive identity to its members, both new and old. Often an awareness of this idyllic character of the community is articulated within the narrative – frequently the external partner explicitly

points out the exceptional harmony and happiness that characterizes this community and that usually stands in stark contrast to the community in which they were originally situated – but the idyllic character of the community is never fundamentally questioned. That does happen in the other types of novels Roberts writes in this period, which share with these category romances an increased focus on the composition of both identity and community – a preoccupation with the interaction between these two notions runs as leitmotif through Roberts’ post-1994 oeuvre – but which much more explicitly and deeply question, explore and problematize the formation and functioning of such happy communities and the romantic couples that constitute them – and therefore, perhaps, of romance itself.

In this group of sixteen category romances there are, finally, two special instances of narrative seriality that, I argue, establish more clearly than most of the other occurrences the connection between the performance of serial and authorial identity. In both *Waiting for Nick* and *Considering Kate*, two additions to the Stanislaski series, secondary characters from *another* series are featured. *Waiting for Nick* includes scenes with the entire post-HEA O’Hurley clan and in *Considering Kate* Nick Davidov and Ruth Bannion make various appearances. In both novels these characters from other series are featured relatively extensively: they appear in more than one scene, they are shown to interact extensively with the protagonists and sometimes the narrative briefly dips into their point of view. I argue that these two instances of cross-seriality – characters from one series are featured in novels belonging to an entirely different series – strikingly perform the authorial identity that each narrative serial reference in principle entails. In these two cases the identity to which the characters from the “other” series performatively refer is not first the serial and then the authorial identity – as it is with series-internal references – but immediately the authorial identity since this is the most relevant connection that exists between these two fictional worlds. The appearance of the entire, post-HEA O’Hurley’s clan, children included, in *Waiting for Nick* and of Nick and Ruth Davidov in *Considering Kate* are playful and subtle performative references to Roberts’ authorial identity since it is this identity that connects the fictional worlds of the O’Hurleys and the Davidovs on the one hand with that of the Stanislaskis on the other.

One could argue that this reference, and thus the extra strong performance of Roberts’ authorial identity, is only picked up by readers who are already familiar with the texts to which the references are made. This might be true; it is certainly so, I believe, that it is easier and therefore more likely for these readers to detect these intertextual references. Still, it seems to me that even readers who are not familiar with the texts to which the references are



made are likely aware of the fact that these scenes have additional, for them hidden intertextual significance. This is due, I believe, to the way in which the cross-serial characters are represented in these two texts. In *Waiting for Nick* the size of the O'Hurley family (which counts twenty-four members, children included; all are mentioned) and their obvious post-HEA state – these scenes brim with love, romance and the by now characteristic post-HEA happiness of Roberts' characters – mark their special status. In *Considering Kate* the pronounced contrast between Davidov's severe on-stage persona – Kate dances in one of his ballets – and the soft, family-oriented character he assumes in his off-stage scenes in which he is accompanied by Ruth and talks about their children – this is another post-HEA couple – signals, I argue, the referentiality even if the reader does not have the intertextual knowledge to decipher the precise content of the reference.

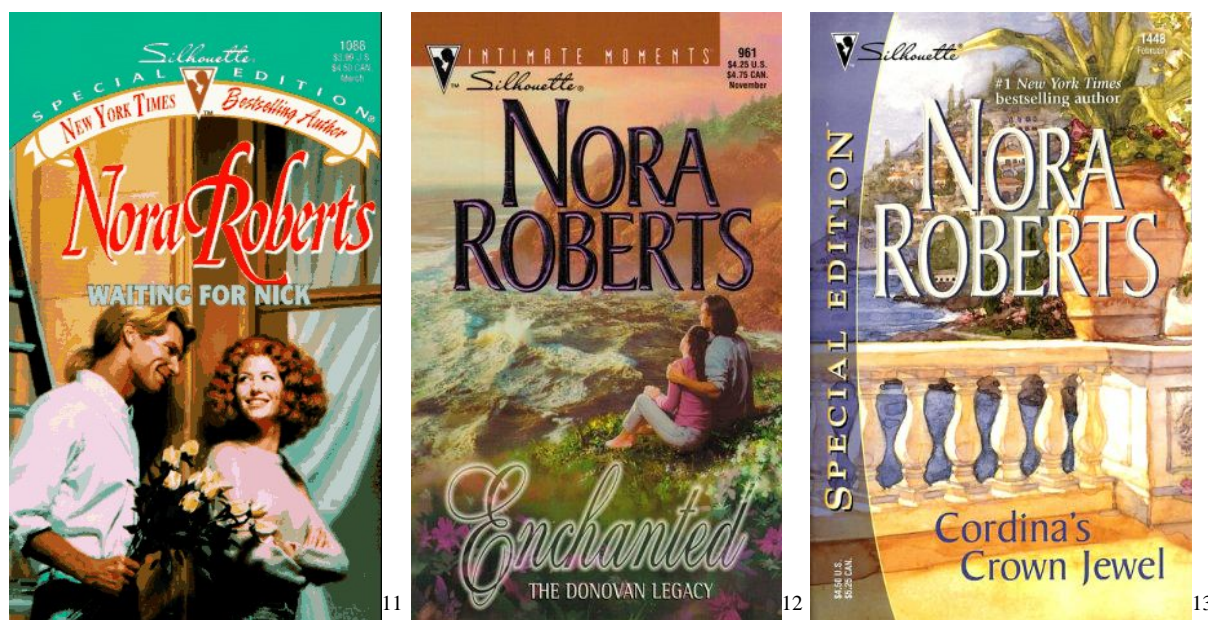
## 2.2 Paratext

The increasing importance and even dominance of Roberts' authorial identity in her texts' textual identity is much more obviously, openly and consequently strongly performed in these novels' paratexts than it is in their narratives, where it often remains wrapped in the guise of seriality. In the paratext, conversely, the dominance of Roberts' author name, and to a lesser extent the series name, is unmistakable as the author name "Nora Roberts", and thus the authorial identity this name refers to, becomes the single most dominant feature of many paratextual, and particularly peritextual, elements.

This dominance is probably most obvious and outspoken on the front cover, where Roberts' name is now the focal point. On all of these front covers Roberts' name is bigger than the line template prescribes.



These images of the original front covers of Roberts' *The Heart of Devin MacKade* and two other novels published in the Silhouette Intimate Moments line in March 1996 clearly show that the size of Roberts' name is larger than that of the other authors. While already exceptionally enlarged in the original category covers from the mid-1990s, over the course of the next six years, the size of Roberts' name on the cover of her category romance novels only increases further until it is absolutely the single most dominant element.

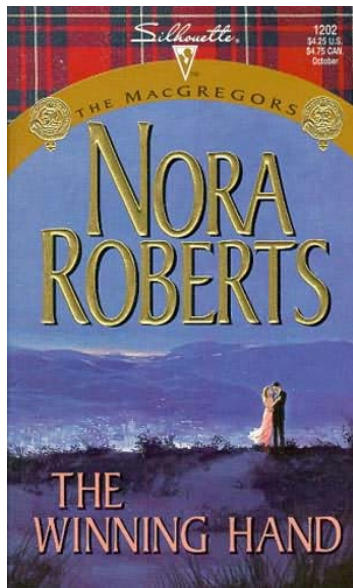


<sup>8</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Lover Under Cover*, Justine Davis. Source: <http://www.fictiondb.com/author/justine-davis~lover-under-cover~11308~b.htm>

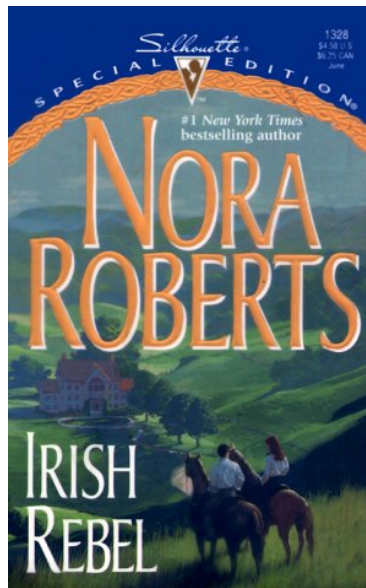
<sup>9</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Quiet One*, Alicia Scott. Source: <http://www.fictiondb.com/author/alicia-scott~the-quiet-one~31772~b.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Heart of Devin MacKade* Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/heart-of-devin-mackade.htm>

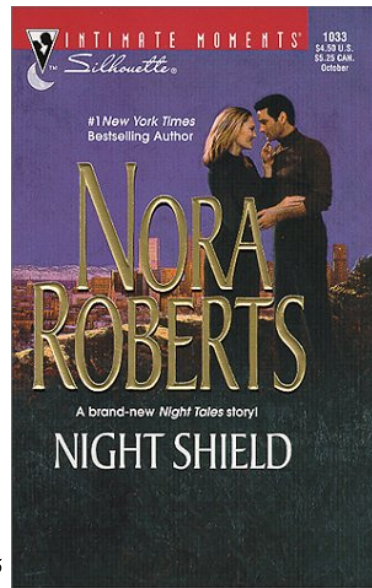
Another evolution that is noticeable in these images is the gradual disappearance of the clinch image. Whereas iconic clinch images are still prominent on the front covers of original editions of the Stars of Mithra (1997-98) (see images below) series, beginning with *The Winning Hand* (10/98) the image's dominant position is taken over by Roberts' name and the clinch image is transformed into a much smaller and visually less important image of an embracing couple on the original covers of *The Winning Hand*, *The Perfect Neighbor*, *Enchanted*, *Irish Rebel* and *Night Shield*.



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Eventually, even this transformed and downsized remnant of the clinch image disappears from the original front covers of Roberts' category romances; by the early 2000s both *Considering Kate* and *Cordina's Crown Jewel* are published with abstract covers.

<sup>11</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Waiting for Nick*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0373240880>

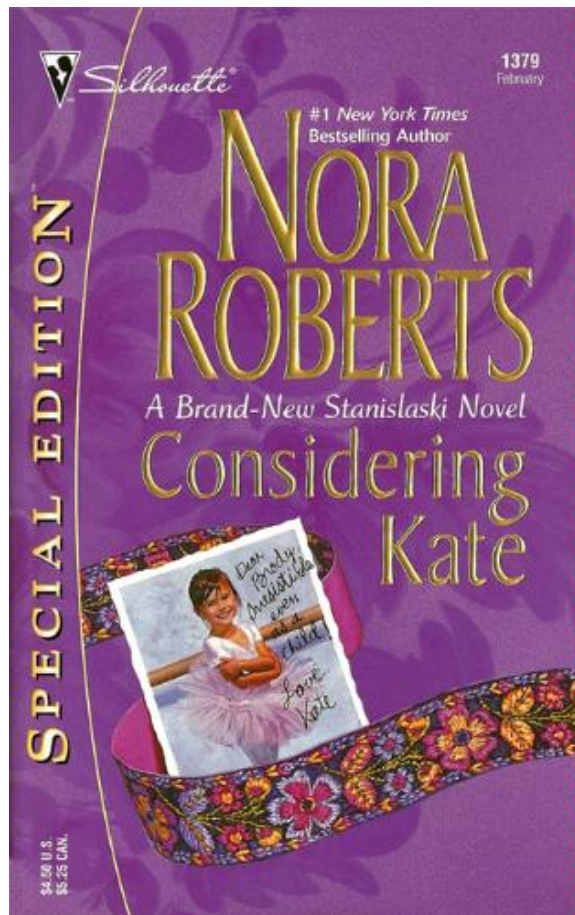
<sup>12</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Enchanted*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/enchanted.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Cordina's Crown Jewel*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/cordinas-crown-jewel.htm>

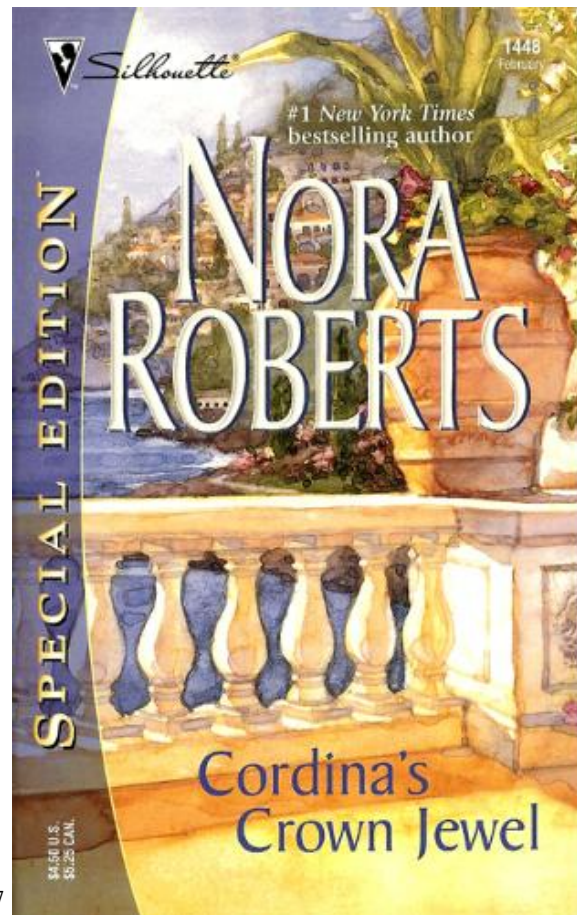
<sup>14</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Winning Hand*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/winning-hand.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Irish Rebel*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0373243286>

<sup>16</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Night Shield*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0373270976>



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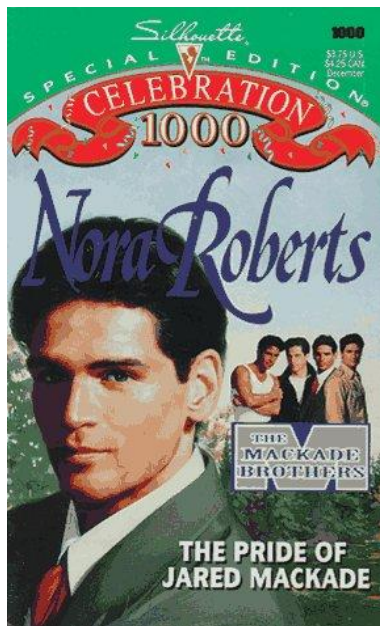
This is a huge deviation from one of the most basic and identifying peritextual conventions of the category romance novel and the unmistakable peritextual proof that by the end of the 1990s the author's name "Nora Roberts" and the authorial identity that resides under it have simply outgrown the category romance format. With the removal of the clinch image from these original front covers a very strong peritextual genre marker moreover disappears from the peritext of Roberts' category romances. While this does not automatically imply that no generic identity is performed on these covers – both covers still feature more subdued, less eye-catching generic markers such as the line's name, the Silhouette logo and the pastel color schemes – the strength and dominance of this performance has certainly diminished in favor of the much more dominant performance of authorial identity. This identity performance is, moreover, further reinforced by the printing of Roberts' name in a visually similar style. On each of these covers (from *The Winning Hand* onwards) the name "Nora Roberts" is printed in exactly the same typescript, on exactly the same place, in exactly the same size. Roberts' name in effect becomes a brand name. Branding these books, this author-name-logo/brand

<sup>17</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Considering Kate*. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373243790/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_3?ie=UTF8&index=3](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373243790/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_3?ie=UTF8&index=3)

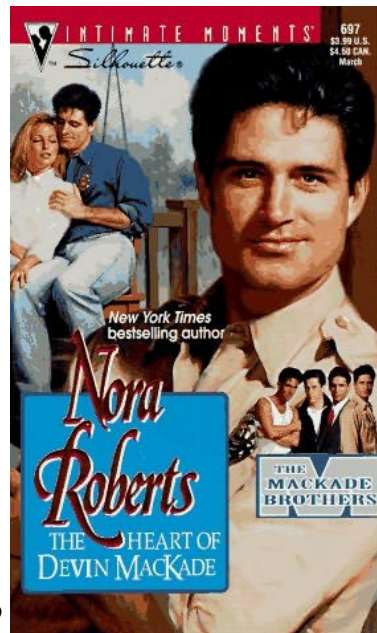
<sup>18</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Cordina's Crown Jewel*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/cordinas-crown-jewel.htm>

icon not only performatively suggests the dominance of Roberts' authorial identity in the textual identity but also that this identity is consistent across different texts.

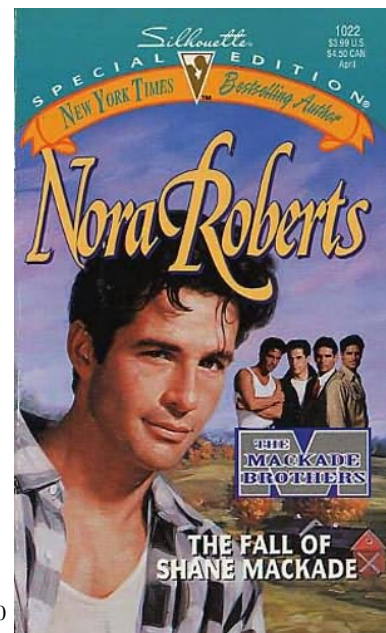
While the author name "Nora Roberts" is then the dominant force on these front covers, all of them also contain references to the narrative series of which these novels are part. For the two new series, the MacKades and Stars of Mithra, special logos are developed that are prominently placed on these front covers.



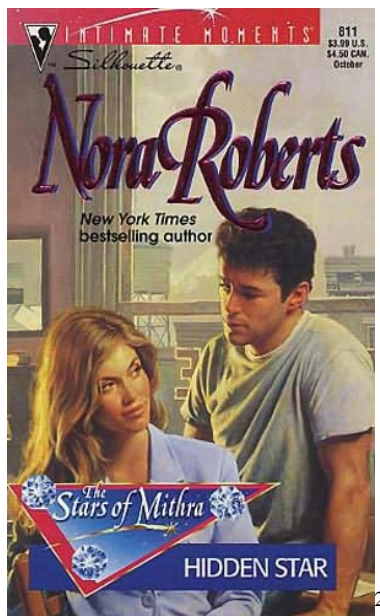
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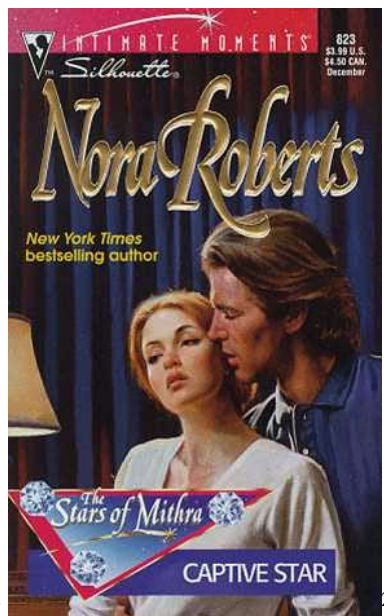
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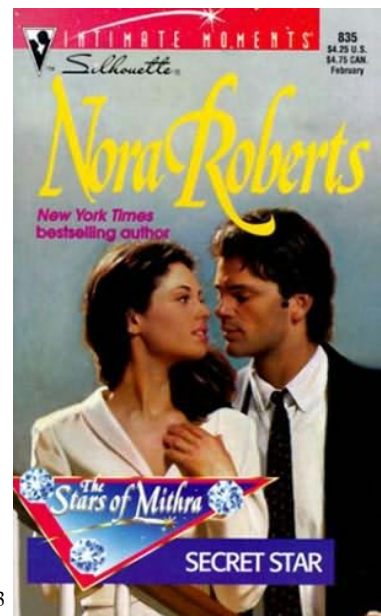
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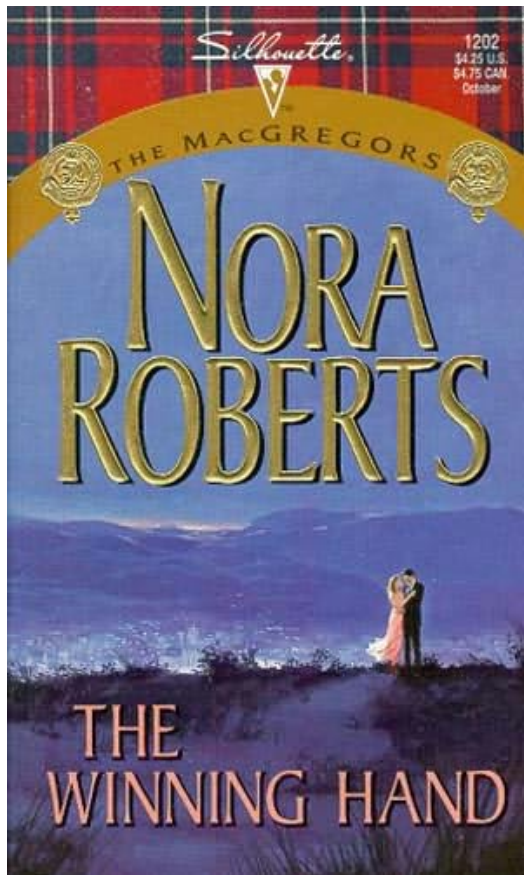
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<sup>19</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Pride of Jared MacKade*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/pride-of-jared-mackade.htm>

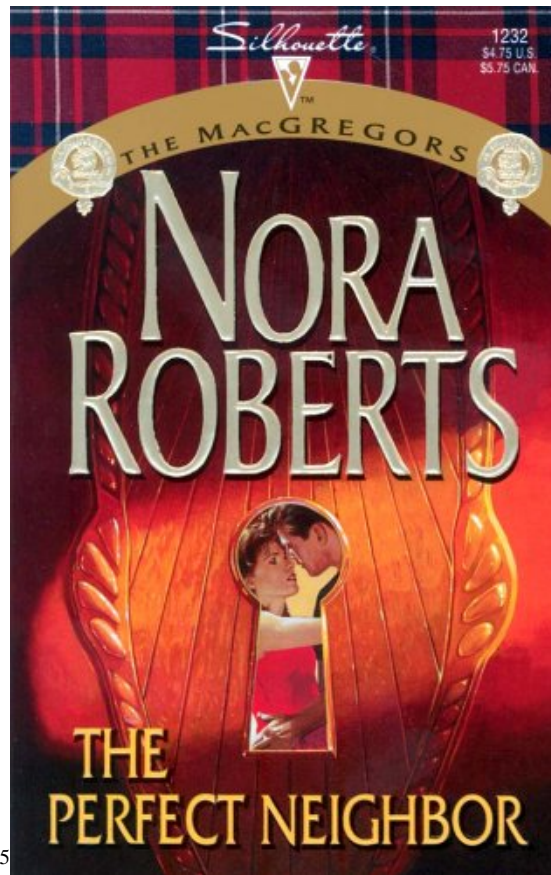
<sup>20</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Heart of Devin MacKade*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/heart-of-devin-mackade.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Fall of Shane MacKade*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/fall-of-shane-mackade.htm>

Likewise, the two new installments in the MacGregor series are immediately published in the special MacGregor template that was designed for the series upon its first reissue in 1987.



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While novels in other series do not feature such a special series logo, all covers feature the series' name, although this is not always placed very prominently (see for example the front cover of the original edition of *Enchanted* above, where a small line under the title reads "The Donovan Legacy").

The dominance of Roberts' authorial identity and, to a lesser extent, the narratives' serial identity continues on the inside pages of the book. All these novels and their serial identity are prominently mentioned in the editorial preface. The novels in the MacKade series, and *Irish Rebel*, feature, moreover, an additional, secondary preface penned by Roberts herself. In these brief texts Roberts spells out the connections between the different installments in the series, emphasizes how much she loved writing the books and draws

<sup>22</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Hidden Star*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/hidden-star.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Captive Star*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/captive-star.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Secret Star*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/secret-star.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Winning Hand*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/winning-hand.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Perfect Neighbor*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0373239947>

parallels with her own life.<sup>27</sup> While the authorial preface is at this time still unconventional in the category romance – and as such another strong performative gesture towards Roberts’ authorial identity – the manner in which Roberts writes it prefigures most of the standard elements such authorial prefaces later adopt (cf. part I). The dominance of Roberts’ authorial identity even influences the oeuvre page – a peritextual space that is conventionally already preoccupied with the author. Instead of listing Roberts’ published category romances according to the line in which they are published – as is conventional – these pages structure Roberts’ category oeuvre on the basis of the narrative series she has written. This particular and at the time unconventional structuring of the oeuvre page is also an indication of the extent to which Roberts’ name and the authorial identity that resides under that name entail the notion of narrative seriality in the romance community, whose members are the intended readers of these pages. By the time these novels are originally published in the second half of the 1990s, Roberts has been writing narrative series in the category romance format for over a decade; during that time a strong association has developed in the romance community between Roberts’ authorial identity and the narrative series, particularly in the form of the family series that is so often used in Roberts’ stories. While by the mid-1990s narrative series are an increasingly common form in the romance genre at large, the connection between Roberts, who was one of the first romance authors to extensively use the format, and narrative seriality is strong in the romance community. These pages are both an indication of the existence of that connection and a further performative reinforcement of it.

Like most other peritextual elements in these novels, the conventional biographical texts that introduce and describe Roberts further contribute to the dominant performance of Roberts’ authorial identity. These texts focus on Roberts’ exceptional achievements and chronicle her extraordinary success. They consistently mention, for example, the number of

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<sup>27</sup> For example: “Dear Reader, What could be more intriguing than one not-quite-reformed bad boy? How about four of them? That was one of the seeds that grew in my mind to form The MacKade Brothers. I very much enjoy writing connecting books, particularly when they center on families. And, well, I just like men. I’ve been surrounded and outnumbered by them all my life. I’m the youngest of five children. Though the male of the species isn’t easy to understand, I think those facts give me a leg up. So I decided to write about four brothers, four men who had been just a little wild in their youth. I enjoyed the challenge of exploring the dynamics of this and in putting those four men in a small town where everyone knows everyone else, and all their faults and virtues. I created the town of Antietam, though it’s not so very different from the small towns near where I live in Maryland. I created the MacKades, though I like to think they’re not so different from men who live and love anywhere in the world. Though I started off with Rafe – because he struck me as the baddest [sic] of the bad MacKade Brothers – I fell in love with Jared, then with Devin, then with Shane. If a woman’s still breathing, she’ll fall for the MacKades. Rafe, the businessman, with a dream and an attitude. Jared, the lawyer, with a reputation and a surplus of pride. Devin, the lawman, who believes in justice and abiding love. And Shane, the farmer, with the love for the land and an eye for the ladies. I hope you’ll enjoy all of their stories. And if you fall a little bit in love with each of these not quite reformed bad boys, don’t worry. You’re only human. Nora Roberts.” (preface to *The Heart of Devin MacKade* 5).

Roberts' books that are in print – this is estimated at 40 million in 1998 (*The Winning Hand*, p. 5), 50 million in 1999 (*Enchanted*, p. 5), over 100 million in 2000 (*Irish Rebel*, p. 5) and, finally, 127 million in 2002 (*Cordina's Crown Jewel*, inside back cover) – and the equally increasing number of bestsellers she has to her name. While these figures establish Roberts' individual success as an author – a success that far exceeds that of any other contemporary category romance author – in various ways these texts also equally strongly emphasize the link between Roberts and the popular romance genre. They consistently mention that of the nearly 100 novels Roberts has written over eighty have been published by Silhouette – and are thus, it is implicitly understood, category romance novels – , they refer to her multiple inductions in the RWA Hall of Fame and they simply outright insist that “[i]n addition to her amazing success in mainstream, Nora Roberts remains committed to writing for her category romance audience, which took her to their hearts in 1981 with her very first book, a Silhouette Romance novel.” (*Considering Kate*, inside back cover) Reiterating Roberts' authorial origins and subsequent long history in the popular romance genre, and more specifically the category romance format, these texts as it were (re)claim Roberts for the genre even as they also emphasize her exceptional, format-defying position in it. These short biographies then perhaps uncover most clearly the constant balancing act that underlies both the narrative and certainly the paratextual identity performance of these novels in which the authorial and generic fractions are seeking a new and dynamic balance.

In the final pages of these novels Roberts' authorial identity remains the dominant factor. Many of the ads that these pages conventionally contain publicize other novels by the author; these always include the other installments in the series. Frequently, these ads are accompanied by order forms that enable readers to order other novels by Roberts and thus to complete their collection of this particular narrative series and/or expand their collection of Roberts' novels. Although some of these books also feature publicity and order forms for other category romances, ads for Roberts' novels are always dominant. This is indicative not only of the extent to which Roberts has come to be the dominant identity that is performed, but also of the commercial power that her author name – which increasingly functions as a brand name within the romance community – has accumulated. Many of these books, finally, also include a so called “sneak peek” excerpt from another category romance novel. While in the mid-1990s Roberts' category romances sometimes contain sneak peeks of novels by other authors – the original edition of *Waiting for Nick*, for example, includes a sneak peak for *Traci on the Spot* by Marie Ferrarella – by the end of the 1990s (more precisely, from the publication of *The Winning Hand* in February 1998 onward) all of Roberts' categories contain



sneak peeks for other category romances by Roberts. This is again an indication and a performance of the increasing dominance of Roberts' authorial identity over the line identity that is usually dominant in the category format. These sneak peeks consist of excerpts from either other novels in the same narrative series – *The Perfect Neighbor* features an excerpt of *For Now, Forever*, the story of Cybil's grandparents, *Considering Kate* includes an excerpt of *Taming Natasha* which relates the courtship of Kate's partents, etc. – or other novels by Roberts from another narrative series – the original edition of *Enchanted* contains, for example, a sneak peek of *Irish Thoroughbred* and *Irish Rebel* features a sneak peek of *Night Shift*. This latter practice of including sneak peeks of other novels by Roberts that do not belong to the same series as the current narrative is another indication of the fact that Roberts' authorial identity, more so than the narrative's serial identity, has become dominant in the paratextual identity performance of these novels.

These sneak peeks are also unconventional in that they most often consist of excerpts from category romances that are, in the context of the format, very old: the examples mentioned above feature sneak peeks of category romance novels originally published in 1981, 1987, 1990 and 1991. That these older novels are nonetheless excerpted in these publications as if they are new novels has to do with the fact that from the end of the 1990s onwards many of Roberts' older serialized category romance novels are systematically reissued by Silhouette to accompany the publication of new additions to the series. Thus, for example, the publication of *The Winning Hand*, a second generation addition to the MacGregor series, in October 1998 is accompanied by the reissuing in the course of 1998 and 1999 of all other installments in the MacGregor series in a sequence of compilations each containing two older MacGregor novels. Likewise, the publication of the new Stanislaski installment *Waiting for Nick* in March 1997 is accompanied by the release of two compilations which each contain two older Stanislaski stories. These reissues, and specifically their paratextual characteristics, are an important phenomenon in this study's overall discussion of the relationship between genre and authorship in Roberts' oeuvre and are therefore discussed more in depth later. For now it suffices to point out that these sneak peeks thus consist of narratives that are old, but novels – editions – that are new. It is the new edition that prompts the publicity for an old narrative.

Many of these category romance novels' epitextual elements, finally, reflect this same intricate balancing act between authorial and generic identity that is present in their peritexts. As category romances all of these novels are reviewed in *Romantic Times*, which performs their romance generic identity. Although these reviews are written in *RT*'s conventional

category review format and are thus rather short and superficial, they are nonetheless raving: all novels receive four or four and a half out of five stars, all but one (*Considering Kate*) are elected as “top pick” and three of these novels are nominated for a *Romantic Times* award. As I remarked earlier, such enthusiasm is not precisely exceptional in *Romantic Times*, but the consistency and force with which *all* of these novels are praised indicates nonetheless that by the second half the 1990s Nora Roberts is one of the top stars on the American category romance scene. Most of these reviews also acknowledge the fact that these novels belong to a series; increasingly, even, the update on older characters that new additions to series provide is explicitly praised. While these *RT* reviews are epitextual elements that (strongly) place these novels in the contemporary popular romance genre and its community of (niche) readers, there are indications that these novels transcend these generic boundaries. In 1999 *The Perfect Neighbor*, the eleventh and final installment of the MacGregor series, becomes the first Silhouette category romance novel ever to appear on the *New York Times* bestsellers list (*The Official Nora Roberts Companion* 54); all subsequent new category romance that Roberts still writes also make this list. While within Roberts’ oeuvre the bestselling status of these novels is anything but an exception – in fact, *every* new novel that Roberts has written since 1999 has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list – within the category romance format it is highly unconventional. In fact, I argue that this bestseller status fundamentally goes against the grain of the category romance format because it singles out these particular novels and differentiates them from all other category romances (which conventionally do not make the bestseller lists); this differentiating and individuating dynamic is at odds with some of the core characteristics of the concept of the category romance novel as I have described these elsewhere in this dissertation. The novels’ bestselling status, much like the disappearance of the clinch image on the novels’ front cover – with which it more or less coincides –, is another indication that by the end of the 1990s the authorial identity that resides under the author’s name “Nora Roberts” has outgrown the (commercial and identity) constraints of the category romance format.

With these developments in mind it is then anything but a surprise that in 2002 Nora Roberts leaves Silhouette and stops writing new category romance novels. Although Roberts then no longer publishes new work in what is perhaps the most quintessential of contemporary popular romance novel formats, the author’s ties to the genre remain strong nonetheless as she continues to explore (the boundaries of) the romance generic form in all other novels that she writes.

### 3. Single Title Romance Trilogies

A second type of romance novel that is important in Nora Roberts' work published between October 1994 and December 2008 is what I refer to as the single title romance trilogy. This is, obviously, a single title romance novel that is part of a narrative series consisting of three installments. The single title romance trilogy is a frequent format in Roberts' post-1994 work; between October 1994 and December 2008 Roberts writes twenty-eight such novels which together make up nine different trilogies.<sup>28</sup> An overview:

- Born In
  - *Born in Fire* 10/94
  - *Born in Ice* 08/95
  - *Born in Shame* 01/96
- Dreams
  - *Daring to Dream* 08/96
  - *Holding the Dream* 01/97
  - *Finding the Dream* 07/97
- Chesapeake Bay
  - *Sea Swept* 01/98
  - *Rising Tides* 08/98
  - *Inner Harbor* 01/99
  - *Chesapeake Blue* 11/02
- Gallaghers of Ardmore
  - *Jewels of the Sun* 11/99
  - *Tears of the Moon* 07/00
  - *Heart of the Sea* 12/00
- Three Sisters Island
  - *Dance Upon the Air* 06/01
  - *Heaven and Earth* 12/01
  - *Face the Fire* 06/02
- Keys
  - *Key of Light* 11/03
  - *Key of Knowledge* 12/03
  - *Key of Valor* 01/04
- In the Garden
  - *Blue Dahlia* 10/04
  - *Black Rose* 05/05
  - *Red Lily* 12/05
- Circle

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<sup>28</sup> Nine trilogies normally makes twenty-seven separate novels, but the Chesapeake Bay series has an unprecedented four instead of three installments. The fourth installment, *Chesapeake Blue*, was published three years after the third one and is a second generation romance relating the story of how Seth, the boy the three Quinn brothers adopt in the course of the first three installments, finds the love of his life. *Chesapeake Blue* is (so far) the only second generation romance that Roberts has written in relation to the trilogies and was, Roberts maintains, purely written because her readers kept expressing the very strong desire to see – narratively experience – Seth's HEA. Roberts' website expressly states Roberts does not plan to write further second generation romances about the offspring of couples established in the trilogies ("Frequently Asked Questions.").

- *Morrigan's Cross* 09/06
- *Dance of the Gods* 10/06
- *Valley of Silence* 11/06
- Sign of Seven
  - *Blood Brothers* 12/07
  - *The Hollow* 05/08
  - *The Pagan Stone* 11/08

In the United States all of these novels are originally published in the mass market paperback format by Jove.

### 3.1 Narrative

This kind of single title romance novel differs in two important ways from the single title novels Roberts writes before 1994. First, the romance courtship narrative is significantly more dominant in the overall plot – as I pointed out in the previous chapter, in many of Roberts' earlier single titles the narrative dominance of the romance plotline is rivaled or even taken over by one or more generically other plot(s) – and second, these single titles are part of a narrative series (instead of being standalones, as all but two of Roberts' pre-1994 single titles are). On the narrative level, the single title romance trilogy then in fact has more in common with the serialized category romances Roberts writes in this period than with most of the author's previous and other single titles. Indeed, the single title romance trilogy can in many ways be considered as an expanded, single title version of the kind of romance story Roberts writes in her serialized categories. Like these category narratives, it dominantly focuses on the conventional romance courtship narrative, it features a serialized narrative that shares a fictional universe, characters and continuous (sub)plots with the other installments in the series and the community that structures the series is an (increasingly) important theme in the narrative. However, the trilogy narratives also differ from the serialized categories in a number of ways. Their serial narrative interconnectedness is often developed much more strongly and, moreover, increases over time; as I analyze in the following discussion, towards the end of this period these trilogies often read not as three interconnected stories but as one story told in three parts. As is conventional in the single title narrative, these stories often also feature an important generically other (sub)plot; again, as with seriality, this is a feature that intensifies in Roberts' work over time. The secondary genre that is predominantly explored in these narratives is not suspense (which continues to be the most frequent secondary genre in Roberts' other, standalone single titles discussed in the next chapter), but fantasy/paranormal. A third important narrative difference between the trilogy and the serialized category narrative lies in the representation of the community that in part structures the series. In many

of these narratives these communities are, certainly at the beginning of the series, significantly less idyllic than the ones that are featured in Roberts' category romances. In fact, very often these communities are fractured, in disarray or simply inexistent at the beginning of the series and the healing, ordering and/or entire formation of the community is an (increasingly) important story thread in the narrative overall. Certainly in Roberts' later (post-2000) trilogies this community formation develops into a central narrative force that drives the story and significantly intensifies the narrative connections between the different installments in the series.

### **3.1.1. Romance Conventions**

All of these stories are first and foremost romance narratives. Each installment of each trilogy features the conventional romance courtship narrative between a hero and a heroine who meet, fall in love, overcome all obstacles and live happily ever after. All of these romance narratives contain the core conventional elements of the popular romance genre that I have described in part I of this dissertation. In the concrete narrative representations of these conventions, these romance stories continue the developments that are already on-going in Roberts' category romance novels. These narratives thus feature and further develop, for example, the emancipation of the heroine, the demystification of the hero and his concomitant rise to narrative prominence, the substantiation of the barrier and, finally, a slight but important shift in the representation of sexuality and its relation to romantic love. With these representations of the romance conventions these narratives play an important role in stimulating, continuing and further consolidating many of the generic narrative developments that are on-going in the popular romance genre in the mid-1990s. In Roberts' oeuvre this process of generic consolidation is dominant as the period between 1994 and 2008 is marked less by substantial shifts in the representation of romance conventions and more by a confirmation and consolidation of the generic narrative evolutions that took place in the preceding decade or so.

The emancipation of the romance heroine, already on-going in the previous decade, continues and intensifies in these narratives. All heroines in these novels are strong and self-reliant women – or gain these characteristics in the course of the narrative – with a well-developed feminine, professional and sexual identity. While all of these female protagonists have a strongly developed professional identity, the kind of job or career they have differs vastly. As in her earlier categories, Roberts' narratives continue to feature women in traditionally male jobs. Brenna O'Toole (*Gallaghers of Ardmore*) is an electrician and car

mechanic, Ripley Todd (*Three Sisters Island*) is a cop, Malory Price (*Keys*) is a gallery owner, and Roze Harper (*In the Garden*) a gardener-turned-business-owner. Other heroines have traditionally female jobs such as bed & breakfast manager (Brianna Concannon, *Born In*), model (Margo Sullivan, *Dreams*), cleaning lady/housekeeper (Grace Monroe, *Chesapeake Bay*), waitress (Darcy Gallagher, *Gallaghers of Ardmore*), librarian (Dana Steele, *Keys*) and shop-assistant (Hayley Philips, *In the Garden*). Some heroines simply have a steady job, while others are driven by professional ambitions and career goals; some heroines have high degrees – Sybill Griffin (*Chesapeake Bay*) is a professor with multiple doctorates – while others have no formal education – Grace Monroe only has a high-school diploma. Regardless, however, of what kind of job, career or education these heroines have, all of them are represented as dedicated to their professions; they always work hard and invariably have pride in what they do, even when that is waiting tables, making beds or cleaning houses. Their jobs, whatever these are, are rarely presented as simply an occupation or a means to a financial end (although they are this too), but are part of what defines and identifies these characters. In almost all of these novels – the installments in the *Circle* and the *Sign of Seven* trilogies are noticeable exceptions<sup>29</sup> – heroines are frequently represented while doing their job, which increases the narrative presence of their professional identity and establishes the importance of this identity to their overall characterization.

While jobs are then never purely a means to a financial end, the heroine's economic circumstances are more elaborately focused on in these narratives than they are in most of Roberts' category romances, where money is very rarely talked about. Most of these heroines display a keen understanding and awareness of their economic situation. Some heroines, such as Maggie Concannon (*Born In*) and Darcy Gallagher, are shown to strongly dislike their relative poverty and are elated when their creative talents – Maggie is a glass blower, Darcy a singer – develop into a career that makes them not only successful and famous, but also rich. Such outspoken appreciation of money is an unusual characteristic for a romance heroine. Other heroines develop professional projects in the course of the narrative that relatively extensively portrays them as dealing with business plans and other financial issues. An ongoing minor subplot in the *Dream* trilogy, for example, relates how the three heroines, Margo Sullivan, Kate Powell and Laura Templeton, start a high-end thrift shop together and struggle to make it work. Likewise, in the *Keys* trilogy a minor ongoing subplot deals with

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<sup>29</sup> As I discuss more elaborately later in this section, the fact that none of the characters in these two trilogies are extensively represented in their professional identities has to do with the dominance of the paranormal plotline in which these characters are engaged in an epic battle against some kind of supernatural evil. Their fight to save the world and all of human kind leaves them little time to do the more mundane jobs they do have.

how heroines Malory Price, Dana Steele and Zoe McCourt buy a property together and work to start their own businesses. Still other heroines, such as Grace Monroe and Laura Templeton, are single moms who are financially struggling. To make ends meet Grace takes on three jobs – she’s a cleaning lady, a crab picker and a waitress – and Laura combines her newly started store with a busy managerial job at the hotel her family owns. In both novels the heroine’s financial and professional situation is brought to the fore of the narrative when the hero is either mad about it (as is *Rising Tides*’ hero Ethan Quinn, who dislikes that Grace works so hard) or puzzled by it (as is *Finding the Dream*’s Michael Fury, who doesn’t understand why Laura works so hard while her family is rich) and this leads to confrontations between hero and heroine. The financial awareness that most of these heroines display is an important difference with Roberts’ category romances – where money is mostly simply a non-issue – and one of the elements that not only constitutes the emancipation of the heroine, but also the more realistic tone of single title romance narrative in comparison to its category counterpart.

The heroine’s ongoing emancipation is in part also constituted by her sexual identity, which is also well-developed and relatively extensively represented in all of these narratives. Although both actual and metaphorical female virgins are still featured here and there – Brianna Concannon and Moira of Gaell (*Circle*) are actual virgins; Laura Templeton, Jude Murray (*Gallaghers of Ardmore*) and Nell Channing (*Three Sisters Island*) qualify as metaphorical virgins – they are significantly less common in these single title romances than they are in Roberts’ (earlier) categories. Many of these single title heroines have a healthy sexual past in which they have had more or less satisfying sexual relationships – although the romance convention that holds that the sexual relationship between hero and heroine is far more satisfying than either of them has ever experienced before remains firmly in place in all of these narratives. This is one of the few areas that somewhat changes in this period as particularly in the 2000s heroines’ sexual histories have expanded and, concomitantly, their attitudes towards sex have become significantly more commonsensical. Heroines are increasingly shown to take sexual initiative – something that was all but unheard of in most earlier romances – and to openly talk about sex with people other than the hero (although rarely with other men). Particularly female friends or sisters regularly have candid conversations about sex in which they discuss their (respective) sexual relationship(s) with the hero(es). While such conversations are candid, they are never lurid or disrespectful and they always confirm the exceptional pleasure the heroines experience in their sexual relationship with the hero. Such conversations, although not pervasive, are increasingly often included in

Roberts' single title romances and are a constitutive part of the overall portrayal of heroines as sexually self-aware, self-confident and articulate.

Another generic evolution that is continued and consolidated in these narratives is the demystification of the hero and his concomitant rise to more narrative prominence. By the mid-1990s hero point of view has become a conventional commonality in the American popular romance genre and one that Roberts' romance trilogies actively partake in. This has two main effects on the overall characterization of the hero. One is that the hero becomes a more nuanced, individuated and less stereotypical character. While all heroes in these narratives still fit the core tall, dark and dangerous romance hero stereotype, heroes' innate masculinity is narratively realized and represented in increasingly different ways. Heroes become increasingly differentiated from each other and several different "subtypes" develop. One of the most common hero types in Roberts' trilogies is the suave, slick and very self-confident (business)man; heroes belonging to this category include Rogan Sweeney (Born In), Josh Templeton (Dreams), Byron DeWitt (also Dreams), Philip Quinn (Chesapeake Bay), Trevor MaGee (Gallaghers of Ardmore), Sam Logan (Three Sister Island), Bradley Vane (Keys) and Fox O'Dell (Sign of Seven). Another type of hero that is regularly featured in these narratives is the *Einzelgänger* or loner; this hero perhaps most resembles the traditional alpha man hero. He is often dark and brooding, tends to have a pessimistic bend and often uses rude manners and seeming misanthropic tendencies to hide a vulnerable core. Trilogy heroes fitting this type include Grayson Thane (Born In), Michael Fury (Dream), Ethan Quinn (Chesapeake Bay), Jordan Hawke (Keys), Cian (Circle) and Gage Turner (Sign of Seven). Two less frequent types of heroes are the dreamer – Murphy Muldoon (Born In), Shawn Gallagher (Gallaghers of Ardmore), and Larkin (Circle) belong to this broad category – and the smart geek – here MacAlister "Mac" Boone (Three Sister Island) and Mitchell Carnegie (In the Garden) come to mind. Although all of these heroes are innately masculine men – this is a very strong core romance convention that no romance deviates from – their masculinities are realized in significantly different ways. By often featuring different types of heroes within one trilogy, Roberts' narratives moreover emphasize that masculinity, like femininity, is a complex, multi-faceted notion that is constituted by many different features and attributes. This diversification of hero types is a genre-wide evolution that is in full-swing by the mid-1990s<sup>30</sup>; while Roberts' category romances to an extent already take part in these

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<sup>30</sup> While it is likely that a myriad of both literary and broader socio-cultural dynamics prompt the significant increase in hero types that takes place in the popular romance genre in the course of the 1980s and 90s (and to a lesser extent the 2000s), I argue that one of the main motors behind this evolution is the introduction and



developments – see the MacKade series among others – I find that in Roberts' oeuvre the trilogies and other post-1994 single title romances offer the most extensive and intensive exploration of these different hero types.

A second (indirect) effect of the introduction of hero point of view on the representation and characterization of the hero that is further substantiated and consolidated in these narratives is that the hero instead of the heroine is the emotionally most steady character who is portrayed as being most open to or at ease with being in love. In novels such as *Born in Shame*, *Holding the Dream*, *Jewels of the Sun*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Face the Fire*, *Key of Valor*, *Red Lily* and *Dance of the Gods* the narrative depicts the hero as (internally) acknowledging his love for the heroine before she does the same. While this internal acknowledgment is not always immediately accompanied by a declaration of love – in a reenactment of the position many popular romance heroines from the 1970s and 80s take up, this hero is sometimes depicted as being aware of his love for the heroine long before he chooses to openly declare this love to her – in such situations the hero is nonetheless portrayed as the emotionally most secure character. In this portrayal hero point of view is of course instrumental since it is only via this narrative technique that the narrative indeed establishes the hero's internal acknowledgement of his love. Certainly when the hero's internal realization is accompanied by an early declaration, but even when it is not, the hero's private acknowledgement of his love changes the traditional dynamics of her romance narrative as it implicitly puts the hero in the emotionally more vulnerable (traditionally feminine) position. This is often reinforced in these narratives by combining this hero with a heroine who is emotionally much more restricted and unable, unwilling or very reluctant to acknowledge her love for the hero before the end of the narrative.

Two additional remarks need to be made here. First, as with the hero types this is a genre-wide evolution that is already on-going in the American romance genre by the mid-1990s and that, for example, some of Roberts' older category romance novels already take part in – Boyd Fletcher in the category romance novel *Night Shift* (1991) is an example of one of the earliest heroes portrayed in this position in Roberts' oeuvre. But like the hero types, this is a generic evolution that is more frequently and more extensively explored in these romance

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subsequent relatively rapid spread of the hero point of view in the (American) popular romance novel in the (first half of the) 1980s. The introduction of this literary technique significantly changes the function of the romance hero from being the heroine's antagonist and reward – the hero as the entity that the heroine both desires and conquers – to being a fully-fledged character in his own right whose functional position in the narrative is no longer solely determined by and dependent on his relation to the heroine. Once the hero gains point of view and his character rises to prominence in the narrative, the increase in complexity and nuance of his characterization is a logical and, it seems to me, even unavoidable narrative process.

trilogies, which then play a part in further consolidating this generic change. Second, while such emotionally steady heroes are increasingly common in the genre overall and Roberts' trilogies – and her post-1994 oeuvre – the more traditional, reversed situation – in which the heroine realizes her love for the hero (long) before he does – continues to be featured in many of these narratives as well. Not infrequently, in fact, the two “models” are combined within one trilogy. This is for example the case in the *Born In* trilogy in which the second installment, *Born in Ice*, features what I have described as the traditional situation: heroine Brianna realizes she is in love with hero Grayson quite early on in the narrative and long before he finally acknowledges he is love with her (which happens only in the narrative's penultimate scene); the emotionally skewed dynamic this creates between Brianna and Grayson is only reinforced by the fact that she also openly declares her love to him long before he can even internally acknowledge, let alone openly declare, his love for her. While the romance narrative in *Born in Ice* (1995) is then strongly characterized by this traditional emotional dynamic between hero and heroine, the series' subsequent novel, *Born in Shame* (1996), features precisely the reverse dynamic. In this narrative hero Murphy Muldoon immediately realizes he is in love with heroine Shannon Bodine, while Shannon is portrayed as having a very difficult time coming to terms with her feelings for Murphy and acknowledges she is in love with him only towards the end of the narrative. In a story such as this one the hero is thus the protagonist portrayed as most in touch with his emotions, which is a depiction that puts the hero in a position that is historically more associated with women, both within and outside of the popular romance genre.

The representation of the barrier is another conventional romance element in which these trilogy narratives generally incorporate and consolidate the generic shifts that have been taking place in the genre since the early to mid-1980s. In other words, there are no more barriers that are solely or even mainly predicated on misunderstandings or lack of communication; instead, barriers consists of substantial problems that revolve around serious, credible issues. As is conventional in the romance, these issues very often have to do with unresolved emotional scars the protagonist sustained in the past. In *Finding the Dream* (1997), for example, hero Michael Fury's inability to deal with his feelings for heroine Laura Templeton is related to the fact that he has not coped with his parents' disastrous marriage in which his mother was physically abused by his father. In *Born in Ice*, hero Grayson Thane cannot acknowledge nor accept his love for Brianna because he has not come to terms with his mother's abandonment of him. While past emotional scars are then often connected to the protagonist's (relationship with their) parents, past scars can also be more directly caused by

the romantic other. In *Face the Fire* (2002) and *Key of Knowledge* (2003), for example, the most substantial internal barrier to the romance union is the fact that heroines Mia Devlin and Dana Steele are unable to trust heroes Sam Logan and Jordan Hawke because the men have left them in the past – both couples had a romantic relationship as teenagers that was broken off by the hero because it was too intense. As I remarked in the previous chapter, such emotional barriers that are tightly connected to the character's (unresolved) past are common and conventional in the American popular romance genre of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

One aspect of the representation of the romance barrier that does change somewhat over the course of this period is the sequence in which the external and the internal barrier are resolved. While, as I remarked in part I, very often the external barrier is resolved before the internal conflict – so as to avoid creating the impression the love is conditional upon the external factors – in these narratives this order is sometimes reversed. This is for example the case in *Valley of Silence* (2006) in which the main external barrier to the romantic union between hero Cian and heroine Moira is the fact that he is a vampire and she a human. Cian and Moira overcome their internal barriers and declare their love to each other long before the external problem of his vampirism is resolved. Likewise, in *The Pagan Stone* (2008), Cybil and Gage resolve their internal barriers and declare their love to each other before the final external barrier to their romantic union – the fact that he is prophesied to die in the apocalyptic demonic battle in which they are engaged – is overcome. As both of these examples indicate, such a reversal of the traditional conflict-resolving-order tends to take place in narratives with a strongly developed generically other (sub)plot and is indeed indicative of the narrative prominence of this paranormal storyline, which, as I discuss below, encroaches more and more upon the romance's courtship narrative.

The trilogies' representation of sexuality is, like that of many other conventional romance elements, for the most part in line with the evolutions that have been and still are taking place in this regard in the American popular romance genre overall. That is, all of these narratives contain explicit love scenes in which the protagonists are portrayed as they are making love. While such scenes are erotic and somewhat explicit, they are narrated in an overall euphemistic and romantic discourse and focus, for example, more on the protagonists' physical and emotional experiences than on the detailed depiction of the sexual acts. One of the on-going evolutions that continues and becomes more pronounced in these trilogy narratives is the distinction that is now systematically made between sex and love. Protagonists in these narrative regularly have sex with each other before they are, or have

acknowledged being, in love. The novels do not problematize but morally support this distinction between sex and love for both men and women: characters of both sexes are depicted as being very comfortable with making and enacting this distinction. While the conceptual separation of sex and love is then in principle endorsed by these stories, in these romance courtship narratives it is eventually always presented as untenable: in the end sex always becomes a physical expression and manifestation of (often unuttered, undeclared) love. In fact, in many of these narratives the protagonists' explicit attempts to maintain the distinction between sex and love turns into a constant source of romantic tension as they set out to keep their physical and emotional relationship separate but, of course, invariably fail in maintaining this separation. In this way these narratives include a revised and, in some ways, emancipated version of the old generic convention that maintained, most explicitly for the romance heroine, the necessary conflation of love and sex.

Another aspect of sexuality that Roberts' trilogy narratives continue to address is the issue of sexual violence and abuse. Several of these narratives feature heroines with an abusive past; Anna Spinelli (*Chesapeake Bay*), for example, was raped when she twelve years old. Although by the time Anna meets and falls in love with Cameron Quinn she has, with the help of therapy, largely overcome this sexual trauma – Cam and Anna have a passionate, explosive sexual relationship – the novel portrays the experience as central to Anna's character. She became a dedicated social worker who uses her own experience to connect with and make a difference for the victims she is helping in her line of work. Nell Channing (*Three Sisters Island*) is another heroine with an abusive past, although in her case her husband's beatings were more severe and frequent than his sexual abuse. To escape her abusive marriage Nell staged her own death and both literally and figurative remade herself. While Nell has left her old, abusive life radically behind and has used therapy to learn to cope with this past, the trauma tends to resurface sporadically in her new life. In a heartbreaking scene in *Dance Upon the Air* (2001), for example, Nell is shown to experience a full-blown panic attack when the café where she works is unexpectedly running low on some food items. When hero Zack attempts to calm her down and Nell cowers away as if expecting a blow, Zack (and the reader) become aware of the full extent of her past trauma. Cybil Kinski, finally, is the only heroine in Roberts' oeuvre (so far) to experience rape during the time of the narrative. In the paranormal romance *The Pagan Stone* (2008) Cybil is attacked by an evil demon whose insubstantial yet physical presence rapes Cybil while hero Gage is forced to helplessly look on. Despite the supernatural nature of Cybil's rape, this scene not only rings emotionally true but also places in the narrative present the act that in all of Roberts' other

narratives with rape victims is still firmly located in the past. While all of these narratives portray, often in what appear to be quite realistic depictions, the extensive and long-lasting emotional and sexual effects of abuse on the victim, all of these stories also insist on the heroine's innate ability to overcome this trauma and reclaim her sexuality and sexual identity. Indeed, Anna, Nell and Cybil are all three represented as having very satisfying and healthy sexual relationships with their respective romantic partners.

A new aspect of sexual violence that is addressed for the first time in Roberts' oeuvre in a few of these narratives is the issue of male sexual abuse and molestation. *Rising Tides* (1998) is the first novel in Roberts' oeuvre to tackle this issue by featuring a hero, Ethan Quinn, who was molested as a child. As the child of a drug-addicted prostitute, Ethan suffered not only intense beating at the hands of his mother but was also repeatedly raped by some of her clients. This past has obviously emotionally traumatized Ethan and this trauma resurfaces in his relationship with Grace Monroe. Ethan's self-hate takes outward shape in his strange conviction that his blood is tainted and he should therefore never have children of his own, which implies he cannot make Grace fully happy and thus is unable to commit to her. Although Ethan's trauma is thus taken seriously by the novel, it is remarkable that while this trauma is in part sexual – the novel leaves no doubt that Ethan was sexually molested repeatedly as a child – it does not influence Ethan's sexual functioning. He is as skilled, self-confident, passionate, considerate and exceptional a lover as every romance hero conventionally is. Whereas female rape victims such as Anna, Nell and numerous others in Roberts' oeuvre (think for example of Cassie Dolin in the MacKade series (1995-96) and Althea Grayson in *Nightshade* (1993)) are then shown to experience not only emotional but also sexual repercussions of the rape trauma, this is not the case for the male rape victim, whose sexual prowess is untainted by his problematic sexual history. This, together with the inexistence of male virgins in Roberts' romance oeuvre, is indicative, I believe, of the generic ingrained-ness of the convention regarding male sexual vigor in the popular romance genre. In popular romance novels, those written by Nora Roberts and by many others, men are represented as innately sexual beings whose sexuality is always at least latently in play.

Whereas, this discussion has shown, Nora Roberts' trilogies published between 1994 and 2008 in many regards then take part in furthering and consolidating the numerous narrative evolutions and shifts that have taken in the American popular romance novel since the beginning of the 1980s, in doing this they also continue to incorporate and perpetuate many of the core conventions of the genre, even when these might be at odds with some the values underlying the other shifts.

### 3.1.2 Generic Hybridity

While in all of these trilogies the romance narrative is then an important, and often the single most dominant, narrative thread in the overall story, the vast majority of these narratives also feature extensive (sub)plots of a generically other kind. By far the most frequent subgenre that is explored in these narratives is paranormal romance, which consists of a combination of the core romance generic narrative with narrative elements traditionally more associated with fantasy and/or science fiction. While a few of Roberts' earlier category romances – in particular the four installments in the Donovan series – dabble in this subgenre, paranormal romance is not particularly strongly represented in Roberts' pre-1994 oeuvre. This changes in her post-1994 output when especially in the trilogies paranormal romance becomes a new focus in Roberts' work. All of the single title trilogies published between 1994 and 2008 feature some kind of paranormal element and are thus, technically, paranormal romance narratives; the extent to which these paranormal elements are developed differs significantly from one trilogy to another, however. While paranormal elements and plotlines are of minor narrative importance in early trilogies, they become more and more prominent in later works until, in series such as the Circle trilogy (2006) and the Sign of Seven trilogy (2007-08), the story brims with paranormal elements and the position of this plotline rivals the romance's courtship narrative for dominance in the overall story.

In early trilogies such as *Born In* (1994-95), *Dreams* (1996-97) and *Chesapeake Bay* (1998-99) paranormal elements are minimally developed. In the *Born In* trilogy, for example, they are only present in the series' final installment, *Born in Shame*, which features a brief subplot that suggests hero Murphy and heroine Shannon are reincarnations of a couple of mystic star-crossed lovers who lived centuries earlier and did not manage to resolve their barriers, leading to their deaths. Both Murphy and Shannon are plagued by dreams about this couple and Murphy finds a mystic brooch on one his field that in these dreams is worn by the woman. While the brooch makes the supernatural connection somewhat tangible, the mystic parallel narrative is still mostly instrumental in the novel's characterization of Ireland, where the narrative is set, as a mystic land of poets, dreamers, myths and legends. It provides Shannon's and Murphy's courtship with an extra touch, but is not a storyline that the novel dwells on nor is the paranormal element in any other way substantiated within the narrative. A similar situation occurs in the *Chesapeake Bay* trilogy, where the paranormal element consists of the appearance of the ghost of Ray, the recently deceased adoptive father to the three Quinn brothers. In each installment of the series ghostly Ray repeatedly visits the brother who is the

romance protagonist – Cam in *Sea Swept*, Ethan in *Rising Tides* and Philip in *Inner Harbor*. Far from being horrific or scary, these visits are benign occurrences during which Ray talks to his son and advises him on, mostly, romantic matters. Much like in the Born In trilogy, these paranormal elements are instrumental in furthering the (romance) story. Here the conversations between Ray and his sons are often functional in the further development of the hero's characterization; they spell out, for example, some of the complex emotional issues that all three Quinn brothers, who were delinquents with traumatic youths before they were adopted by Ray and Stella Quinn as young teenagers, are still dealing with. As in the Born In series, however, the Chesapeake Bay narratives do not further develop this paranormal element; in fact, it is even implicitly suggested that ghostly Ray is a fragment of the brothers' imagination. While this notion is countered by the fact that Ray appears to all three brothers at separate times, such suggestions do ground the narrative in the mainly realistic fictional world in which it is set. These early trilogies could then be termed soft paranormal romances in which the paranormal aspects are functional in the main romance narratives.

From the Three Sister Island trilogy onwards the paranormal elements come much more to the fore in Roberts' single title romance trilogies. This is narratively realized in two ways. First, in these narratives paranormal elements are a much more important part of the protagonists' daily lives than in the earlier trilogies, where the paranormal elements are fairly marginal. In the Three Sister Island trilogy, for example, four of the six protagonists are witches with magical abilities; in the In the Garden trilogy the protagonists share a house with a psychotic ghost who disturbs their existence on a daily basis; and in the Circle trilogy many of the protagonists are supernatural creatures (Cian is a vampire and Larkin a shape shifter) or have magical abilities (Hoyt is a wizard, Glenna a witch and Blair a vampire slayer). The narrative representation of paranormal elements is, consequently, not limited to a few isolated scenes – as it is in most of the earlier trilogies – but is a near-constant presence in the narrative and strongly interwoven with all other narrative threads that are developed. Second, all of these narratives feature a strong fantasy plot line in which the protagonists fight an epic battle against an evil supernatural force. In the Keys trilogy the protagonists are fighting to free three young goddesses who are kept prisoner by Kane, an evil god. In the Circle trilogy the protagonists are fighting to save humanity from vampire queen Lilith and her evil army of vampires and warlocks and in the Sign of Seven trilogy an epic battle is waged between the six protagonists and Twisse, a demon who is trying to take over the world. In each trilogy this epic good versus evil battle – which is a conventional element of fantasy – is developed over the course of the entire series. It is launched in the series' first installment,

reaches provisional climaxes at the end of the first and the second installment, but is only definitively resolved in the series' third and final novel. As such, in all of these trilogies the paranormal plot then also constitutes a significant part of the narratives' seriality as it sets up very strong plot connections between the separately published stories. Both these processes reach a kind of highpoint in the Circle and the Sign of Seven trilogies, which are pervasively paranormal narratives with very strongly and prominently developed paranormal elements that rival the romance's courtship narratives for overall dominance.

The narrative prominence of the paranormal generic identity is reinforced in many of this latter group of trilogies – the ones published from *Three Sisters Island* onwards – in two ways. Most importantly, it is often extensively entwined with the narrative representation of the conventional romance elements. In a technique that I have described as conventional for romance subgenres (cf. part I) paranormal elements frequently influence the narrative representation of conventional romance elements. In *Face the Fire*, for example, the attraction between Sam Logan and Mia Devlin, both witches, is represented as not only being sexual and emotional, but also magical: as witches they are able to share magic, which significantly intensifies their romantic connection. Likewise, in *Morrigan's Cross* the romantic connection between hero Hoyt, a wizard, and heroine Glenna, a witch, is intensified by the magic they share. Paranormal elements often also influence the representation of the romance barrier. In the Circle trilogy, for example, the fact that Cian is a vampire forms a very strong double barrier to the romantic union between him and Moira. Initially, Cian's vampirism is something that repulses Moira, who just before meeting Cian helplessly witnessed her mother being slaughtered by vampires. For much of the first two installments of the trilogy Moira's impassioned hate for vampires is represented as a strong obstacle to any romantic connection between the two characters. As is conventional in romance novels, however, hate can quickly turn to love and eventually Moira and Cian fall deeply and passionately in love with each other. Again his vampirism functions as a barrier to their union, now because it makes him an infertile immortal while she is fertile mortal.

A second element that reinforces the narrative performance of the paranormal generic identity in some of these narratives has to do with the ending of the narrative. In a number of these novels the romance courtship narrative is completed before the paranormal plotline developed within the narrative is wrapped up. In *Key of Knowledge*, for example, the courtship narrative between Jordan and Dana reaches the HEA before the paranormal plot – in which Dana is searching for a key in order to free a goddess – comes to a conclusion. Likewise, in *Key of Valor*, Zoe and Brad have declared their love to each other and overcome



all barriers before Zoe finds her key and battles their evil enemy. The novel in which this separation between the romance HEA and the resolution to the paranormal plot is most extensive is *Red Lily*, in which Harper and Hayley reach their full HEA – they have not only overcome their barriers and declared their love to each, but are formally engaged and expecting a baby together – a good fifty pages before the end of the novel; in these final fifty pages the paranormal plot that is developed over the course of the entire trilogy is wrapped up and resolved. Such situations strongly reinforce the narrative performance of the paranormal generic identity, which in these scenes takes the upper hand over romance.

### 3.1.3 Seriality

As has already become evident in the above discussion, these trilogies are generally marked by a strong degree of narrative seriality. This seriality is developed in three main ways which often overlap and interact with each other. First, many of these narratives feature continues plots that develop over the course of the entire trilogy. Second, in some these narratives the romance courtship plot of a particular couple develops over the course of two or more installments of the series. Third, these narratives increasingly focus on the community of characters around which the trilogy is structured; not only the community itself, but the process of building such a community becomes an increasingly salient narrative thread that is always developed over the course of the entire trilogy. The combination of these three serializing narrative tendencies, all of which are increasingly present in these trilogies, tends to strongly tie the narratives in these series together. The degree of seriality then intensifies over time in Roberts' work.

The first type of narrative serial connection that exists between different installments in Roberts' single title romance trilogies is the plot-based connection. There are basically two kinds of plot that tie trilogy installments together. In some trilogies a realistic (sub)plot is developed over the course of the series. This is for example the case in the Born In trilogy and the Chesapeake Bay series. In the Born In trilogy this series-wide plotline is launched in the opening scene of the trilogy's first installment, *Born in Fire*, in which heroine Maggie's father dies and, before breathing his last utters the name of an unknown woman. Confused and curious, Maggie and her sister Brianna start looking through their father's possessions and soon discover love letters he exchanged with another woman while married to the sisters' mother. *Born in Ice* picks up this plot thread when Maggie and Brianna hire a private detective to track down their father's mysterious lover. Towards the end of this installment it is revealed the woman has recently died, but had a daughter – Shannon – who is Maggie's and

Brianna's half-sister. Shaken to the core by their father's long-hidden adultery, Maggie and Brianna nonetheless invite Shannon to Ireland. In the series' final installment, *Born in Shame*, Shannon comes to Ireland to meet her newly-revealed half-sisters and figure out if any kind of bond can exist between them. While in Ireland Shannon not only gets to know Maggie and Brianna, but also meets and falls in love with Murphy Muldoon and eventually decides to settle there. While the subplot of the father's affair is of relatively rather minor importance in the series first two installments – these narratives are predominantly focused on the conventional romance courtship plot in which first Maggie and later Brianna meet their true love – it is thrust to the fore in the series' final installment with not only Shannon's actual appearance on the narrative scene but also her protagonist role in the courtship narrative developed in this novel.

A somewhat similar situation occurs in the Chesapeake Bay trilogy, which develops a number of realistic (sub)plots over the course of the series. Like *Born in Fire, Sea Swept*, the series' first installment, opens with the death of one of the protagonists' father. Before he died Ray Quinn, beloved adoptive father to heroes Cam, Ethan and Philip, paid a huge amount of money to a woman named Gloria in order to adopt her son Seth, a ten year old boy with a horrible past and Ray Quinn's unmistakable brown eyes. On his death bed Ray asks his three older sons to take care of Seth, but dies before he can reveal what, if any, biological connection exists between himself and the child. This opening sequence launches two parallel (sub)plots that develop throughout the rest of the series. The narratively most prominent one of these focuses on the three Quinn brothers' attempts to live up to their father's dying wish and give Seth both an actual and a legal home; they start adoption proceedings and attempt to establish an emotional connection to the deeply troubled Seth. Numerous scenes narrated over the course of the series establish how all three older Quinn brothers slowly develop a deep and lasting emotional bond with the initially skittish and traumatized young boy. This ongoing storyline, in which the series' three heroines also play an important role, is an important story-thread in each of these narratives and provides much of the cohesion between the different installments in the series. The second (sub)plot focuses on the question of the nature of the connection between Seth and Ray; while the Quinn brothers refuse to accept Ray cheated on their adoptive mother Stella, who died years earlier, the unmistakable physical similarities between Seth and Ray raise both questions and gossip in the small coastal town where they live. These questions are only answered in the series' final installment, *Inner Harbor*, when Sybil, Gloria's half-sister, comes to town intending to fight the Quinns' adoption of Seth. When Sybil learns the truth about the child abuse Seth endured at the hands

of his mother, her loyalties shift and she is instrumental in finalizing the men's adoption of Seth. Sybil also reveals that Seth is Ray's grandson and Gloria the daughter Ray never knew he had, thus settling the issue of Ray's potential unfaithfulness that is shown to bother the three Quinn brothers throughout much of the series. In the courtship that develops in this novel between Philip and Sybil her position in Seth's life and the on-going adoption procedure are an important part of the (external) barrier to their romantic union.

A second type of series-wide story line that is developed in some of Roberts' trilogies is the paranormal plot; as I discussed earlier this is a type of (sub)plot that is particularly prominent in Roberts' later paranormal romance trilogies such as *Three Sisters Island*, *Keys*, *In the Garden*, *Circle* and *Sign of Seven*. In many of these series this (sub)plot provides strong (sometimes very strong) narrative connections between the different installments in the series, in part because the paranormal story line is increasingly important in the story as a whole. In the final two trilogies in this period, the *Circle* (2006) and the *Sign of Seven* (2007-08) series, this tendency reaches a highpoint as these series read not so much as three stories with various narrative interconnections, but as one big story that is narrated in three separate parts. In the *Circle* trilogy this structure is reinforced within the narrative by the frame tale in which an initially anonymous narrator (eventually revealed to be Cian, one of the protagonists) is shown to be narrating the story of the six protagonists' battle against evil; each installment opens and closes with a brief scene depicting the narrator briefly interrupting the ongoing tale, which strongly emphasizes the continuity of the story that is narrated over three separately published trilogy installments. I find that the connections between the different installments in both the *Circle* and the *Sign of Seven* series are so strong that these stories can not properly function independently from each other. Even though the narrative in each installment provides brief recapitulations of the events that occurred in the previous installments, it seems to me these novels are narratively essentially unintelligible if they are read separately from the others in the series.

A second type of serial narrative interconnections between different installments in these trilogies has to do with the development of the conventional romance narrative. While in most of these series the courtship narratives between the different couples are strictly contained to a single installment – in the *Born in*, *Dreams* and *Three Sisters Island* series each romance hero and heroine only meet each for the first time at the beginning of the narrative related in "their" installment – in a few series future couples meet and are shown to romantically interact in an installment preceding the one that contains their romance courtship narrative proper. This happens for the first time in the *Chesapeake Bay* series in which

numerous interactions between Ethan and Grace, romance protagonists in the second installment *Rising Tides*, are narrated in the preceding installment *Sea Swept*. Similarly, in the Gallaghers of Ardmore trilogy Shawn and Brenna, romance protagonists in the second installment *Tears of the Moon*, are shown to regularly interact in the series' first installment, *Jewels of the Sun*. In both series these narrated interactions in the first installment establish quite clearly that these characters are strongly attracted to each other, but this attraction does not yet materialize in any actual romantic actions (there is no kissing or touching, for example, nor do the characters openly acknowledge their attraction). While these scenes could then be interpreted as preamble to or prefiguration of the future courtship, I find that they also implicitly raise the question of what element precisely constitutes the beginning of the generic romance narrative. Following Pamela Regis' definition, the romance narrative starts with the first meeting between the protagonists; as I argue elsewhere in this dissertation, it seems to me this first meeting element should be specified to the first romantic meeting – that is, the first meeting in which hero and heroine are able to potentially interact as future romantic partners. Following this definition, the romance narratives between Grace and Ethan and between Brenna and Shawn start in the installment preceding the one in which their courtship narrative is fully developed, which implies that the performance of the romance generic identity is only complete when both installments are taken into account.

While this is a matter for debate in these two early trilogies – since no actual romantic interactions take place between these couples, the courtship narrated in “their” installment is not missing generically vital elements – in two later trilogies, the Keys (2003-04) and the Circle (2006) trilogy, it is unmistakable that the performance of the generic narrative identity is only complete when more than one installment is taken into account. In the Keys trilogy both the attraction and a number of the barriers between Zoe and Brad, whose courtship narrative is mainly developed in the series' final installment, are set up over the course of the first two installments in the series. The couple not only shares a number of romantically charged verbal interactions in these earlier installments, but in the second installment Brad passionately kisses Zoe and thereby sexually substantiates their burgeoning romantic relationship. A similar situation occurs in the Circle trilogy in which the courtship narrative between Cian and Moira is well under way by the time the events in *Valley of Silence*, “their” romance, occur. The first two installments of the series establish how the initially strongly antagonistic relationship between Cian and Moira – he is vampire, as I noted above, and she passionately hates vampires because they have slaughtered her mother – not only slowly transforms into one of grudging respect and even friendship, but is also complicated by a

strong and growing (sexual) attraction between them. This reaches a provisional climax in the series' second installment in which an argument between Cian and Moira ends in a passionate kiss. That Cian and Moira's romantic relationship is then well under way by the time the events in *Valley of Silence* occur – the conventional romance elements of the definition of society, the first meeting, the barrier and the attraction have (in part) already been narrated – influences the development of this generic narrative, which develops rather quickly. Barely halfway into *Valley of Silence* Cian and Moira have established a sexual and deeply emotional relationship based on true and openly declared love and the only element preventing the materialization of their HEA is the external barrier of his vampirism. Although this external barrier remains in place until the final pages of the novel, for much of this narrative the love that exists between Cian and Moira is represented in ways that are reminiscent of the love between completely established, post-HEA couples. It is then clear that the conventional romance narratives between both Brad and Zoe and, particularly, Cian and Moira develop over the course of several installments in the trilogy. This implies an important shift in the relationship between genre and authorship in the narratively performed textual identity since the generic identity romance is only realized by way of the authorial identity. Only when the connections between these narratives – connections that perform the serial and thus the authorial identity – are taken into account is the full narrative performance of the generic identity romance realized in these narratives. Consequently, serial and authorial identity dominate generic identity on the level of the narrative in these particular trilogies.

A third and final way in which narrative serial connections between the different installments in these trilogies are established is via the communities that the central characters make up. In all these narratives, as in Roberts' serialized category romances published in this period, these communities are an important theme in the narrative. In Roberts' trilogies three basic types of such communities can be distinguished: the ideal community, the fractured community and the developing community. Trilogies with ideal communities are the *Dreams* and the *Gallaghers of Ardmore* series; in these narratives the community that the six romance protagonists make up or the larger community of which they are part is ideal, balanced and harmonious from the very beginning of the first narrative. The interactions that characterize these communities resemble the ones in the idyllic communities that are featured in Roberts' second generation category romances. These communities are quite elaborately depicted in these narratives. The installments in the *Dreams* trilogy extensively portray the bonds of friendship and family that connect the six protagonists, and particularly the three heroines at the core of the series; similarly, the *Ardmore* installments show at length how the three

Gallagher siblings and their romantic partners who form the core of this community lovingly interact with each other. In these depictions these communities are represented as being relatively static. That is, they are happy at the start of the first narrative and remain so until (and beyond) the end of the final narrative, when they have expanded to include both the new partners and the children of the established couples.

This is not the case for the other two community types, both of which are characterized by the significant developments they undergo over the course of the trilogy. The fractured community, which is featured in the *Born In* and the *Chesapeake Bay* trilogies, is a community that at the beginning of the first narrative in the series is fractured – that is, unhappy, out of balance or in some other way incomplete. Over the course of the series this community is, to a greater or lesser extent, healed and brought into balance again in a process that is often in part related in the series-wide (sub)plots I discussed earlier. In the *Born In* trilogy, for example, the family-community of which heroines Maggie and Brianna are part is fractured at the beginning of the narrative by first the death of their father and second the discovery of his adultery. These events bring to the surface other deeper-lying problems in the community which revolve around the figure of May, Brianna and Maggie's mother, who is represented as a discontented, spiteful and bitter woman throughout much of the series. May's unhappiness, which originated in her miserable marriage to the sisters' father, has put a strain on her relationship with her daughters. Significantly, this strain is not healed by true love; even when first Maggie and later Brianna meet their true love and thus live in the romantic post-HEA the narrative continues to represent the relationship with their mother as difficult and often painful. Unlike in Roberts' community driven category romances, in these single titles true love then does not heal all and the post-HEA, while pervasively characterized by romantic happiness, is not constituted by a life without problems. In fact, the problems between May and her daughters initially only intensify when the latter invite their newly-discovered half-sister to Ireland in an act that May understandably considers as a kind of betrayal. The relationship between Brianna and Maggie on the one hand and Shannon on the other is presented as initially very uncomfortable and even painful. This relationship, however, gradually thaws and grows warmer and by the end of the series Maggie, Brianna and Shannon consider themselves true sisters. The relationship between Maggie and Brianna and their mother remains difficult, although it is significantly improved in the final novel by the birth of both Brianna's and Maggie's first children. The community at the heart of the *Born In* narratives is then considerably happier and more in balance at the end of the series than it was at the beginning. Still, it suffers from some essential problems that true love

cannot resolve – the father’s adultery cannot be undone, the mother, though mellowed, essentially remains a tragic figure. In this portrayal of the community this single title series, which is Roberts’ first single title romance trilogy and published at a time the author is best known for her more optimistic category romances, differs significantly from Roberts’ category romances which adopt an essentially more idyllic tone and are set in fictional universes that are a shade more ideal.

The community at the heart of the Chesapeake Bay trilogy likewise is initially fragmented but evolves towards a happy balance by the end of the series. As in the *Born In* trilogy, the initial fragmentation of the community is brought about by the death of the father. This fragmentation is compounded by the figure of young Seth, whose unexplained but unmistakable biological connection to Ray seems to imply a more basic and thorough fracturing of the core of the Quinn family constituted by the happy marriage of Ray and Stella Quinn. Over the course of the trilogy the Quinns are represented as rebuilding their community. The bonds of brotherhood that already exist between the three adopted brothers Cam, Ethan and Philip are re-established and strengthened and all three men go out of their way to develop a connection to Seth. They give him not simply a house to live in but a home and a family to belong to; Seth’s inclusion in this reinvigorated community, which provides him with a stable and safe identity, is presented as vital to his life. The narrative of the rebuilding of the Quinn community is particularly significant in Nora Roberts’ oeuvre for two reasons. First, this is a community that essentially revolves around men and various forms of male bonding; although women are brought into the fold over time, the four Quinn brothers are the heart of this community and the narratives systematically revolve around them and their relations with each other. The focus on the figure of the romance hero that then thoroughly characterizes this trilogy represents a kind of climax of the evolutions of the romance hero’s rise to narrative prominence and his demystification that have been on-going in Roberts’ oeuvre and the American romance genre at large since the early 1980s. As the narratives in Roberts’ oeuvre that most extensively and fundamentally focus on the romance hero, masculinity and the notion of male bonding, the Chesapeake Bay trilogy perhaps definitively lays to rest the notion that the romance narrative is a story about women. Second, this series is one of the first in Roberts’ oeuvre to very explicitly problematize and essentially refute the notion that family and community and the identity they provide are based on biological connections. This happens in two ways in the series. The Quinn family as a whole embodies the notion that family and community are fundamentally not made up of biology since no members of this community share blood bonds – like Seth, Cam, Ethan and Philip

were initially adopted into the Quinn family. This notion is reinforced, moreover, by the fact that the people with whom the heroes do share blood – their parents, in particular Seth’s mother Gloria – are always represented as a very negative force in their lives. Cam, Ethan, Philip and Seth all suffered abuse of some kind or other at hands of (one of) their biological parents. Ethan, particularly, has taken this idea to heart and decided that because of his “tainted blood” he should never have children of his own. This notion is brought to fore of the romance narrative related in *Rising Tides*, where it forms the core internal barrier preventing the happy romantic union between Grace and Ethan. The novel thoroughly explores Ethan’s skewed relationship with his own biological identity and eventually exposes his beliefs as unattainable and absurd when Anna points out that in Ethan’s logic Seth should never have children of his own. Ethan’s recognition of the fundamental folly of his ideas not only resolves the internal barrier in his relationship with Grace, but also brings home the anti-essentialist message of the series as a whole. The explicitly anti-essentialist approach to community and identity that is introduced in this trilogy is one that characterizes much of Roberts’ later work and that is, for example, one of the core themes addressed in J.D. Robb’s In Death series.

The focus on community building that characterizes the Born In and the Chesapeake Bay trilogies is expanded in the series that revolve around what I call a developing community. This is a community that essentially does not exist at the beginning of the series and that is fully developed throughout the trilogy. Series with this kind of community are Three Sister Island, Keys, In the Garden, Circle and Sign of Seven, which are not accidentally Roberts’ trilogies with an important paranormal (sub)plot. Very often the building of the community that is related over the course of the series is tightly interwoven with the paranormal story line that also develops over the course of the trilogy. In the Circle trilogy, for example, the six protagonists must come together and form a “circle” – a community – in order to be able to beat evil vampire queen Lilith in the apocalyptic battle that is the core paranormal story line in this series. Each member of the community has something to offer that is crucial to winning this coming battle and only by working together, trusting each other and learning from each do the group – and by extension humanity – stand a chance of survival. This narrative set-up, introduced at the very beginning of the series, turns the community building into a crucial part of the trilogies’ core storylines. Indeed, many scenes in all installments in this series then relate the various ways in which these six initial strangers come together and develop various bonds and relationships with each other – including the three romantic relationships that are the focus of the romance narratives – to eventually form a



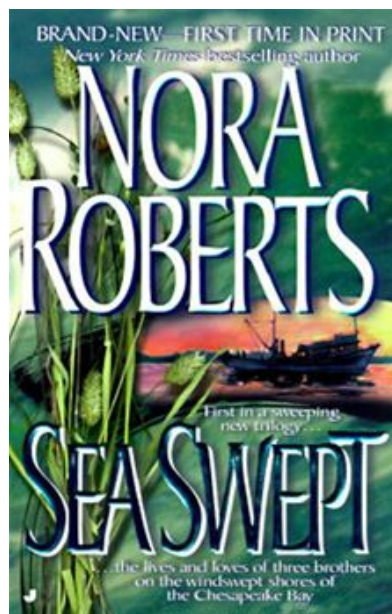
balanced, happy and very close community that provides an essential part of their identity. In this community narrative many of the stories' other serial threads come together and interact. Not only is the process of community building often closely intertwined with the paranormal storyline, but the development of romance courtship narrative over the course of more than a single installment is also tied to fact that in these narratives future couples meet and interact from the first installment in the series onwards. The courtships between Zoe and Brad, Cian and Moira and Gage and Sybil – the final couple in the Sign of Seven trilogy whose courtship is also partially narrated in the series' earlier installments – develop in part in these earlier installments because the narration of interactions between these future couples is an integral part of the wider story thread of the community formation.

These community-focused storylines are significant to this dissertation's wider study of the relationship between genre and authorship in Nora Roberts' oeuvre for two main reasons. First, as the discussion above indicates, these community narratives often constitute important serial narrative connections between separately published narratives and are as such important to the narrative performance of serial and authorial identity. Certainly in many of Roberts' later trilogies the development of the community is an inherent part of the narrative as a whole and a plot line that creates a lot of narrative cohesion between separately published installments. Second, over time these narrative representations of communities also tend to increase the narrative performance of Roberts' authorial identity because it develops into a theme that is a hallmark of Roberts' writing, her authorial voice and thus the narrative performance of her authorial identity. Certainly in the romance community, Nora Roberts is well-known for these characteristic and idiosyncratic portrayals of communities and families, which are often considered one of the features of her narratives that sets these apart from writings by other (romance) authors. Since this is a theme that is introduced in Roberts' oeuvre quite early – the author's first narratively connected stories are published in 1983 while the first more elaborate community (the MacGregors) is represented in novels from 1985 – and that becomes an increasingly elaborate and prominent thematic in Roberts' narrative, the association between this kind of community representation and Roberts' author name and the authorial identity that resides under this name has significantly intensified over time. By the early to mid-2000s it is one of the defining characteristics of her writing that, later discussions in this chapter illustrate, is a central narrative feature in almost all novels Roberts writes.

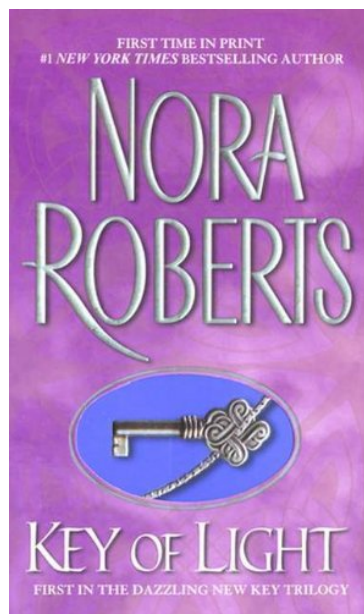
### 3.2 Paratext

The paratexts of these single title romances, like those of the category romances published in this period, are almost completely dominated by Roberts' authorial identity, which seems to be developed at the expense of a strong paratextual performance of a clear generic identity. Indeed, while the author name "Nora Roberts" and the authorial identity that resides under that name are a focal point of most of these novels' paratextual, and particularly peritextual, elements, strong performances of the romance nor the fantasy generic identity are present in these zones, despite the fact that, as the discussion above has indicated, both generic identities, and particularly romance, are strongly performed on the narrative level of most of these novels. Instead, both the authorial identity and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the serial identity of these novels' dominate the overall paratextual identity performance that characterizes the original editions of these single title trilogies.

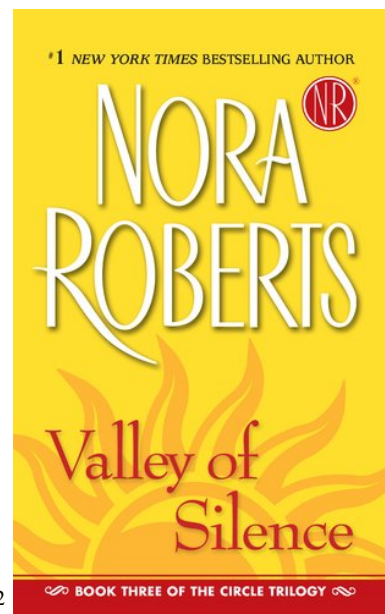
All of these novels are originally published by Jove in the mass market paperback format, which in the United States marks them as popular genre fiction, but does not assign them a more particular generic identity. The front covers of these novels are, like those of many of Roberts' category romances published in this period, completely dominated by Roberts' author name and the title of the novel.



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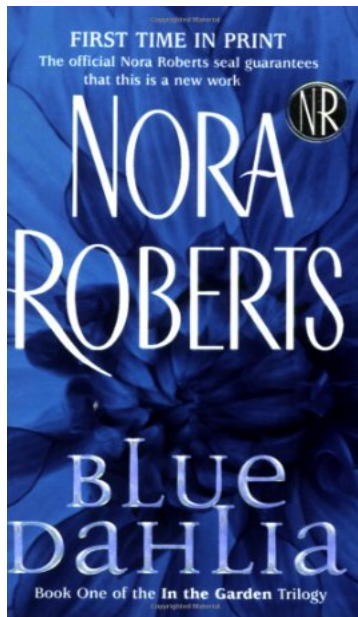
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<sup>31</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Sea Swept*. Source: <http://kobobooks.com/ebook/Sea-Swept-The-Chesapeake-Bay/book-yseFOjk91kefTkqODmeoDw/page1.html>

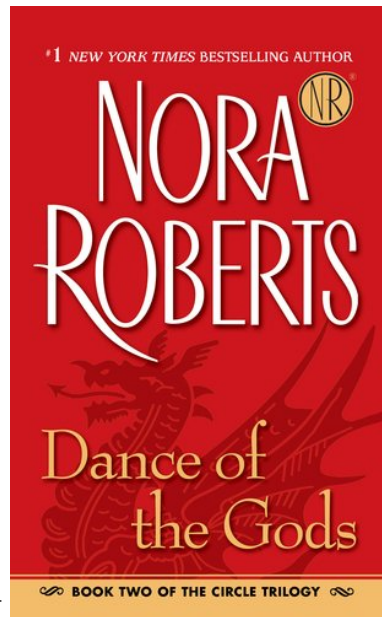
<sup>32</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Key of Light*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=1417715332>

<sup>33</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Valley of Silence*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515141674>

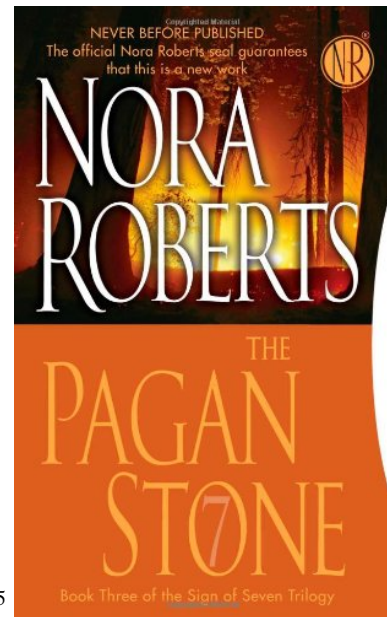
Not only is this name the single dominant element on these front covers but here too, like on the front covers of Roberts' later category romances, this author name is visually developed into a kind of brand name. This effect is achieved by both the use of strong visual parallels in the printing of Roberts' name – it is printed in the same typescript, same size and exact same spot on each front cover – and, from 2004 onwards, the use of what is called “ the Nora Roberts seal”.



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The seal, which first appears on the cover of the original 2004 edition of *Blue Dahlia*, is used to “officially” indicate that a novel is a new work that is printed for the first time. The development of this seal is clearly a response to the multitude of reissues of Roberts' older work that by 2004 are flooding the (American) book market (cf. below). As a brand name, the author name “Nora Roberts” marks or brands these books and indicates that they are characterized by an identity that is similar for all products – books, texts – carrying this label.

<sup>34</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Blue Dahlia*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=051513855X>

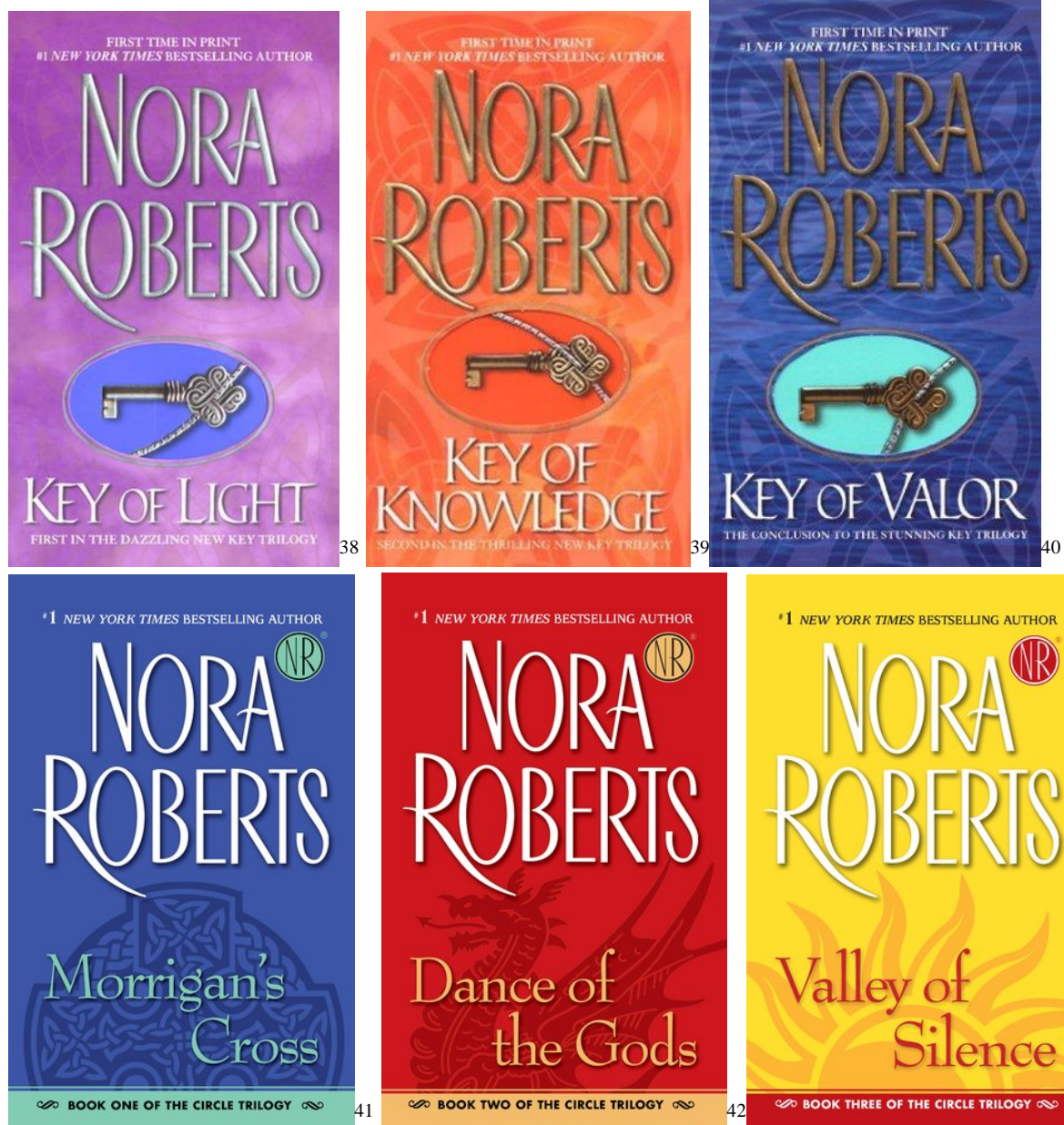
<sup>35</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Dance of the Gods*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515141666>

<sup>36</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Pagan Stone*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515144665>

<sup>37</sup> The official Nora Roberts seal. Source: [http://reviews.ebay.com/Nora-Roberts-Reprint-or-New-Release\\_W0QQugidZ1000000001148096](http://reviews.ebay.com/Nora-Roberts-Reprint-or-New-Release_W0QQugidZ1000000001148096)

The branding of Roberts' author name thus enhances the performance of her authorial identity and reinforces the notion that this identity is constant across different texts.

Besides Roberts' name, the series to which these novels belong usually also has quite a strong peritextual presence. The front covers of installments that belong to one trilogy are designed in an obviously similar style that makes the novels' shared serial identity visually unmistakable.



<sup>38</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Key of Light*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=1417715332>

<sup>39</sup> Front cover, original edition. *Key of Knowledge*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/key-of-knowledge.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Front cover, original edition. *Key of Valor*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/key-of-valor.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Morrigan's Cross*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515141658>

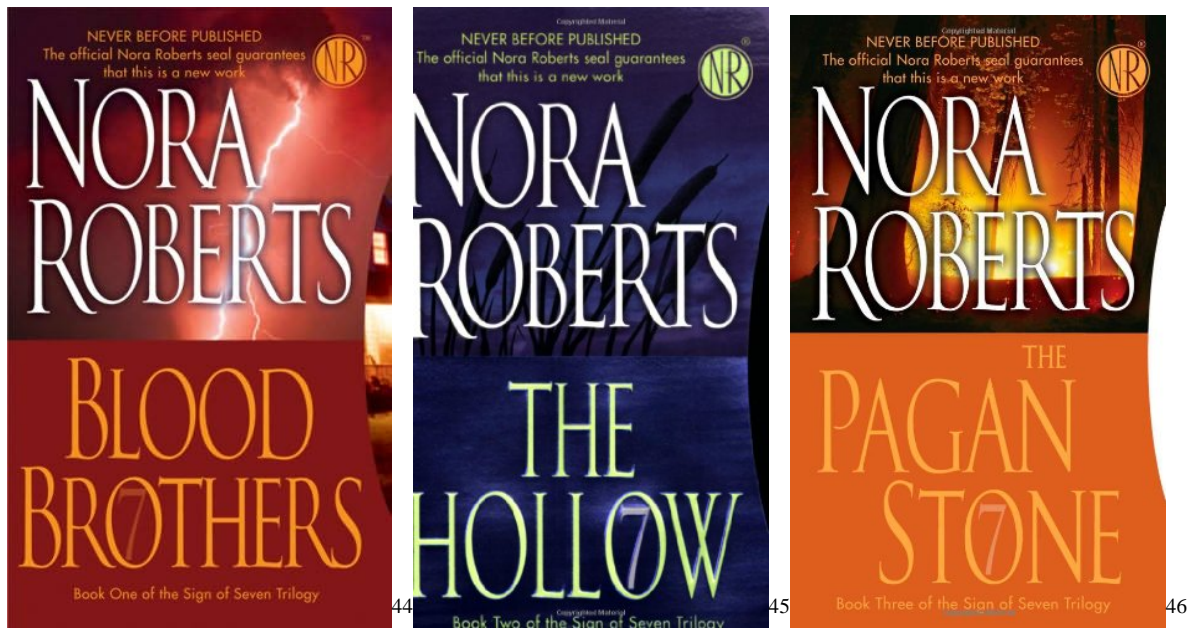
The name of the series and the book's place in the trilogy structure ("Book One of the In the Garden trilogy", "Second in the enchanting Irish trilogy", "Book three of the Circle trilogy", etc.) are also always printed on these front covers, indicating the importance of this serial identity. The novels' titles usually preformatively reference the serial identity as well. The titles in the Born In and the Keys trilogy all start with the words "born in" and "key of" respectively, for example, while the titles in the In the Garden series all refer to a color and a flower (blue dahlia, black rose and red lily) and the those for the installments in the Chesapeake Bay series share a nautical theme (sea swept, rising tides, inner harbor). The novels' serial identity is then a rather prominent aspect of their front cover, and by extension their entire paratext (cf. below).

While authorial and serial identity are then paratextually prominent, generic identity is all but absent from these front covers. Interestingly, none of these covers is graced with a clinch image nor any of the other stock images that have become iconic generic cues for the popular romance identity, such as the solo man, the semi-undressed woman, or the suggestively naked body parts (cf. part I). Instead, imagery is subdued on most of these covers. The few images that are used usually refer to some of the central themes of the series; the front cover of the original editions of the Chesapeake Bay novels feature nautical scenes, for example, while those of the In the Garden series carry a flower and the Keys series covers are, unoriginally, graced with a key. Many of these images, certainly in combination with the color schemes that are used on most of these front cover, tend to have rather feminine undertones that construct these books as directed at a female reader but that do not develop a clear generic identity. Like the romance generic identity, the fantasy generic identity – which is a strong narrative presence – almost absent from many of these covers. Only the original editions of the Sign of Seven series seem to contain some oblique visual references to their (narratively very strong) paranormal generic identity.

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<sup>42</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Dance of the Gods.* Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515141666>

<sup>43</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Valley of Silence.* Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515141674>



This is particularly significant because the paranormal romance subgenre has, by the end of the 1990s, developed into one of the most popular and prominent subgenres in the American popular romance genre that has its particular type and tone of cover imagery. Indeed, much like e.g. historical romance, paranormal romance is a subgenre with quite a characteristic iconography that includes, for example, such elements as semi-naked solo men (images of men stripped to the waist appear particularly frequently on the covers of paranormal romances), tattoos, lightening, fangs and a clinch image that resembles a vampire bite. None of these subgenerically conventional image types appear on the original covers of Roberts' romance novels, despite the fact that a number of them do feature vampires and other paranormal creatures. Instead the front covers of the installment in for example the Circle trilogy are marked by colors and images that seem to go out of their way not to signal the vampiric narrative presence (see images above). It is clear then that not only is Roberts' author name dominant on these front covers, but a conscious effort seems to be made to avoid paratextual elements that clearly perform a particular generic and/or subgeneric identity – despite the fact that on the narrative level this (sub)generic identity is very performed quite prominently.

The patterns of identification that are thus developed on the front covers of these novels – in which the authorial identity is dominant, followed by the serial identity and only

<sup>44</sup> Front cover, original edition, *Blood Brothers*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/blood-brothers.htm>

<sup>45</sup> Front cover, original edition. *The Hollow*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515144592>

<sup>46</sup> Front cover, original edition, *The Pagan Stone*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0515144665>

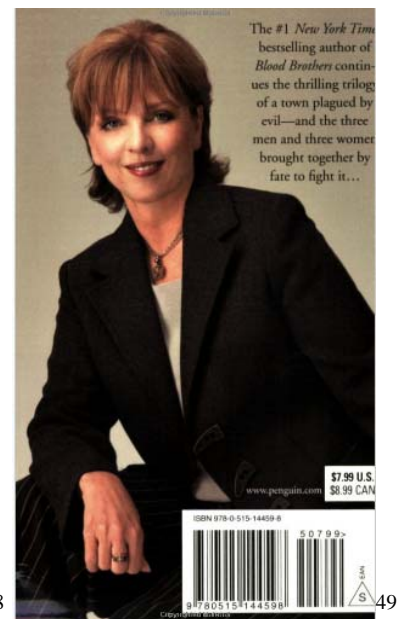
in third instance a vaguely constructed generic identity – also mark the rest of the peritext. Several peritextual evolutions that take place within this period indicate, moreover, the constantly increasing prominence of Roberts’ authorial identity and an often proportional decline in the strength of the peritextual performance of the generic identity. The composition of the back cover, for example, changes in this period. The back covers of earlier novels – such as the installments in the *Born In, Dream, Chesapeake* and *Gallaghers of Ardmore* series – are dominated by texts that contain both a partial summary of the narrative and praising quotes. These quotes are mainly pulled from clearly mainstream sources, such as magazines such *Entertainment Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan* and *People* and newspapers such as *USA Today* and *The Denver Post*. Such clearly mainstream quotes, as I elaborately discussed in part I of this dissertation, performatively indicate these novels are part of mainstream (i.e. not genre specific) popular culture. The summaries, likewise, tend to downplay the romance plot that is nonetheless the dominant narrative in most of these novels and instead focus on other elements of the narrative. This composition of the back cover changes with the publication of the original editions of the *Three Sisters Island* trilogy in 2001. These are the first back covers that are entirely taken up by a photo of Nora Roberts. While the picture is renewed every several years, since 2001 every original edition of a paperback single title trilogy features such an authorial picture on its back cover. This picture reinforces the presence of Roberts’ authorship and strongly connects this authorial identity to the person Nora Roberts whom is represented in this picture.



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<sup>47</sup> Back cover, *Dance Upon the Air*, original edition, 2001. Scan.

<sup>48</sup> Back cover, *Key of Light*, original edition, 2003. Scan.

<sup>49</sup> Back cover, *The Hollow*, original edition, 2008. Scan.

A similar evolution takes place in the inside pages of these books, where Roberts' authorial identity is again and increasingly the most prominent element. Many of these books open with a preface by Roberts on the first page; sometimes this preface is preceded or replaced by a partial summary of the narrative. Often, this preface is followed by a series of pages (usually four or five) filled with quotes praising other single title novels by Nora Roberts (including other installments in the series, novels in other trilogies and standalone singles titles; categories are never mentioned here). Although here and there a quote from a genre-specific source is featured – e.g. *Romantic Times*, *Affaire de Coeur* and *All About Romance* - the majority of these quotes are pulled from clearly mainstream sources. Again, as on the back cover, this clearly and performatively places these novels in a mainstream cultural context and community of readers. While, as I have established in the first part of this dissertation, such pages with praising quotes are conventional in single title romance novels, both the dominance of mainstream sources and the number of pages (never less than four) is somewhat unconventional for the single title romance format and emphasize the within the romance genre exceptional degree of Roberts' popularity and success as an author (and thus the in this generic context unconventional prominence of her individual authorial identity).

In what initially appears to be a somewhat remarkable peritextual evolution these pages with praising quotes abruptly disappear from the original editions of Roberts' single title romance trilogies from the publication of the Keys trilogy in 2003 onward; since then these pages have consistently been missing from these books. While the disappearance of these pages, which essentially lessens the peritextual focus on Roberts' authorial identity, goes against one of the dominant features of the identity that is otherwise peritextually performed in these books, I interpret it also as a maneuver to indirectly raise the cultural status of the identity that is performed by dissociating it from the obviously commercial category of (romance) genre fiction. The pages with praising quotes, which expressly validate the book and/or its author, are namely a typical self-legitimizing feature of popular, and particularly generic, literature which might not only have a self-validating effect but might also indirectly expose its own anxiety about its (perceived) cultural value. In removing these pages, this potentially anxiety-exposing peritextual element disappears and the book takes on less typical features of popular literature or genre fiction.

The oeuvre page that is featured in all of these novels is another peritextual element that undergoes an evolution towards an increased focus on Roberts' authorial identity, although this identity is of course always the focus of the oeuvre page. Whereas in the first trilogies this page is, however, ordered chronologically, in later series – those published in the



original editions of the Keys novels and onwards – the oeuvre page is ordered on the basis of the series to which the novels belong. This new organization of the oeuvre is indicative and constitutive, I find, of the extent to which the concept of a narrative series is increasingly associated with Roberts' authorial identity. The organizing principle of the oeuvre page not only changes in the course of this period, but the length does as well. As Roberts writes more and more novels, the page expands from a single page to up to four pages. Thus Roberts' authorial authority, that is performatively indicated by these pages (cf. part I), increases significantly over time. As is conventional in single titles romances, these oeuvre pages do not include the nearly eighty category romance Roberts has written.

The dominance of Roberts' authorial identity and the novels' serial identity is, finally, continued in the final pages of these novels, which systematically contain excerpts from other novels by Roberts. In most cases these excerpts are pulled from the next installment in the trilogy. In novels that are a trilogy's final installment, other novels by Roberts are excerpted here. Besides an excerpt, these final pages frequently also include a number of advertisements for other novels by Roberts, which again reinforces the focus on Roberts' authorial identity and is indicative of the commercial power of this author name and identity.

Similar tendencies mark the epitexts of these novels, which thus also predominantly revolve around Roberts' authorial identity and the novels' serial identity, and much less so around their generic identities. This is first of all indicated by the review practices that surround these novels. All of these novels are reviewed by the romance fanzine *Romantic Times*, which is an act that does epitextually perform the popular romance generic identity. Like the reviews of Roberts' category romances, and like so many *RT* reviews, these are all raving reviews and Roberts' trilogies consistently receive four or four and half stars out of five. Most of the novels are also awarded the "top pick" label and a number amongst them are nominated for some of the magazine's awards. One of the more remarkable aspects of these review, which as single title reviews are significantly longer than the reviews of Roberts' category romances, is that although they mostly consist of story summary, these summaries often do not predominantly focus on the romance narrative – that is nonetheless dominant in the novels' narrative – but on another story thread. This is for example the case in the reviews of *Born In Shame* and *Sea Swept*.

BORN IN SHAME marks the last chapter of superstar author Nora Roberts' wonderful Concannon Trilogy.

After losing her beloved father, Shannon Bodine now faces the imminent loss of her much-loved mother. Amanda Bodine has kept a shattering secret from her daughter,

which she knows she must confess before it is too late: Years ago, Amanda met and loved Tommy Concannon, but both knew there was no future in their relationship, and when Amanda returned to America, she was pregnant.

Shannon is devastated when Amanda reveals that all she has ever believed about her life is a lie. Bitter words are spoken, and to Shannon's sorrow, her mother dies before she can retrieve them.

Her half-sisters, Brianna Concannon Thane and Maggie Concannon Sweeney, learn of her existence and come looking for her. They find a woman unwilling to accept the love her mother had for Tom Concannon.

Brianna is determined to bridge the gap and manages to get Shannon to visit their homeland. Once in Ireland, Shannon is plagued with vivid dreams.

Concannon friend Murphy Muldoon recognizes, even if she does not, that they have been destined for one another. Does Shannon have the courage to change her dreams and destiny?

The incomparable Nora Roberts brings this magnificent trilogy to a highly satisfactory conclusion with *BORN IN SHAME*, and it is a pleasure to have characters from the previous books developing together (Smith, "Born in Shame.").

In her new trilogy, Nora Roberts writes from a mostly male perspective. The Quinn brothers, Cameron, Ethan and Philip, are legendary in their small coastal Maryland town. With no blood ties between them, they are bound by the love, respect and acceptance their adoptive parents Ray and Stella bequeathed them. When Ray is fatally injured, the brothers return to be at his side. Ray tells them they must open their hearts one more time, for he has taken in one last lost boy, Seth.

Jet-setting, speed-loving Cameron knows nothing about raising troubled 10-year-olds, but it's his job to set up a respectable home life for the four brothers. Anna Spinelli, Seth's caseworker, has her doubts about the Quinns adopting Seth, and she is also worried about the fireworks between Cameron and herself.

When rumors regarding Seth's parentage and Ray's alleged suicide circulate, the brothers band together to fight for their father's reputation and their young brother's life.

This new series promises to be extremely rewarding. Plot threads begun in this novel will unravel throughout the trilogy. The turbulent Quinns are one family you won't want to miss (Smith, "Sea Swept").

These reviews, which are exemplary for the reviews of all these trilogies that appear in *Romantic Times*, focus more on the (sub)plots about the community than on the main romance narrative that is the dominant story in both novels. In doing this they in a way downplay the romance generic identity of these novels and instead emphasize generically other aspects of the narratives. The reviews also explicitly acknowledge the seriality of the novels and represent Roberts as a star author. Many of these novels are also reviewed on romance review websites, such as *All About Romance* and, to a lesser extent, *Dear Author*.<sup>50</sup> Not only genre specific review venues feature discussions of these novels; as the many quotes included in the novel's peritext indicate many of these novels are also quite regularly reviewed in popular

<sup>50</sup> Since *Dear Author* and *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* were only launched in 2005 and 2006 respectively they include relatively few reviews of Roberts' novels.

mainstream review venues such as *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Today* and *The Denver Post*. As I have argued in the first part of this dissertation, such mainstream reviews performatively construct a more mainstream, less genre-specific identity for these novels.

Although these novels win remarkably few Rita Awards – *Born in Ice* is the only novel of these twenty-eight to win such genre specific awards; in 1996 it is awarded the Rita for both Best Contemporary Single Title and Best Romance of 1995 – they are nonetheless very successful. Many of these novels, and all those published since 1999, are *New York Times* bestsellers – including *Born in Fire*, which is remarkable since this is Roberts' first book in this single title original paperback romance trilogy format. In 1998 *Sea Swept*, the first instalment in the Chesapeake Bay trilogy, becomes Nora Roberts' very first number one *New York Times* bestseller when it hits the coveted top spot on this list (*The Official Nora Roberts Companion* 51). In the same year *Rising Tides*, the second instalment in the series, becomes Roberts' first ever novel to *debut* on the bestseller's top spot (*idem*). When *Inner Harbor*, in 1999, also reaches the number one position on this list, it marks the first time that all instalments in one of Roberts' trilogies reach the number one position on the *New York Times* bestseller list (*idem*). This remarkable achievement is indicative of the popularity and success of this type of novel, which combines a strong romance narrative, with both elaborately developed communities and often significant generically other subplots. It is this particular format, remarks Roberts' long-time publisher Leslie Gelbman that has then been crucial in building the exceptional popularity Nora Roberts enjoys as an author.

The paperback trilogies really helped establish Nora's single-title career – she had a lot of success with her previous single titles, but it wasn't until the paperback trilogies that her audience started to really grow and expand. Nora had always written connected books in her category series romances, but it wasn't until the *Born In* trilogy that she brought that interconnectedness over to her single titles. And readers were hooked right away – they loved the characters introduced in *Born in Fire* and followed them to *Born in Ice*, and then *Born in Shame*. And since we had decided to separate the paperback original trilogies from the hardcovers by excluding the suspense element, these books were the first single titles that Nora wrote that focused almost exclusively on the romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine. So her core romance fans (many of whom may not have read her previous single titles because of the emphasis on suspense) crossed over and fell in love with the trilogies. At the same time, Nora was able to play more and more with suspense in her hardcovers, and element that appealed more to traditionally non-romance readers, including men. So her readership really did expand enormously when she was able to attract both romance readers and mainstream suspense readers at the same time, but with two different kind of books (Little, "A Publisher's Journey." 33-34)

Although as far as I am aware no concrete readership statistics are available to prove Gelbman's assessment of the kind of readers that reads these novels, her suggestion that these

single titles, which narratively develop a much stronger romance identity than Roberts' earlier single titles, draw in more core romance readers seems very plausible. Equally interesting is the suggestion here that another type of novel Roberts writes in this period, the hardcover standalone romantic suspense novel, appeals more to non-traditional romance readers, in particular men. The next chapter focuses on this type of book and determines, in particular, to which extent to romance identity that is so prominent in these single titles remains part of the core textual identity performed these other books written by Nora Roberts in this period.

## **CHAPTER 8: NORA ROBERTS 1994 – 2008**

### **ROMANTIC SUSPENSE AND IN DEATH**

#### **1. The Single Title Romantic Suspense Standalone**

A third type of novel Nora Roberts frequently writes in the period between October 1994 and December 2008 is the single title romantic suspense standalone. In this period seventeen such novels are published in a rhythm of at least one every year.<sup>1</sup> In many regards these single titles share characteristics with the single title trilogies published in the same period. Like the trilogies, these single titles generally incorporate and thus further consolidate the developments of the narrative romance conventions that have been on-going in Roberts' oeuvre and the American romance novel at large since the early 1980s. Also like the trilogies, these narratives are characterized by generically hybrid stories, although here suspense instead of paranormal is usually the secondary genre of choice. Finally, as in the trilogies, in these narratives the communities of which the characters are part is an important narrative theme in the story, although this narrative thread is not developed over the course of a number of separately published instalments. In other regards this type of novel, which features romantic suspense narratives that are not part of a narrative series, is much more than the single title trilogy in line with the single title novels Roberts writes in the period between 1987 and 1994. Like these earlier single titles all of these novels feature strong and often quite violent suspense (sub)plots that are an important part of the narrative as a whole. In fact, the narrative entwining of and balance between the ever-present romance courtship plot and this suspense story line, which I argued is somewhat skewed in numerous of Roberts' early single titles, is perfected in these narratives, which are often characterized by seamless combinations of generically different narrative elements. In the following discussion, I briefly focus on each of these characteristics separately. It goes without saying that in these narratives all of these elements constantly overlap and interact with each other. I round off this section with a brief discussion of the paratexts of these single title novels.

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<sup>1</sup> In order of publication these seventeen novels are: *True Betrayals* (1995), *Montana Sky* (1996), *Sanctuary* (1997), *Homeport* (1998), *The Reef* (1998), *River's End* (1999), *Carolina Moon* (2000), *The Villa* (2001), *Midnight Bayou* (2001), *Three Fates* (2002), *Birthright* (2003), *Remember When* (2003), *Northern Lights* (2004), *Blue Smoke* (2005), *Angels Fall* (2006), *High Noon* (2007) and *Tribute* (2008).

## 1.1 Narrative

### 1.1.1 Romance Conventions

Although the suspense plot is always very important in these stories, all of these narratives also incorporate representations of the conventional narrative elements of the popular romance genre. As in the trilogies, these representations are in line with the generic evolutions that have been taking place in Nora Roberts' oeuvre and the American popular romance genre more widely since the early 1980s and generally have a consolidating effect. Thus, these narratives consistently feature, for example, strong, professionally and sexually emancipated heroines, complex but demystified heroes, substantial romance barriers and multiple, often explicit (but never crude) love scenes. The professional emancipation of the heroine is not only consolidated but sometimes taken to new highs in some these novels as heroines are increasingly often represented as having explicitly male jobs – Willa Mercy in *Montana Sky* (1996) is a rancher who runs a vast Montana cattle ranch; Reena Hale in *Blue Smoke* (2005) is a fire fighter and arson investigator and *High Noon's* (2007) Phoebe MacNamara is professional police negotiator – and/or as being professionally very successful – *Sanctuary's* (1997) Joe Ellen Hathaway is world famous photographer, Miranda Jones (*Homeport* (1998)) and Callie Dunbrook (*Birthright* (2003)) are professors, and Sophia Giambelli, in *The Villa* (2001), is a CEO who runs a successful multinational. As in Roberts' single title trilogies published in this period, in these narratives the heroine's job is represented as an inherent part of her identity that is, moreover, often quite extensively explored in the novel. *Montana Sky*, for example, contains numerous scenes that portray Willa in her rancher identity (she mends fences, runs herd, brands cattle and supervises the birth of calves), in *Blue Smoke* Reena's professional identity as arson investigator is a vital part of the (suspense) plot and in *The Villa* the external barrier between Sophie Giambelli and hero Tyler MacMillan has a lot do with her CEO position in the company they both work for. The demystification of the hero is likewise continued. Although none of these novels have heroes that are as prominent in the narrative as the Quinn men are in the Chesapeake Bay series, one of the evolutions that does become more and more common in these novels is that of the representation of the hero as the emotionally most stable and steadfast character. Novels such as *True Betrayals* (1995), *Montana Sky*, *The Reef* (1998), *River's End* (1999), *Midnight Bayou* (2001), *Blue Smoke* and *High Noon* all feature romance plots in which the hero acknowledges he is in love with the heroine much sooner and much easier than the heroine does. These heroes are consistently portrayed as the characters most at ease with romance and romantic love and tend to function as the narrative's

emotional and romantic haven. As I have argued earlier, I consider this representation of the hero as the outcome of an evolution that started with the introduction of hero point of view in the early 1980s; in Roberts' oeuvre this evolution reaches a (provisional?) highpoint in some of these single title narratives.

While these gender-related evolutions in the representation of the romance narrative conventions are, to a greater or lesser extent, present in all of these novels, there are a few novels in which they lead to a (near) subversion of the traditional gender roles that are in many ways still vitally important to the conventional romance narrative. This is most clearly the case in *Montana Sky* and, especially, *Midnight Bayou*. In *Montana Sky* the near-subversion of the traditional gender roles is mostly located in the character of Willa Mercy, who is the main romance heroine in this story. Willa is a tomboy who in many ways is much more in touch with a traditionally masculine than traditionally feminine identity. Having grown up on a cattle ranch in the care of a very harsh, stern and misogynistic father and without a mother, who died shortly after Willa was born, Willa's life is for a long time defined by her trying to be the son her father never had. As the sole girl in a male-dominated world, Willa – who is frequently referred to by the masculine nickname “Will” – adopts a number of traditionally masculine skills; she knows how to fight, she is an excellent hunter, she shoots and slaughters cattle, deer and wildlife, she mends fences, rides rodeo and is one of the best marksmen on the entire ranch. This performance of a traditionally masculine identity is reinforced by Willa's refusal to adopt traditionally feminine traits; she abhors paying attention to her looks, she does not use makeup, and she dresses like a man. Not only in her physical appearance, but also in her behaviour Willa refuses to take up the traditionally feminine gender role. She does not perform traditionally feminine tasks in the home such as cooking, cleaning, washing or any other household chores, but instead excels at traditionally masculine chores outside the home. At the beginning of the narrative Willa is then represented as a heroine who in fact *lacks* a feminine identity. She has no female friends, she does not engage in any traditionally feminine activities and, importantly, she has never developed a sexual or significant romantic relationship. While Willa is never represented as mannish – she is a very beautiful and appealing woman – she is at the beginning of the narrative quite clearly out of touch with her feminine identity. This evolves in the course of the narrative as a major part of Willa's character growth consists of her discovery and claiming of the feminine side of her identity. As Willa gets to know her two half-sisters and develops a romantic and sexual relationship with hero Ben McKinnon, she slowly discovers, accepts and performs a more feminized identity. Although Willa always remains a tomboy at heart, by the end of the novel

her more traditionally masculine character traits are integrated with more traditionally feminine characteristics.

The novel develops a double attitude towards Willa's gender identity that is indicative, I believe, of both the possibilities and the boundaries of gender performance in Nora Roberts' oeuvre, if not the popular romance genre at large. On the one hand the narrative consistently validates many of Willa's more masculine traits and behaviours, which often serve to empower her in the Western and very masculine world in which she moves and in which the novel is set. Willa's excellent ranching skills, for example, make her economically independent, while her exceptional marksmanship repeatedly saves the lives of herself and those she loves. On the other hand the novel problematizes Willa's initial lack of a feminine identity, which is represented as imposed on her by the misogynistic gaze of her now-dead father. This lack plays a role in initially preventing Willa from establishing relationships that, by the end of the narrative, turn out to be amongst the most valuable in her life: the romantic and sexual relationship she develops with Ben – in which she actively claims her sexual identity as a woman – and the bond of sisterhood with her two half-sisters – in which she claims a community identity that eventually becomes vital to her. It is then only in claiming and performing both the masculine and the feminine aspects of her identity, the novel then insists, that Willa is empowered to achieve her happiness – a happiness that is constituted by both the HEA romantic union she reaches with Ben and the intense emotional bond of community and sisterhood she achieves with her sisters. The representation of Willa Mercy's complex and evolving gender identity is indicative, I believe, of both the evolutions the popular romance genre has undergone with regards to the representation of gender roles and the limits of these evolutions: emancipation is empowering and positive but in a generic universe in which happiness is defined as at least in part constituted by the relationship with a romantic and sexual other, claiming the "natural" identity is equally vital to achieving happiness.<sup>2</sup>

The novel in Roberts' oeuvre in which the (near) subversion of the traditional gender roles reaches a remarkable climax is *Midnight Bayou* (2001), a paranormal romantic suspense novel in which the romance hero, Declan Fitzgerald, is repeatedly possessed by the ghost of a young nineteenth century woman. Via this paranormal twist the novel develops a double and often ambiguous gender identity for Declan. On the one hand Declan is portrayed as an innately male, very masculine alpha male hero. His male physical strength is repeatedly

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the case for the subgenre of gay and lesbian popular romance novels, but this is a category of romances that is not located in the prototypical centre of the generic system, but its periphery.



emphasized in the novel's numerous scenes that depict Declan while he is renovating his run-down New Orleans mansion. In these scenes Declan is the epitome of physical male strength and power. This power is matched by his economic power; as the richest character in the novel, Declan stands at the top of the economic food chain. Declan's masculine identity and the various kinds of power he has at his disposal in this identity contrast strongly with the feminine identity and female body that is thrust upon Declan in the ghostly possession episodes. In these scenes Declan experiences a number of innately female physical experiences: pregnancy, childbirth and male-female rape. In these possession scenes Declan then does not simply experience a feminine identity, but in a way a female body is imposed on him.

The contrast between Declan's present masculine identity and the feminine identity and body he experiences in the possession episodes is strong. The various forms of power Declan then has at his disposal in his present masculine identity contrast strikingly with the position of powerless victim that he experiences in the female identity the ghost imposes on him. This contrast is particularly pronounced in the rape scene, in which Declan, like the woman originally being raped, is reduced to an utterly powerless and innately female victim. The novel's overall representation of Declan's gender performance is then, in my reading, ambiguous and somewhat anxious. On the one hand it repeatedly and strongly puts Declan in not simply a feminine, but a physically female position, while on the other hand it anxiously differentiates Declan's masculine identity from this female identity by emphasizing the historical, class, and multiple power differences between the two. With this remarkable approach to, particularly, the hero's gender identity performance, *Midnight Bayou* takes up a somewhat separate position in Roberts' oeuvre; there is no other novel in this body of work in which a similar ambiguous approach to particularly the hero's gender identity is developed. While, as I have indicated throughout this and the previous chapter, many of Roberts' heroes and heroines perform more complex gender identities than the ones imposed by the old conventions of the genre and thus actively partake in the process of refining and complicating the representation of gender identities in the American popular romance novel, novels like *Midnight Bayou* and *Montana Sky* are, in my reading, indicative of the limits of this nonetheless vital generic evolution.

This group of novels, finally, introduces one new element into the representation of the narrative romance conventions in Roberts' oeuvre. In a number of these narratives multiple courtship plots are developed and completed within a single narrative. While such simultaneous courtships are an established and common form in the popular romance genre at

large, the form somewhat remarkably does not appear in Roberts' work until the publication of *Montana Sky*, in which this narrative structure is used for the first time. In this novel, as in the later *Three Fates* (2002), the multiple courtship structure takes an unusual form since the three courtship narratives that are developed in each of these novels take up an equally prominent and important position in the narrative as a whole. This representation of the multiple courtship plot deviates from the much more common form in which one courtship narrative is the primary romance plot and the other courtship plots are secondary to this narratively most prominent romance story. This more common primary and secondary structure is used in the representation of the multiple courtship narratives within one novel in some of Roberts' later novels such as *Sanctuary*, *Carolina Moon*, *The Villa*, *Birthright* and *Northern Lights*. Although these simultaneous romances in some ways of course resemble the trilogy instalments in which the courtship between a later couple is already under way, one quite important difference between the two formats is that whereas in the trilogies the secondary romance is only completed in (one of) the next instalment(s), in these standalone single titles all romance narratives reach the HEA by the end of the novel.

The simultaneous romances that are developed in these novels have two main effects. One is that they increase the narrative presence and performance of the romance generic identity, which is performed two or even three times instead of as single time. In the context of these particular romantic suspense narratives this is not an unimportant factor in the text's narrative identity performance since, as I have already pointed out, the suspense narrative is often quite prominently developed in these novels and is therefore often a strong presence in the narrative identity performance. Since this suspense narrative is not infrequently somewhat at odds with core characteristics of the romance narrative – suspense narratives, full of murder and mayhem, are conventionally narrated in a dark tone that contrasts with the essentially optimistic character of the conventional romance generic narrative – the doubling or tripling of the romance narrative importantly reinforces the performance of this generic identity in relation to the performance of the narrative's other generic identity. This is for example clearly the case in Roberts' *Sanctuary*, a novel in which the primary romance between Jo Ellen Hathaway and Nathan Delaney is complemented by two secondary romances between Jo's brother Brian and Kirby and between Jo's sister Alexia and Giff. While these secondary romances receive considerably less screen time in *Sanctuary*'s narrative than the primary romance between Jo and Nathan, their HEA's are equally heartfelt and help to counter the very bleak and dark atmosphere created by the novel's prominent suspense storyline. This plot revolves around the disappearance of Jo's mother when all three Hathaway siblings were

young children. While it was always presumed their mother abandoned them, in the course of the narrative it is revealed she was in fact murdered and the murderer has returned to stalk, haunt and eventually attack Jo. These events create an exceptionally dark fictional universe when it is slowly revealed that the murderer is Nathan's brother, Kyle, and Nathan has suspected this all along. Although Nathan eventually kills his brother when the latter attacks Jo and Jo subsequently forgives Nathan for keeping his suspicions to himself, the revelation of the connection between Nathan and her mother's killer puts a considerable strain on the HEA Jo and Nathan formally reach. In my interpretation of the novel this strain, which I consider antithetical to the essential optimism and happiness of the conventional romance HEA, is partially countered by the romantic HEA's that both of Jo's siblings also reach. This tripling of the HEA reinforces the notion that this narrative takes place in a *romance* universe in which happiness in the end always and *necessarily* outbalances sadness.

A second effect achieved by the simultaneous narration of multiple courtship narratives is the diversification of the generic concept of romance. Very often in Roberts' novels romance narratives that are developed simultaneously within one novel are represented as being significantly different in tone from each other. This is for example quite clearly the case in *Montana Sky* in which the three simultaneous romances are all quite different. The romance between Tess Mercy and Nathan Torrence is represented as passionate, sexual and initially mainly driven by a combination of like and lust; indicative of this is that Nathan and Tess unapologetically sleep together before they are in love with each other. The romance between Lily Mercy and Adam Wolfchild is narrated in precisely the opposite tone. The representations of their interactions mainly portray these as soft, sweet and loving. Indicative of this is that Adam and Lily not only fall in love with each other, but declare their love to each other before embarking on a very passionate sexual relationship. The romance between Willa Mercy and Ben McKinnon, finally, is narrated in a tone that holds somewhere between the two opposites represented by the two other courtship narratives. Although Ben and Willa's sexual encounters are represented in a more explicit discourse than those between Lily and Adam, these scenes are less sexual than the love scenes between Nate and Tess. And while Willa and Ben are in love with each other by the time they first sleep together, they have not yet openly declared their love to each other. The three romance narratives that are thus developed in *Montana Sky* represent three different kind of romantic relationships, each of which is in line with the personalities that the novel develops for the protagonists. The soft and loving tone that dominates Lily and Adam's relationship, for example, is related to the fact that Lily is a victim of intense sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her ex-husband.

Still overcoming her trauma, Lily is initially very weary of men and believes herself to be unable to ever respond sexually or romantically to a man again. While Adam falls head over heels in love with Lily, he is aware of her trauma and allows their relationship to develop slowly, lovingly and sweetly. Tess, by contract, is characterized as a hard, fast and sophisticated career woman – she is a screen writer in Hollywood – whose unapologetic sexual pursuit of Nate fits her personality. The inclusion of such different but all equally happy romances within one narrative diversifies the concept of romance within the boundaries of a single narrative text both on the fictional level – different characters develop very different kinds of romantic relationships – and the metafictional level – the conventional romance courtship narrative is narratively represented in significantly different ways and tones within the confines of even a single text. The narrative performance of the generic romance identity is then not only enhanced in these double or triple romance narratives, but often also shown to be not simple but complex, not single but multiple.

### 1.1.2 Generic Hybridity

The strong romance generic identity that is thus performed in all of these narratives is always combined with the narrative performance of at least one and sometimes two other generic identities. All of these seventeen novels develop a strong suspense story line which narratively performs the suspense identity. A few novels – namely *Carolina Moon*, *Midnight Bayou* and *Three Fates* – also feature conventional paranormal narrative elements. Besides romance, however, suspense is always the dominant narrative identity. This identity is prominent in these narratives and usually takes up a structural position in the narrative as a whole that is equal in importance to the romance courtship plot that is simultaneously developed.

The strong narrative performance of the generic suspense identity is realized via a number of partially interacting and overlapping narrative strategies that are developed in most of these novels. One of the most important ones is the development of the suspense antagonist or villain as a prominent figure in the novel. This happens in one of two ways. In a few novels the antagonist is a character whose identity is known and who is openly developed as the narrative's villain throughout the narrative. Novels with this plot structure are *The Reef*, *The Villa*, *Three Fates* and *Blue Smoke*. While these novels lack the whodunit plot structure that is conventional in many suspense narratives, they instead put a face and a name on the villain from the beginning of the narrative and often explore the creepy and evil madness that hides behind a polished and smooth appearance. William Van Dyck, the villain in *The Reef*, is a

smooth, slick and very rich businessman whose refined manners and deft charm hide an increasingly apparent madness and obsession that drives him to violence, blackmail, kidnapping and murder. Likewise, *Three Fates*' Anita Gaye – one of the very few female villainesses in Roberts' oeuvre – is a rich, pampered, and cultured widow whose stunning good looks and seeming friendliness hide a killer driven by a mad obsession. The cruelty and coldness with which both of these villains are shown to torture and kill stand in stark contrast to the seeming cultivation and refinement of their lush and lavish lifestyles. This contrast creates very effective villains who fulfil a well-developed role in the suspense plot.

In all other novels the identity of the suspense antagonist is initially unknown; these novels usually develop a variation of the classic whodunit plot in which the protagonists' hunt for the mysterious killer is one of the major plot lines. At the end of the narrative this villain is always unmasked and his identity revealed. Despite the fact that the villain is anonymous and that this anonymity is a crucial plot point in the developing suspense story line, many of these romantic suspense narratives feature scenes in which the killer functions as the anonymous focalizer. These scenes always significantly increase the narrative presence of the villain – who is, quite literally, given a narrative voice – and thus the narrative performance of the suspense generic identity. They usually also have a variety of other effects, depending on their particular characteristics. In some of these narratives these scenes are very brief and depict the villain while he is contemplating the situation. Such scenes are featured for example in *Northern Lights*, a novel in which the suspense story line revolves around unmasking the murderer of the heroine's father. The novel is set in a small and very remote Alaskan village and the narrative's occasional brief dips into the killer's head reveal that he is a member of the small village community in which the hero and heroine live and that he is quite familiar with them. While such scenes leave the anonymity of the killer intact, they significantly augment the narrative tension. Another way in which scenes focalized through the villain's eyes significantly increase narrative tension is when they function as foreshadowing of (possible) future narrative events. This technique is used for example in *River's End*, a novel in which the narrative repeatedly delves into the head of the man who killed heroine Olivia MacBride's mother. These scenes establish the killer's increasing focus on stalking and killing Olivia. Featured with rhythmic regularity throughout the narrative, these scenes constantly up the tension. This reaches breaking point in the story's finale when the killer's self-control snaps and he effectively goes after Olivia in an act that has repeatedly been foreshadowed in the narrative.

Some of these narratives scenes in which the anonymous killer functions as the focalizer depict him while he is perpetrating the crime. These scenes very often include quite graphic depictions of these grisly acts. *Montana Sky*, for example, includes a few haunting and very dark scenes which portray the (still anonymous) killer while he is raping, sodomizing, torturing and killing his female victims. These violent and very graphic scenes represent these acts in gruesome detail. Their disturbing effect is reinforced by the alternation in the focalization which switches between the killer – who, in these moments, is depicted as enjoying these acts and experiencing, among other things, a sexual high – and the (equally anonymous) victim, whose almost unspeakable pain becomes narratively tangible. The extreme contrast between the two focalizations within one scene strongly reinforces the horror of the committed acts. Although the graphic representation of, particularly, sexual violence that is featured in some scenes in *Montana Sky* is rather exceptional in Roberts' romance oeuvre, there are a few other novels which include such vivid depictions. One of these is *Carolina Moon*, in which the narrative's paranormal twist – the heroine has telepathic abilities – is used to further augment the horror of sexual violence. Via her telepathic abilities the heroine, Tory Bodeen, repeatedly experiences the stalking, beating, raping and eventual strangling of several victims at the hands of an increasingly deranged sociopath killer. Multiple scenes in the novel depict the heroine in the telepathic grips of these horrors, which reawaken some of her buried childhood traumas. These scenes, moreover, not only explicitly put the heroine in the position of victim, but frequently also victimize the hero, who numerous times in the novel is forced to helplessly watch while the heroine telepathically experiences nearly unspeakable horrors. While in these two novels these rather graphic depictions of sexual violence are explicitly located within the suspense plot – they are presented as part of the villain's standard *modus operandi* and thus not part of a romantic partner relationship – they have the potential to intertextually resonate with the relatively frequent representation of the figure of the raped heroine in a number of Roberts' other popular romance novels.

While the suspense generic identity is then strongly performed via the relatively prominent narrative presence of the villain, the deft development of suspense-related narrative tension and the fairly graphic and frequent representation of sexual and other violence, my earlier discussions have indicated that these narratives at least equally strongly perform a romance generic identity. Although to an extent the often quite dark and grisly tone of the suspense narratives is antithetical to the more optimistic tone that is conventional of the romance genre, overall most of these narratives manage to balance these two potentially opposing generic identities. This is in part due to the fact that in these narratives, much more

than in many of Roberts' older, pre-1994 romantic suspense single titles, the two generically different plotlines are actively intertwined with each other. There are three main ways in which this narrative entwining is achieved. In many of these novels the suspense plot line creates the situation that requires the romance protagonists to meet each other and, often, also to continue interacting with each other throughout the story. In *Homeport*, for example, heroine Miranda Jones, an international art expert, meets art thief Ryan Boldari when she hires him to track down and steal back a priceless art piece that was stolen from the museum for which she works. This quest, which soon turns deadly, pushes Miranda and Ryan together. Likewise in *Three Fates* all three heroes and heroines meet each other in their dangerous and suspenseful search for statues of the Three Fates. In *Northern Lights* hero Nate Burke and heroine Meg Galloway grow closer together when the frozen body of her murdered father is discovered and he is the newly-appointed local Alaskan cop heading the investigation. Often in such situation hero and heroine share a common goal – Ryan and Miranda want to find the stolen art piece, Nate and Meg want to unmask the murderer, the various heroes and heroines in *Three Fates* want to find the statues and play a nasty trick on villainess Anita Gaye – which helps them overcome part of the barriers that stand between them.

While the suspense plot line is then often one of the narrative forces bringing hero and heroine structurally together, it frequently also constitutes part of the romance barrier. In *Sanctuary*, for example, the fact that hero Nathan keeps to himself his suspicions about the involvement of his brother Kyle in murder of Jo Ellen's mother is a serious Jo's and Nathan's to their romantic union. In *Homeport* the straight-arrow Miranda has serious ethical issues with Ryan's thievery. In *The Reef* the vengeful quest that drives hero Matthew Lassiter to seek revenge on villain William Van Dyck, who killed Matthew's father, is one of the barriers to his romantic union with heroine Tate Beaumont. In *Carolina Moon* the brutal rape and murder of hero's Cade Lavelle's younger sister Hope when they were both children stands between Cade and heroine Tory Bodeen, who was Hope's best friend. Tory's lingering guilt over Hope's murder – the night Hope was killed Tory was supposed to meet up with her but failed to make the secret meeting because she was beaten to within an inch of life by her father – as well as her mysterious connection to the crime – Tory's telepathic abilities enabled her to lead the police to Hope's body before anybody was aware a crime had been committed – is a barrier to the romantic union between the adult Cade and Tory, whose very presence reminds each of one of the worst experiences of their lives.

Finally, in many of these narratives the suspense plot creates situations that stimulate and further develop the emotional and/or physical attraction between hero and heroine.

Protagonists in these stories for example frequently give in their mounting sexual attraction – which is romance narratives is of course always in some way connected to and an element of a deeper-lying emotional connection – after they have lived through a dangerous situation. Sophia Giambelli and Tyler MacMillan in *The Villa*, for example, have resisted their mutual sexual attraction for years, but give into the growing feelings between them right after one of their co-workers is murdered. Life-endangering situations, which occur with some regularity throughout many of these stories and which are particularly indispensable in the narrative's finale – indeed, every single one of these narratives features a finale in which the life of at least one and often both romance protagonists is in danger - often lead not only to heightened sexual awareness, but also emotional insight and growth. In *Montana Sky*'s finale, for example, Willa is kidnapped and threatened at gunpoint by the villain; her life is saved by Ben when he shoots the villain while the latter is using Willa as a bodily shield. This situation triggers Ben's recognition – facing Willa's death makes Ben realize and accept the depth of his love for her –, their mutual declarations of love and their subsequent betrothal. Via these multiple and interacting narrative strategies the romance and suspense generic identities are often quite tightly interwoven with each other in these texts' narrative identity performance.

### 1.1.3 Community

The theme of community, which is pervasive in many of Nora Roberts' other types of books, is developed in different ways and to varying degrees in these single title romantic suspense standalones. While all romance protagonists in these narratives belong to some kind of community, the extent to which this community is represented in the narrative differs significantly from novel to novel. In some novels it is a very prominent theme, in other novels the community is present but not a focus of the narrative and in a small group of still other stories the community is a background presence that generally receives little attention in the narrative.

Novels in which the development of the community to which the characters belong is a prominent story line in the narrative as a whole are *Montana Sky*, *Three Fates* and *Birthright*. The representation of the communities in these narratives closely resembles the development of this theme in some of Roberts' trilogies. As in some of these trilogies, in these novels the active formation of the community is a relative important storyline in the narrative as a whole. This is particularly the case for *Montana Sky* and *Three Fates*, which are – not incidentally – the two novels with three simultaneous romance courtship plots and, consequently, six protagonists. In *Montana Sky* the development of the community revolves



mainly around the narrative's three heroines. Tess, Lily and Willa Mercy are half-sisters who meet each other for the first time after the death of their father, cattle man and ranch owner Jack Mercy. Jack's will decrees that each daughter inherits one third of his vast, multi-million dollar cattle ranch only if the three half-sisters live together on the ranch for a full year. Although the three women resent this arrangement – which seems particularly unfair to Willa, the youngest daughter who has lived on the ranch her entire life and is the only one who can keep it afloat – they all nonetheless agree. An important storyline in *Montana Sky* relates then how these three women evolve from being strangers at the beginning of the narrative to becoming true sisters by the end of the story. Tess, Lily and Willa become first friends and then real family and build a small feminine community in the male-dominated world in which this Western narrative is set. Representing very different kinds of femininity and womanhood in each sister - Tess is a tough Hollywood career woman, Lily is a desperately shy, small-town teacher with a traumatic past, and Willa is a fearless tomboyish cowgirl – the narrative effectively differentiates the notion of feminine identity while it emphasizes that feminine bonds can be developed regardless of these differences. As I have discussed earlier, this feminine community provides an important part of these characters' identity. While this is most obviously true for Willa, who learns to claim and perform an important part of her feminine identity from Tess and Lily, this is a dynamic that to a lesser extent also applies to Lily and even Tess. Several scenes in the narrative portray the three women exchanging knowledge, skills and behaviour – Tess and Lily teach Willa how to dress like a woman and use makeup, Willa teaches Tess and Lily how to shoot and protect themselves, Lily shows Tess and Willa how to make a home cosy, etc. – and thereby establish how the connections that develop between them influence their identity performance. While other, larger communities develop around this core group of three sisters – the narrative includes representations of the community that is constituted by the six protagonists, the even larger community constituted by all people who live on the ranch, and the still bigger community constituted by friends and family who live in the neighbourhood – at the heart of *Montana Sky*'s community narrative lies the story of three women who become sisters.

Such extensive representations of the formation of the community are, however, generally rather rare in this group of novels. In most of these romantic suspense novels the community to which (initially often only one of) the romance protagonists belong(s) is more or less in place at the time of the narrative and while it is represented in numerous scenes throughout the narrative, it is not a focal point in the story. Novels with such a representation of the community theme include *River's End*, *Midnight Bayou*, *The Villa*, *Northern Lights*,

*Blue Smoke* and *High Noon*. This community can be big or small, but is often at its core cosy and close-knit. In *Blue Smoke*, for example, several scenes represent heroine Reena Hale's family as a boisterous, happy, loving community of which Reena is an intricate part and in which hero Bo Goodnight – who comes from a broken home and lacks a family community to belong to – is quickly incorporated. Likewise in *The Villa*, the family Giambelli is mostly a warm, loving and close-knit group as is the family of *High Noon* heroine Phoebe MacNamara. While these communities are generally warm and loving – and provide the protagonist whom is a member with a stable identity – they are often also marked by a tragedy that is often connected to the novel's suspense plot. The restaurant owned by Reena's family was burned down, the Giambelli family business is in trouble and several of the communities' more marginal members – Sophia's estranged father, a friend and co-worker, etc. – are murdered and Phoebe MacNamara's mother suffers from agoraphobia caused by the fact that she and her children suffered through a violent hostage situation in the past. While the representations of community in these single title romantic suspense novels then in certain ways resemble the representations in some of Roberts' serialized category romance novels – these families are also warm, loving, close-knit and play a central role in the protagonists' lives – one of the important core differences is that whereas the category communities are always idyllic, existentially happy and pervaded by true love (think of families like the MacGregors and the Stanislaskis), these single title communities are often represented in a more realistic way. This is indicative, I find, of the fundamental difference in tone between the category and the single title popular romance novel. Whereas the former resembles an idyllic fantasy, the latter is often emotionally more realistic.

While the representation of the community in these standalone narratives – in which it is not a narrative seriality constituting element – does not directly influence the relationship between genre and authorship in the narrative performance of identity in the ways that I have argued earlier it does in serialized category and single title novels, I do believe in a more indirect manner it does play a role in this dynamic. This is due to the fact that over time this typical representation of cosy, close-knit communities grows into one of the characteristic features of Nora Roberts' authorial voice. Increasingly these representations develop into a signature element of Roberts' authorial style and voice that is one of the elements differentiating Roberts' narratives from romance stories written by other authors. In this way, these representations have the potential to significantly stimulate the narrative performance of Roberts' authorial identity in these narratives. Of course, this is an association that develops

over time. As these characteristic representations are featured increasingly often in Roberts' writings, the association intensifies, and therefore also the representation's contribution to the narrative performance of authorial identity.

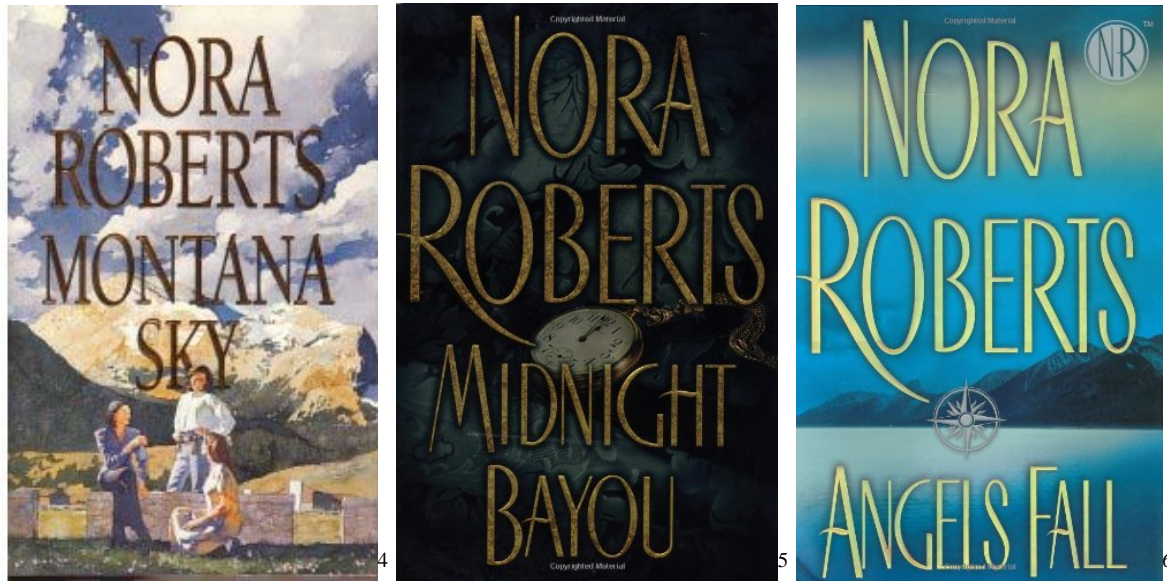
## 1.2 Paratext

The paratexts of these novels is generally characterized by two elements: first, Roberts' authorial identity is the dominant element and second, a number of elements are developed that differentiate these books from the broader category of genre fiction. This latter strategy (implicitly) reduces the prominence of genre identity – be it romance, suspense or any other – in the paratextual performance of textual identity. One of the main peritextual elements to develop this dissociation from the category of popular genre fiction is the hard cover format (complete with paper jacket) in which all of these novels are originally published.<sup>3</sup> As I discussed in part I of this dissertation, one of the conventional elements of genre fiction in America is that these books are originally published in the mass market paperback edition. The hardcover format that is used for the original editions of these novels thus quite strongly differentiates these books from the category of genre fiction to which popular romance belongs.

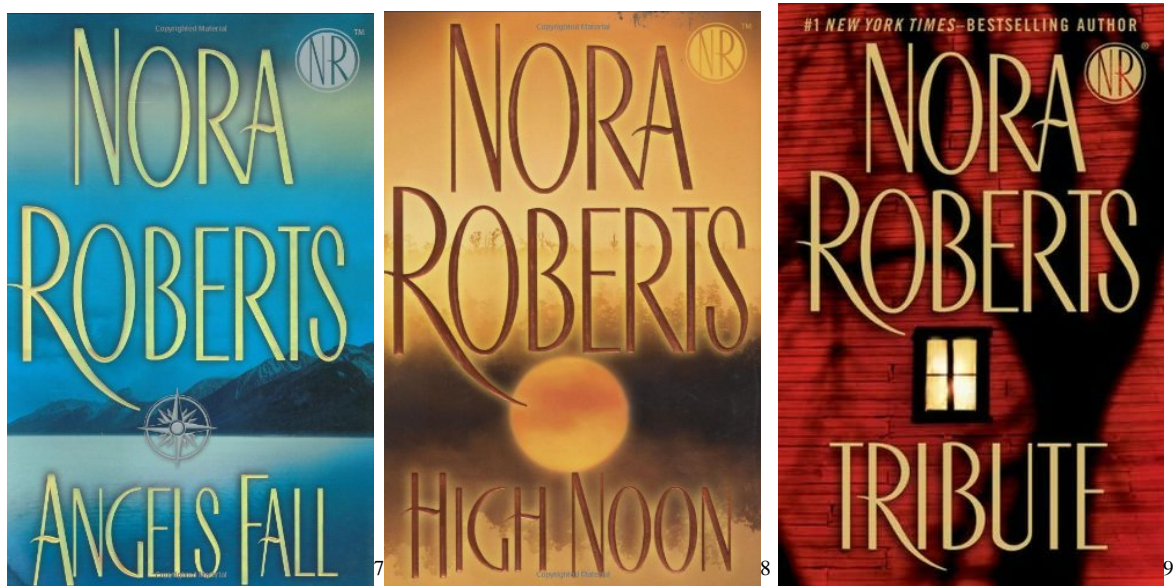
In many other peritextual elements Roberts' authorial identity is the dominant factor. The author name "Nora Roberts" is the most prominent element on the front covers of all of these books.

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<sup>3</sup> These original hardcover editions are systematically followed by the first paperback reissue a year later. These reissues are discussed later in this chapter.



As we can see on these few chronologically ordered examples, the author name is always dominant on the front cover but still increases in size over time in this period. Here too, as on the front covers of Roberts' categories and single title trilogies, strong visual similarities in the printing of Roberts' name across different covers develop the author name "Nora Roberts" into a kind of brand name that implies the existence of a consistent identity across these different texts.



<sup>4</sup> Front cover, original edition *Montana Sky* (1996). Source: <http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/0399141227%3FSubscriptionId%3D0ACM1RC83GP83JK10M02%26tag%3Dspeculativefic05%26linkCode%3Dxm2%26camp%3D2025%26creative%3D165953%26creativeASIN%3D0399141227>

<sup>5</sup> Front cover, original edition *Midnight Bayou* (2001). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0399148248>

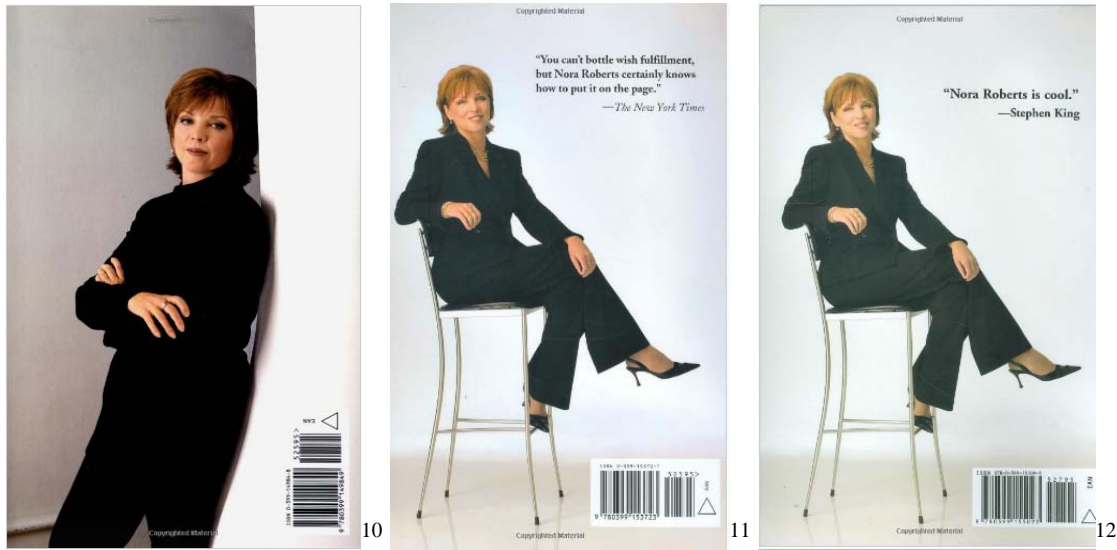
<sup>6</sup> Front cover, original edition *Angels Fall* (2006). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0399153721>

<sup>7</sup> Front cover, original edition *Angels Fall* (2006). Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0399153721>

<sup>8</sup> Front cover, original edition *High Noon*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/edition/?isbn=0399154345>

The novel's title is the only other prominent item on these front covers. While some of these titles have generic associations – *Montana Sky*'s Western generic identity is clearly referenced by its title, and titles such as “sanctuary” and “blue smoke” might create suspense associations – generally these front covers are marked by the absence of elements that perform a clear-cut or obvious generic identity.

The same is true for the novels' back covers, which are taken up by a picture of Roberts.



As we can see in these examples, sometimes a single and soberly designed quote accompanies the visually dominant picture of Roberts. These few quotes are indicative (and slightly constitutive, perhaps) of Roberts' changing position in American (popular) culture. The back cover of *Angels Fall* (2006) is adorned with a quote in praise of Roberts that is pulled from *The New York Times*. This newspaper is not only thoroughly mainstream, but also one of America's most respected and critical quality newspapers. The fact that Roberts' work is not only discussed in this paper but, as this quote indicates, praised<sup>13</sup> (more on that below) is a strong indication of Nora Roberts' rising status, visibility and fame in American mainstream culture. Moreover, since contemporary popular romance novels are conventionally not reviewed in the *New York Times*, this quote implicitly also differentiates the novel from the popular romance generic identity – a differentiation that is, of course, not in line with the generic identity that is strongly performed in the book's narrative. While the *New York Times*

<sup>9</sup> Front cover, original edition *Tribute*. Source: <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/r/nora-roberts/tribute.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Back cover, *Birthright*, original edition, 2003. Scan.

<sup>11</sup> Back cover, *Angels Fall*, original edition, 2006. Scan.

<sup>12</sup> Back cover, *Tribute*, original edition, 2008. Scan.

<sup>13</sup> The exact quote is: “You can't bottle wish fulfillment, but Nora Roberts certainly knows how to put it on the page.”

quote dissociates Roberts from the notion of genre fiction altogether, the explicit attribution of the quote “Nora Roberts is cool” to Stephen King on the back cover of *Tribute* (2008), very strongly associates this particular novel and Roberts’ author name and the authorial identity with the horror genre for which King is famous. That King – a male author mainly known for his work in horror, a genre that is conventionally probably as associated with men as the romance genre is with women – is used to endorse Roberts here is also one of the elements that indicates these novels are targeted at a potentially male – and, therefore, likely not romance – reader.

The traditional partial summary of the narrative is usually placed on the inside flap of the cover’s paper jacket. These summaries usually focus on the suspense plot in the narrative and, while they most often mention both protagonists, the impression is strongly created that the romance narrative (if it is mentioned at all) is a minor subplot in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> While this again downplays the peritextual performance of the romance generic identity, the very brief biography of Roberts that is usually printed on the back inside flap does open by mentioning Roberts is “the first writer to be inducted into the Romance Writers of America Hall of Fame.” This associates the novel with the popular romance genre – an association that is constructed via the authorial identity: this novel is not presented as a romance novel (to the contrary, even) but Roberts is presented as a romance author – even as it singles out the author as one of the most successful figures in this generic group.

The inside pages of these books differ in tone from the other books that have so far been discussed in this dissertation. They do not feature pages with praising quotes in the front nor do they contain advertisements, excerpts or summaries of other novels in the back. Instead, several plain white pages are inserted here and there – a peritextual convention of non-genre literature – which create a decidedly more sober and serious tone. The oeuvre page, which is included, lists Roberts’ other single title novels in chronological order. Unlike oeuvre pages in the later trilogies, it does not acknowledge the different series to which some of these works belong. Roberts’ category romances are, of course, not mentioned. The final pages of

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<sup>14</sup> For example: “Sanctuary. Successful photographer Jo Ellen Hathaway thought she had escaped that house long ago. It was where she spent her loneliest years, after her family was shattered by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of her mother. Yet the sprawling southern resort off the coast of Georgia continues to haunt her dreams. Even more haunting are the pictures that someone is sending her – strange close-ups, candid shots, and finally, the most shocking and heartbreaking portrait of all: a photograph of her long-lost mother ... naked, beautiful and dead. Now Jo realizes that it is time to return to Sanctuary. The island inn, run by her bitterly estranged family, brings back painful memories as she is enmeshed once again in the troubled relationships she has struggled so long and so hard to forget. With the help of one man, she must learn to the truth about who is stalking her – and about the tragic past that torments her family still. But the menace that drove Jo back to Sanctuary has followed her there. And those on the island will learn that Sanctuary may be the most dangerous place of all...” (inside flap, original edition, *Sanctuary*).

these novels are simply left blank. It is then clear that the obvious commercialism that marks many of the peritextual elements of Roberts' categories and trilogies is downplayed in these books. This further differentiates and dissociates these books from the category of genre fiction, which is a popular but also always an openly and explicitly commercial kind of literature.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas generic identity is then significantly downplayed in the peritext of the original editions of these romantic suspense single titles, some of their epitextual elements – which unlike the peritext are not developed by a single instance – do more strongly perform the various generic identities that are performed in the novels' narratives. This is for example the case in the ways in which these novels are reviewed. The books are reviewed by both genre specific – romance – review venues and mainstream review instances. The romance specific review venues include *Romantic Times*, *All About Romance* and various others. *Romantic Times* assigns almost all of these novels the generic label “romantic suspense”. While these reviews are again raving – all novels receive four or four and half stars out of five, most of them are elected as “top picks” and numerous of these novels are nominated for various *RT* awards – the story summaries of which they predominantly consist usually focus on the suspense story line and minimize the romance courtship plot. This is somewhat remarkable given the fanzine's strong romance profile. While the appearance of these reviews as such is then an epitextual element that performs a romance identity, the content of these discussions might somewhat counter this effect and replace the dominant romance identity with a dominant suspense identity. Unlike in the peritext, the identities predominantly performed in these reviews are generic. The various mainstream review venues that feature reviews of these novels include, remarkably, *The New York Times*, which in March 2001 publishes a rather appreciative review of *The Villa* (Maslin) and in October 2004 a generally negative one of *Northern Lights* (Schappell).

The effect of these reviews on the epitextual performance of, in particular, generic identity is ambiguous. On the one hand, as I have pointed out before, the appearance of these reviews as such tends to dissociate these novels – and Roberts' authorial identity more generally – from the category of popular genre fiction (which is only very sparsely reviewed in the *New York Times*) and certainly from the popular romance generic identity, since popular romance novels (unlike some other genres of popular fiction) are conventionally not

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that the peritext of these books is not developed with commercial purposes in mind. Of course it is, but part of the (commercial) strategy of these (more expensive) books is to downplay the obvious commercialism of genre fiction and aim for more a more sober and classy tone instead.

reviewed in this quality newspaper – it is then not a coincidence that Roberts’ only two novels to (so far) have been reviewed by *The New York Times* are two of her romantic *suspense* novels. On the other hand, the content of both reviews strongly emphasizes the generic, popular and commercial aspects of the particular novels under review and Roberts’ oeuvre more in general. Both reviews discuss some of the stereotypical elements of the romance genre – the perfect heroes and, particularly, the sex scenes are mentioned and bemoaned –, briefly consider the suspense plot and stress the mass appeal of Roberts’ novels. While Maslin’s review of *The Villa* develops a somewhat reluctant appreciation and understanding of Roberts’ success with the mass public – this is the review which coined the quote about wish fulfilment that would go on to be featured on the cover of many of Roberts’ books –, Schappell’s discussion of *Northern Lights* is less appreciative and sometimes downright condescending towards Roberts’ work and the romance reader Schappell presumes it is aimed at.

Classic suspense this isn’t. Roberts’s plots are far more simplistic than those of big guns in the mystery genre like Ruth Rendell and P.D. James. ... In “Northern Lights”, the suspense hovers over a much less complicated question: not whether Burke will track down the murderer but whether Burke and Meg will fall in love, despite their differences and against their better judgment. And that leads to another question: How many more pages need to pass before there’s another sex scene? Roberts’s fans may claim to be reading “Northern Lights” to find out whodunit, but they’re keeping the lights on late for the promise of heaving bosoms and consciousness-altering orgasms. ... Part of the appeal of Roberts’ work is its way of playing variations within an established, reassuringly predictable theme. From one novel to the next, you can be sure the sex is going to appeal to a certain sort of reader: a woman who dreams of a man who is tough but sensitive, a man who’s most comfortable in jeans and likes to chop wood but also listens to Norah Jones and appreciates a good cabernet. (Schappell)

In sequences such as this one, this review articulates several of the stereotypes that surround the popular romance genre in contemporary American culture. It equates the romance genre almost solely with the sex scenes that conventionally appear in its narratives, it assumes all romance readers are the same (“a certain type of woman”) and it presumes to know what *really* interests this reader in her reading act: she might claim she reads for the suspense plot – which is not so very subtly presented as a plot structure much more worthy of the reader’s interest – but in reality she “keep[s] the lights on late for the promise of heaving bosoms and consciousness-alternating orgasms.” Not only is the tone of this statement condescending – the reviewer puts herself in a position of superiority over the romance readers she is stereotypically describing by assuming she knows what motivates these readers, even if they



make claims to the contrary – but studies such as that by Janice Radway indicate that it is also a too simplistic and incorrect description of the romance reading act.

Both Maslin's and Schnappell's discussions of Roberts' oeuvre stress the popularity and explicit commercialism of this body of work by prominently mentioning the dizzying numbers that are indicative of the Roberts' exceptional popularity. Schnappell contrasts Roberts' commercial success with the author's lack of critical recognition ("So what if other writers are honoured with prestigious awards and are assured lofty place in the literary canon? You don't see a lot of bumper stickers that say "Id rather be reading an essay by Susan Sontag."") and, describing Roberts as a "one-woman romantic-suspense-novel mill" who "cranks out half a dozen" novels a year in the opening sentence of the review, implicitly constructs Roberts' prolific output as mechanical ("mill") and therefore (again implicitly) lacking in artistic quality. Overall, the effect of these strategies is that both the actual text being reviewed and Roberts' oeuvre more generally are strongly represented as genre fiction: popular, commercial and determined by generic narrative structures. Even as the act of review an sich thus performatively differentiates these novels from the popular romance genre, the reviews' content performatively reinforces this identity in, particularly in Schnappell's piece, an unappreciative way.

Other epitextual elements further inscribe these novels in the popular romance genre. Five of these novels win a Rita Award: *Carolina Moon* (2001), *Three Fates* (2003) and *Remember When – Part I* (2004) for "Best Romantic Suspense", *Birthright* (2004) for "Best Contemporary Single Title" and *Tribute* (2009) for "Best Novel with Strong Romantic Elements". In 1995, when *Hidden Riches* wins for "Best Romantic Suspense", Roberts is inducted in the RWA Hall of Fame for the second time, this time for her achievements in the subgenre of romantic suspense. This spot in the RWA Hall of Fame as well as the four other Rita's for this subgenre Roberts subsequently still wins are indicative and constitutive of the increasing association between Roberts' author name and authorial identity and the subgenre of romantic suspense, for which she becomes increasingly well-known. A bit like the typical representations of family and community, this blend of romance and suspense then develops over the course of this period into one of the characteristic hallmarks of Roberts' authorial identity.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> While both elements develop into characteristic elements of Roberts' authorial identity, an important difference between them is of course that whereas Roberts' typical representation of family and community is more or less idiosyncratic, the blend of romance and suspense is a subgeneric entity that exists separately from Roberts.

These novels are not only successful in the romance community, but also in mainstream American culture, which is indicated by the bestseller status the vast majority of these titles achieve. From 1999 on each new novel by Roberts that is published reaches the *New York Times* list, which implies that at least twelve of these seventeen novels are bestsellers. In 1996 *Montana Sky* becomes Roberts' first hardcover bestseller (*The Official Nora Roberts Companion* 50); in 2001 *Midnight Bayou* is Roberts' first hardcover to reach the coveted number one spot on the list (idem, 56). Barely a year later, in 2002, *Three Fates* is Roberts' first hardcover to debut on this top spot (idem, 57). In the same week in April 2002 the paperback reissue of *The Villa* occupies the number one place on the paperback list, which makes the first time novels by Roberts' simultaneously occupy the top spot on both the hardcover and the paperback bestseller list. According to Denise Little and Laura Hayden, editors of *The Official Nora Roberts Companion*, "[o]nly a handful of authors can claim that honour, and no other romance author has ever accomplished this feat to date [i.e. 2003]" (idem). By the early 2000s Roberts' massive success in the romance community has expanded to mainstream American culture, where she is increasingly considered a figure of note. Roberts' massive mainstream success – which is unprecedented in the contemporary romance community – leads her to take up an exceptional position in this generic community. While her popular success then puts her squarely beyond the confines of the popular romance genre, both Roberts' work and Roberts herself strongly and performatively maintain the bonds with this community. Not only do Roberts' narratives continue to incorporate the core conventional elements of the popular romance genre and thus perform a popular romance identity. But Roberts herself also remains actively involved with RWA – attending all of its national conferences save one – and she often speaks up for the genre in the mainstream media who are increasingly interested in her.

## 2. J.D. Robb and the In Death Series

The part of Roberts' oeuvre in which this popular romance identity, which is a (narrative) constant in *all* her other works, is perhaps least (conventionally) developed, is the In Death series, published under the pseudonym J.D. Robb. Between October 1994 and November 2008 twenty-six novels appear in this still on-going and open-ended series.<sup>17</sup> As I have

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<sup>17</sup>In chronological order of publication these are: *Naked in Death* (7/95), *Glory in Death* (12/95), *Immortal in Death* (7/96), *Rapture in Death* (10/96), *Ceremony in Death* (5/97), *Vengeance in Death* (10/97), *Holiday in Death* (6/98), *Conspiracy in Death* (4/99), *Loyalty in Death* (10/99), *Witness in Death* (3/00), *Judgement in Death* (9/00), *Betrayal in Death* (3/01), *Seduction in Death* (9/01), *Reunion in Death* (3/02), *Purity in Death* (8/02), *Portrait in Death* (2/03), *Imitation in Death* (08/03), *Divided in Death* (1/04), *Visions in Death* (8/04),

pointed out before, the narratives in the In Death series are a generically hybrid mix of suspense, science fiction and romance. The series is set in the New York City of 2058-61 and revolves around the lives of protagonists Eve Dallas, a homicide cop, and her lover and later husband, Roarke<sup>18</sup>, an extremely rich businessman. The main plot of each separate novel in the series follows a homicide case that Eve and her colleagues are working on; this case is launched at the beginning of the novel and solved by the end of the story. The narrative serial connections between the different instalments in the series are mainly developed via the fictional world and the various characters these narratives have in common. The series as a whole follows the lives of protagonists Eve and Roarke and an ever-expanding cast of secondary characters that mainly consists of a number of the protagonists' friends and colleagues. While in each separate narrative the main focus lays on the suspense plot that details Eve's police investigation, as a whole the series essentially revolves around the characters and the different kind of relationships they establish with each other.

The most important relationship that is developed in the In Death series is without a doubt the romantic union between Eve and Roarke, who meet each other for the first time at the beginning of the series' first novel *Naked in Death* (1995). By the end of the series' second instalment, *Glory in Death* (1995), the relationship between Roarke and Eve has reached the conventional romance HEA, which is institutionalized in by their marriage that takes place at the end of the third novel, *Immortal in Death* (1996). All other novels and novellas in the In Death series thus take place in what could be considered Eve and Roarke's romantic post-HEA. As I discuss more extensively below, as a series the In Death novels are then perhaps Nora Roberts' most extensive and intensive exploration of the concept of the post-HEA and its relation to the conventional romance narrative that precedes it and from which it is the inevitable product. While the romantic relationship between Eve and Roarke is one of the series' main focus points, numerous other relationships – romantic and otherwise – are developed and extensively represented in these narratives as well. One of the series' most important on-going plot lines is precisely the slow but steady development of a complex community of friends and co-workers that grows around core couple Eve and Roarke. Both in this extensive and often emotionally nuanced representation of the development of a

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*Survivor in Death* (2/05), *Origin in Death* (7/05), *Memory in Death* (1/06), *Born in Death* (11/06), *Innocent in Death* (2/07), *Creation in Death* (11/07) and *Strangers in Death* (2/08). Additionally, four In Death novellas are published in this period, each of which appears in an anthology accompanied by novellas by other writers: *Midnight in Death* (published in an *Silent Night*, 11/99), *Interlude in Death* (published in *Out of this World*, 6/01), *Haunted in Death* (published in *Bump in the Night*, 4/06) and *Eternity in Death* (published in *Dead of Night*, 10/07).

<sup>18</sup> No distinction between a first and a last name is made for this character, which is always simply known as "Roarke". The name then seems to function as both his first and last name.

community around the romantic couple and in the elaborate exploration of Roarke's and Eve's romantic relationship – during a time that formally qualifies as their post-HEA – the In Death series reaches the status of Nora Roberts' *magnum opus*.

My discussion of the In Death series adopts the structure I have used in previous sections of this and the previous chapter. That is, I first consider the ways in which the narratives in the series incorporate the conventions of the popular romance genre. My discussion subsequently focuses on the issue of generic hybridisation in these stories. This section is followed by an analysis of the elements constituting the novels' narrative seriality and this piece is rounded off, finally, by my analysis of the novels' paratexts. It again goes without saying that elements that are discussed separately here – romance, generic hybridity, serialisation – of course continuously interact and overlap in the narratives themselves.

## 2.1 Romance Conventions

In the course of the In Death series a number of conventional romance courtship plots are developed. By far the most important of these plots is the romance that develops between the series' protagonists Eve Dallas and Roarke. The conventional elements of their romance narrative occur in the first three books in the series. The futuristic society in which these narratives are set is described and defined at the beginning of the series first instalment, *Naked in Death*; further elaborations on these descriptions are featured in almost all subsequent novels in the series. The first meeting between Eve and Roarke also occurs in this novel when Roarke becomes the main suspect in the homicide investigation Eve is conducting. While from the moment they first meet both characters are immediately and very strongly attracted to each other, Roarke's suspected involvement in the murders functions as a substantial barrier to their union. Eve and Roarke nonetheless develop a sexual and emotional relationship. Multiple other barriers stand in the way of a happy union, however. While Roarke's suspect position in the current investigation Eve is conducting is an important but temporary external barrier – that is removed after a while when Eve proves Roarke's innocence – the internal barriers that both Roarke, and particularly Eve bring to the table are much more substantial. The most important barrier between them is that Eve is unable to deal with their developing feelings for each other. This inability stems primarily from Eve's traumatic past; the narrative slowly reveals that as a young child Eve was the victim of systematic and horrifying sexual and physical abuse. This experience has left her with deep

emotional scars that are reawakened in, particularly, her emotional relationship with Roarke.<sup>19</sup> Another substantial barrier between Eve and Roarke is Roarke's shady past and still ongoing criminal activities; while he is innocent in the murder investigation Eve is currently heading, some of his current business ventures are not on the up and up. Roarke's criminal connections and liberal views on some of these businesses strongly clash with Eve's innate belief in the public justice system for which she works. Despite these substantial barriers standing between Eve and Roarke develop a strong sexual and emotional relationship. By the end of the narrative related in *Naked in Death*, Roarke realizes he is in love with Eve and declares his love to her. Eve is unable to reciprocate.

While in *Glory in Death* an entirely new suspense plot is launched, the novel picks up the threads of the romance courtship where *Naked in Death* left off. Roarke is portrayed as very understanding and respectful of Eve's emotional traumas, but her inability to reciprocate his declaration of love is nonetheless increasingly grating. Eventually, about a third into the narrative, this conflict bursts out and Eve and Roarke split up over her inability to commit to him emotionally. The romance plot enters the moment of ritual death phase in which particularly Eve is, as is conventional, often associated with the metaphor of death: she is pale, she can't sleep, she can't eat, she can barely function and feels "like something is broken inside" (*Glory*, 122). While in many romance novels the moment of ritual death takes up a relatively brief amount of the narrating time, here it is drawn out over more than sixty pages. It comes to an end when Eve realizes she loves Roarke and finally tells him so; her declaration of love fells the most important barrier between them and from that moment onwards the true love that exists between Eve and Roarke is *never* fundamentally questioned again in the series. At the end of *Glory in Death*, Roarke proposes to Eve. While the novel ends with the question unanswered, the opening sentence of the subsequent instalment - "Getting married was murder" (*Immortal* 1) - confirms Eve accepted his proposal. Throughout this narrative preparations for the wedding are ongoing and the novel ends on the morning of the couple's wedding day. Eve and Roarke effectively tie the knot off-screen in between the third and fourth novel in the series, the latter of which opens with scenes of Eve and Roarke on their honeymoon. In all subsequent novels in the series Eve and Roarke are

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<sup>19</sup> It is somewhat remarkable that while Eve is portrayed as being very deeply and severely emotionally scarred by her traumatic past throughout the entire In Death series - this is a very prominent aspect of her personality and identity that the narratives in the series consistently return to - her sexual functioning and identity are relatively unscathed. While before Roarke Eve only very, very rarely engaged in sex - and then only in the form of one night stands - her trauma does not strongly influence her sexual behaviour. Unlike other raped heroines in Roberts' oeuvre (like Cassie Dolin in the MacKade series and Nell Channing in the Three Sisters Island trilogy, for example), Eve is then able to sexually function quite normally from the beginning of the relationship with her romantic partner.

husband and wife. Thus, a courtship narrative incorporating all conventions of the popular romance genre is developed over the course of the first two (possibly three, depending on where we locate the betrothal) In Death novels.

While the romance courtship narrative between Eve and Roarke is by far the most significant and most extensively portrayed romance plot in the series, it is not the only one. Over the course of the subsequent novels a few other conventional romance plots develop between secondary characters. The most elaborate of these secondary romances takes place between Delia Peabody, a fellow homicide cop who is initially Eve's aide and later her partner, and Ian McNab, another fellow cop. Like the development of Eve's and Roarke's romance, the narration of the courtship between Peabody and McNab is developed over several instalments in the series. They first meet in *Vengeance in Death*, the novel in which McNab is introduced. In this novel McNab and Peabody are shown to initially butt heads, which in the popular romance genre is a conventional sign of underlying sexual attraction. After a while they give in to their strong attraction and begin a sexual relationship. But various barriers – amongst these their inability to commit emotionally to the relationship and misplaced jealousy on both sides – drive them apart and they break up. During their time apart they both try to date other people, but eventually they recognize their feelings for each other and officially start a committed and exclusive relationship with each other. When McNab is seriously injured in *Purity in Death* this leads him to confess his love to Peabody. She reciprocates and eventually they move in together. While Peabody's and McNab's courtship narrative includes almost all conventions of the romance genre – there is the first meeting, the attraction, the barrier, the moment of ritual death, the recognition and the declaration – they are currently not (yet) betrothed and their love is less than that of conventional romance couples construed as certainly everlasting. In many ways the McNab and Peabody romance functions as the “light” version of the Eve and Roarke romance which is not only much more prominent in the narrative, but also portrayed as emotionally more intense. Two other romantic unions develop between secondary characters in the course of the series – one between Mavis, Eve's best friend, and her lover Leonardo and one between Louise Ditmayo, a doctor who becomes a friend of Eve and Roarke's, and Charles Monroe, a male “licensed companion” (i.e. prostitute) whom Eve meets in her first investigation and reluctantly befriends – but neither of these courtships are extensively portrayed in the narration of the series and instead mainly take place off-screen.

While narrative romance conventions are then clearly present in many of the In Death novels, these works' narrative performance of the popular romance identity is nonetheless, I

argue, not a straightforward matter. This performance is problematic for a number of reasons. One is that no single In Death novel contains *all* popular romance conventions. Instead, the romance plots play out over the course of two or more separately published instalments.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the narrative performance of the popular romance identity depends on the novels' narrative seriality, which, I have argued earlier, is an (indirect) performance of authorial identity. Other ways in which the narrative performance of the popular romance identity is complicated or problematized in these narratives has to do with the fact that with regard to the series' main romance narrative – the one between Eve and Roarke – the vast majority of the series takes place in a time in the fictional world that (at least formally) qualifies as post-HEA. Indeed, the In Death series is a thorough exploration of the concept of the post-HEA. While this is a narrative phase that is represented in many of Roberts' other novels, the representation of the post-HEA in the In Death novels is significantly different from these other representations in numerous ways and these differences, I argue, complicate the series' narrative engagement with the popular romance identity.

While, as I have remarked before, the true love that is definitively established between Eve and Roarke by Eve's first declaration of love in *Glory in Death* is never fundamentally questioned again and in fact reinforced in each instalment of the series, the representation of Eve and Roarke's post-HEA depicts their relationship as anything but free of conflicts and barriers. In almost every instalment of the series Roarke and Eve confront a conflict or barrier. Often, these conflicts are relatively superficial and easily resolved. Roarke, for example, frequently finds it difficult to deal with the Eve's tendency to put herself in harm's way during an investigation and this often leads to minor tension between them. As this example indicates, the source of these superficial conflicts is often their deep love for each other and these conflicts then usually rather paradoxically function as a positive, romance-confirming force. However, some of the more substantial barriers that stood between Eve and Roarke from the very beginning also reappear in many instalments in the series and complicate their relationship. The most important of these is their differing views on justice, morality and ethics. In almost every In Death narrative Eve and Roarke clash over the fact that while she firmly believes in the public justice system, he essentially finds his personal sense of justice more important than what society considers just. Since for both of them these beliefs make up a fundamental part of their identity, their opposing views on this to them fundamental matter complicate their relationship and frequently form a barrier between them. This issue comes up

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<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the Peabody-McNab courtship narrative takes the cake as it takes over ten novels between their first meeting and their moving in together.

in almost every novel in the series; often it revolves around the extent to which Eve is willing to use illegal electronic means provided by Roarke to obtain crucial information that enables her to catch the guilty criminal. While Roarke has no moral qualms about circumventing the law to serve justice, Eve continuously struggles with the ethical implications of these acts.

In some narrative in the series their opposing views on these matters drive a serious wedge between Eve and Roarke that puts a considerable strain on their romantic union. This is the case in *Vengeance in Death* (1997) and even more so in *Divided in Death* (2004). In *Vengeance* Eve discovers that Roarke committed cold-blooded murder in the past as an act of revenge against five thugs who kidnapped, beat, raped and murdered a young girl close to Roarke as a form of retaliation against Roarke, who refused to enter into a criminal deal with them. While Eve understands Roarke's feelings in the matter – having been a victim of abuse as a child herself, this is a situation that resonates strongly with her – the discovery nonetheless puts a serious strain on their relationship since Roarke's personal quest for murderous vengeance – which he continues to stand behind – fundamentally goes against Eve's belief in the public justice system (but not, importantly, her own sense of justice). In *Divided* their opposing views almost lead to a break-up of their marriage. Eve discovers that the physical and sexual abuse she sustained at the hands of her father was being monitored by a secret government agency who were surveiling him for his possible connection to the criminal underworld. Although the government agents were aware of Eve's inhumane suffering, they did not intervene so as to safeguard their operation. When Roarke learns about this, his rage is immense and he develops plans to murder all people involved in the investigation. Eve cannot accept this personal vengeance and for most of the narrative both their emotional and sexual relationship is severely strained. In both novels these conflicts are resolved and barriers overcome by recognitions and love. In *Vengeance* Eve realizes she loves Roarke for who he is and his violent past is a fundamental part of him; in *Divided* Roarke abandons his murderous plans for revenge when he realizes he would only be serving his own needs and not Eve's. In both narratives this recognition that fells the barrier strongly reinforces Eve and Roarke's love for each other and brings them even closer together. For example, in *Divided*, after Roarke tells Eve he is abandoning his vengeful quest, she not simply reconfirms their love, but emphasizes it has intensified:

[Eve:]“You think I don't know, that I don't understand what that cost you. But you're wrong.” She couldn't keep her voice steady, gave up trying. “You're wrong, Roarke. I do know. There's no one else in the world who would want, who would need to kill for me. No one else in the world who would step back from it because I asked it. Because I needed it.”



She turned, and the first tear spilled over. “No one but you.”...

“I never in my life expected anyone would love me, all of me. How would I deserve that? What would I do with it? But you do. Everything we’ve managed to have together, to be together, this is more. I’ll never be able to find the words to tell you what you just gave me.”

[Roarke:] “You undo me, Eve. Who else would make me feel like a hero for doing nothing.”

“You did everything. Everything. Are everything.” ... Love, that strange and terrifying entity, was the answer after all. “Whatever there is, whatever happened to me, or how it comes back on me, you have to know, you need to know that what you did here gave me more peace than I ever thought I’d find. You have to know I can face anything knowing you love me.”

“Eve.” ... “I can’t do anything but love you.” (316-317)

Scenes such as this one establish that in re-overcoming the barrier, the romantic union between Eve and Roarke – which, importantly, is strained in these narratives but never *fundamentally* broken up – is reinforced and intensified.

Eve and Roarke’s post-HEA is thus marked by a pattern in which the protagonists are repeatedly forced to re-confront some aspect of the core barrier between them but also always re-overcome this barrier and thereby reconfirm and reinforce their love. In this regard Eve and Roarke’s post-HEA, which is much more elaborately depicted than any other couple’s post-HEA in Roberts’ oeuvre, differs significantly from other post-HEAs, which do not tend to feature re-enactments of the barrier but are usually characterized precisely by the idyllic romantic peace and intimacy of the couple without barriers between them. In my interpretation this aspect of the In Death series’ representation of the post-HEA has an ambiguous effect on its performance of the popular romance identity. On the one hand it problematizes this identity performance because it breaches not only the utopian character of the post-HEA, but also its implied and in many of Roberts’ romances narratively realized romantically idyllic character by establishing that a barrier that is seemingly overcome can come up again and again. On the other hand, it reinforces the performance of the romance identity because in this post-HEA the core dynamic of the romance generic narrative – the overcoming of the barrier that leads to true love – is systematically re-enacted: Eve and Roarke always find each other anew and their love is a changed, stronger love for having overcome the barrier again.

## 2.2 Generic Hybridity

While the narrative performance of the popular romance identity in the In Death series is a fuzzy and somewhat complicated matter, other generic identities are strongly and more

unambiguously performed in these narratives. The single most dominant identity is suspense. Each narrative in the *In Death* series is first and foremost a police procedural. The main plot in each instalment revolves around a homicide case that Eve and her team of fellow cops, usually assisted by Roarke, are trying to solve. These plots develop according to a similar pattern in each novel. The plot and the case are launched at the beginning of the narrative when Eve and Peabody are called to the crime scene where the first body is found. This crime scene provides a number of both clues and unresolved puzzles that they need to solve in order to find the killer. In solving these puzzles Eve and Peabody use a variety of investigative techniques and strategies, which include forensics, electronic data gathering and suspect interviews. While Eve and Peabody are assisted in this by a team of specialists, Eve always heads the investigation and often solves the majority and/or the most significant of puzzles. This investigation is usually accelerated when a second, third and sometimes fourth body turns up. While each body provides more evidence, each murder also ups the stakes and puts Eve and her team under more pressure to find the culprit. This almost always culminates in a finale in which Eve (often accompanied by Roarke) directly confronts the killer who then attempts to kill one or both of them. This type of suspense plot is the dominant narrative thread in all *In Death* novels; it incorporates a lot of the conventional elements of the detective/suspense genre and thus strongly performs this generic identity.

Science fiction is another generic identity that is present in the *In Death* narratives, which are set in the not too distant future of the mid twenty-first century. This futuristic setting is set up in the series' first novel and further developed and expanded in all subsequent instalments in the series. The most significant differences between our world and the futuristic world of the *In Death* series are technological and political. In the *In Death* world cars fly, interplanetary travel is common, food is prepared by an "autochef" (a microwave-like device that replaces manual cooking), everybody has a "link" (a device that resembles a smartphone<sup>21</sup>) and all electronic data exchange is policed by "Compuguard". The *In Death* series is also set in a decidedly more progressive and liberal society in which guns are banned, prostitution is legalized, parenthood is professionalized ("professional parenthood" is a viable career option for both men and women), and same-sex relationships and marriages are common. This futuristic setting is often used in the suspense plot. Eve and her colleagues

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<sup>21</sup> While the "link" no longer feels very advanced in 2011, when the series was initially launched in 1995 this device had more of futuristic cachet to it. This change in futuristic cachet can be observed in a number of elements of the *In Death* world and in part has to do with the fact that in the fifteen years since the series was initially launched our present world – and particularly its technological advances – have in part caught up with the advances of the *In Death* world.

often use futuristic technologies in their homicide investigation, for example. The characters' daily lives are also permeated by particularly the technological advances of the age. While in this way the science fiction generic identity is clearly performed in these narratives, it is never the dominant identity but always simply part of the setting.

While both romantic suspense and romantic science fiction are common, well-established subgenres in the romance genre, the particular narrative blend of police procedural, science fiction and romance that marks the In Death series is uncommon – perhaps even unique for Roberts/Robb – and makes this series stand out from the various genres of which it is part. To that extent, the narratives' unique generic hybridity not only fractures the generic identity performance but also indirectly performs the Roberts/Robb authorial identity.

### **2.3 Seriality**

The In Death series is marked by a relatively strong sense of narrative seriality. While this seriality does not influence the suspense plots that drive each narrative – each of these plots is, as I remarked earlier, strictly contained to a single instalment – it does impact the various courtship plots, which develop over the course of several instalments in the series. The most important form of narrative seriality in the In Death series is, however, constituted by the shared characters. Roarke and Eve are the two main characters in each instalment of the series. There are, furthermore, a number of secondary characters that, from the time they are introduced, are also featured in each subsequent instalment. These include Summerset (Roarke's majordomo and in effect his father figure), Mavis Freestone (Eve's best and for a long time only friend), Peabody, Mira (the department's forensic psychiatrist and later close personal friend of Eve who throughout the series increasingly acts as a mother figure to Eve), Ryan Feeney (Eve's mentor and former partner who is now connected to the Electronics Crimes department), Ian McNab (another e-detective and Peabody's romantic partner), Nadine Frust (a journalist Eve reluctantly befriends in the course of the series) and Commander Jack Withney (Eve's direct superior). Besides these protagonists and secondary characters there is a large cast of tertiary characters who make regular appearances in the course of the series but are not featured in every novel. The narrative seriality that ties the different instalments in the In Death series together is constituted most significantly by the relationships that develop between all these characters on the one hand – as has become common in Roberts' work, over the course of the series a sense of community develops

amongst these characters – and, on the other hand, by the evolution some of these characters go through in the course of the series. This latter form of narrative seriality in which characters develop and grow significantly over the course of the series – which most explicitly applies to Eve, and to a lesser extent to Roarke and also Peabody – is less extensively developed in many of Roberts’ other (shorter) series. As might be expected, these narrative threads of course overlap and interact. That is, a character’s development and growth is related to the development of a community of which they are and vice versa.

The *In Death* character who develops most in the course of the series is its protagonist Eve Dallas. At the beginning of the series Eve’s identity is almost solely defined by her job as a homicide detective. The picture of Eve that is drawn in *Naked in Death* portrays a character whose entire being revolves around her profession. She has almost no life outside of her job; she has no partner, no family and only a single friend – Mavis – with whom she sometimes hangs out. Eve is all about her job. *Naked in Death* already suggests that Eve’s extreme focus on her job is related to her traumatic past. While initially Eve remembers little about what happened to her when she was a child, in the course of the first three novels in the series her developing relationship with Roarke reawakens these memories as increasingly intensive and frequent nightmares. Eventually Eve remembers not only that it was her father who systematically abused and raped her when she was between the ages of four and eight years old, but also that in a fit of rage she killed him with a kitchen knife while he was raping her and breaking her arm. Bloodied, battered, raped and severely traumatized Eve wandered the streets of Dallas, where she was eventually found in alley and ended up in the state-run system. As a defence mechanism Eve developed amnesia and managed to block out these events for more than twenty years until they resurface in the build-up to her wedding to Roarke. Eve’s exceptional dedication to and focus on her job is clearly portrayed as an attempt to overcome and conquer this past. This is most obvious in *Conspiracy in Death* (1999), the eighth instalment in the series, in which Eve temporarily loses her badge when a fellow cop is killed and she is wrongly suspected of the murder. Several scenes in the novel clearly portray how the loss of her job destroys Eve’s identity and temporarily turns her back into the helpless, powerless victim she was as a child – a development noted by both Roarke and Mira:

[Mira:] “While others may be outraged or sympathetic or have any variety of reactions to what happened to day, you and I are perhaps the only ones who fully understand what this has done to her. To her heart, her sense of self. Her identity.”

[Roarke:] ‘It’s destroyed her.’ ... ‘I’ve seen her face death, her own and others’. I’ve seen her face the misery and fears of her past and the shadows that cover pieces of it.

I've seen her terrified of her own feelings. But she stood. She gathered herself and she stood up to it. And this, this departmental procedure, has destroyed her." ...  
 [Mira:] "This suspension, the suspicion, the mark on her record is not just a matter of the job and procedure to Eve. Her identity was taken from her once before. She rebuilt it and herself. For her, this has stripped her of it again, of what and who she is. What she needs to be." (*Conspiracy*, 234-36)

As Mira observes here, Eve has developed her identity from scratch – waking up with complete amnesia as a traumatized eight year old, she completely lacked an identity – and has made her profession the sole focal point of the identity she built.

While throughout the series Eve's profession remains absolutely paramount to her identity, she is shown to slowly develop other aspects of her identity as well. Obviously, she develops an identity as Roarke's partner and wife. Although this is not a role that comes naturally to Eve – while she loves Roarke passionately, showing this love remains difficult for her throughout much of the series – as she and Roarke grow closer and closer and their love intensifies the identity that this coupledness provides becomes crucial to Eve's character. In private she also becomes increasingly comfortable openly performing this identity; for example, while Eve initially finds it very difficult to tell Roarke she loves him, over the course of the series she becomes more and more used to openly talking about her feelings for him. As an innately private person, Eve often struggles more with the public performance of her identity as Roarke's wife, a role in which she is regularly expected to attend public functions since Roarke is one of the world's richest and most important businessmen. Eve takes up this role reluctantly, something that is consistently portrayed as amusing Roarke. While Eve is wary of public displays of affection – a running gag in the series that often creates humoristic scenes – their coupledness and her identity as Roarke's romantic other are strongly performed in the growing community of their immediate friends and colleagues, who are all shown to be strongly aware of this intense and identity-defining romantic relationship. In this representation the series often strikes a delicate but successful balance between insisting, on the one hand, that both Eve and Roarke have vital identities separate from their relationship – that, in other words, their identities do not coincide with their romantic union – and emphasizing on the other hand their intense unity and profound connection to each other. While neither Eve nor Roarke is portrayed as being defined by their relationship, their relationship becomes increasingly vital to their identities in the course of the series.

Another aspect of Eve's identity that is slowly, and in many ways comically, developed over the course of the series is her embodiment of traditional, even stereotypical aspects of feminine identity. Like a number of Roberts' other heroines (Willa Mercy, Althea

Grayson, etc.) Eve does not pay any attention to her looks, her body, and her clothes, she has no female friends besides Mavis, and she has no sexual relationship except for the very rare one night stand. While Eve reclaims her sexual identity as a woman in her relationship with Roarke, other parts of her feminine identity are developed in the context of the community that develops around Eve in the course of the series. She very slowly and often reluctantly develops friendships with several women, most important Peabody – who comes to be a kind of sister to Eve –, Nadine Frust, Louise Ditmayer and Charlotte Mira (the psychiatrist who increasingly also takes up the role of Eve's mother figure). While all of these female characters are consistently portrayed as strong, emancipated women – they all have important and satisfying careers that bring them not only economic independence, but satisfaction and a strong sense of selfhood and most of them have or develop happy romantic relationships in the course of the series – their feminine identities are implicitly differentiated from and even opposed to Eve's in that they are, unlike her, interested in for example clothes and make-up, love pampering and enjoy social gatherings. Over the course of the series this type of feminine identity is all but thrust upon Eve by her female friends as they e.g. arrange for spa treatments and girls' nights out. While these scenes are often narrated in a humoristic way – Eve's continued reluctance towards and bafflement over these traditional feminine traits creates many funny situations and dialogue exchanges – the underlying development of Eve's more traditional feminine identity and, most importantly, her becoming part of a happy feminine community is overall presented as empowering and positive.

A third thread of Eve's identity that is quite elaborately portrayed in the *In Death* narratives is her identity as a female victim of rape and abuse. While the figure of the raped heroine is one that is rather common in Roberts' oeuvre, the portrayal of Eve differs in some ways from these other characters. Eve's trauma is more severe and horrifying than that sustained by any other of Roberts' character. By the time Eve remembers most of her past – which is deep into the series – it becomes clear that her father beat, raped, abused and neglected her for years on end. Eve also remembers that he did this as a kind of training for her to become a prostitute and that her parents never gave her a name, instead treating her as a kind of pet or slave. This inhumane treatment has of course deeply traumatized Eve and left many scars. This trauma is not only severe, but the narrative representation of Eve's memories and nightmares is often quite explicit. Several novels in the series contain horrifying scenes which represent Eve being raped by her father; her subsequent animalistic murderous attack on him is also repeatedly portrayed. Such scenes narratively realize Eve's rape and are part of what differentiates the representation of the rape trauma in the *In Death*

series from the treatment of this topic in many of Roberts' other novels, where it is less explicitly portrayed. While, as I have remarked before, Eve's sexuality suffers little from this trauma, the *In Death* series rather extensively portrays the severe emotional impact the trauma has on Eve. While Eve is consistently characterized as an incredibly strong woman, in some situations she has panic attacks and she habitually suffers from intense nightmares. Although the evolution of Eve in the *In Death* series consistently emphasizes that she is increasingly successful in overcoming this trauma and refuses to let her childhood victimization define her – Eve not only claims another identity, but is generally a happy person who has, the series repeats again and again, overcome her childhood and against all odds made herself into a professionally and personally successful woman – it also indicates that the trauma never really disappears. It is an inherent part of Eve's characterization and regularly comes to the surface. While it does not define Eve's identity, neither is it represented as something that can ever really be solved or erased. In this regard too the portrayal the rape trauma in this series differs from its representation in some of Roberts' other works, where it is often implied that in overcoming the trauma heroines as it were also erase it.<sup>22</sup>

The character of Eve Dallas then puts an interesting spin on the figure of the “new” romance heroine that is developing in the genre in the course of the 1980s and 90s. Eve certainly incorporates a number of this figure's central attributes; she is a strong woman with an important professional identity who is both economically and emotionally independent from others. Her character is also indicative of the pitfalls of (over)developing a single aspect of this identity. While the series continuously celebrates Eve's strong professional identity, the single-minded fixation on her job that initially characterizes her is shown to be problematic. Eve becomes a happier, richer and more fulfilled character over the course of the series as she develops more aspects of her identity. Interestingly, some of the aspects of Eve's identity that are initially underdeveloped – a more traditional feminine identity, a romantic identity, etc.– are identity aspects that tended to characterize romance heroines in the early 1980s. To this extent Eve's character then plays havoc with romance stereotypes as her character's journey is not one of increasing independence, but one of increasing feminization and emotional co-dependence. In this regard the character of Eve Dallas is indicative of the long journey the romance heroine has undergone between the early 1980s and mid 1990s – a journey that she in part undertook in Roberts' oeuvre.

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<sup>22</sup> Think for example of heroines such as Cassie Dolin in the *MacKade* series and Nell Channing in the *Three Sisters Island* trilogy. Both heroines suffer from intense traumas before and in the course of the their narrative, but it is no longer portrayed as a significant element in the post-HEA portrayals of these characters.

While Eve's character plays a little havoc with romance stereotypes, the character of Roarke incorporates several of these stereotypes in one figure. On the one hand Roarke is a classic alpha man hero. He is tall, dark and dangerous. The narratives consistently represent Roarke as the single most powerful figure in the *In Death* universe; this power is defined as physical (he is an exceptional fighter and skilled killer), economic (he is the richest man on and off Earth), political and social. He is masculine, dangerous, lethal and capable in almost everything he does. He is a very skilled and shrewd businessman, a suave and charming man, a good and loyal friend and above all a devoted partner to Eve. Roarke is incredibly protective of Eve (a trait of his that repeatedly creates tension between them and that Roarke is shown to struggle to suppress) and displays possessive tendencies towards her that occasionally give rise to outright jealousy. While the figure of Roarke then incorporates several of the core characteristics that classic alpha hero – he is in this sense the very embodiment of the alpha man as conceptualized by Charles Boon in the 1930s – these are consistently combined with a number of traits that are unconventional for the alpha man romance hero. Roarke is, for example, a very nurturing figure. He is very regularly shown to be taking care of Eve, who during an investigation has the tendency to neglect basic necessities such as sleep and food. Roarke often feeds Eve – though thanks to Summerset and the “autochef” he never cooks –, he makes sure she sleeps when she is exhausted, he tends the various bumps and bruises she regularly has, he soothes and comforts her when she wakes up from a nightmare and he buys her clothes. Indeed, unlike Eve Roarke is interested in clothes and appearances – though never in an effeminate manner – and throughout the series he is often shown to pick out outfits for her. While Roarke is depicted as enjoying taking care of Eve, this softer aspect of his identity is almost exclusively developed in relation to Eve. While Roarke's love for Eve softens him up, he is never an effeminate or weak figure. To the contrary, Roarke is depicted as being capable of great and ruthless violence – a tendency he displayed for example in the numerous murders he committed in the past – and intense rage – a trait that comes up in relation to Eve's past. It is, in my interpretation, precisely the combination of these somewhat contradictory character traits – he is both ruthless and caring, violent and soft – that make the character of Roarke such a successful romance hero.<sup>23</sup>

Although Roarke, like Eve, evolves over the course of the series, his character growth is less extensive than Eve's since his identity is generally more stable than hers. Like Eve,

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<sup>23</sup> That Roarke is indeed a successful and much-beloved hero in the romance community is indicated by the fact that he regularly tops *All About Romance's* annual poll of best romance hero of the year; he also takes up the number one spot on the website's two general “best hero” polls conducted in 2006 and 2009.



Roarke is a self-made man who has escaped a traumatic youth and against all odds made something of himself. However, whereas Eve is portrayed as still struggling with the past on a day-to-day level, Roarke has generally coped with his past and left it more or less behind. His identity is then generally steadier than Eve's. The biggest changes Roarke goes through probably occur at the beginning of the series, when his budding romance with Eve change Roarke's outlook on life. Having lived on the wrong side of the law for a long time, Roarke is deeply shocked to find himself falling in love with a dedicated cop. While his relationship with Eve and his deep love for her force Roarke to sever his criminal connections, the most significant change Roarke undergoes is his emotional dependence on Eve. Before he meets Eve, Roarke is presented as a loner. While he has a lot of acquaintances and very regularly develops a sexual relationship with a woman, apart from Summerset no one is emotionally close to Roarke. The profound love Roarke comes to feel for Eve is shown to rock him to his core and fundamentally change his experience of life. This is a notion that is established at the beginning of the series and further developed throughout, as both Eve and Roarke are portrayed as always growing closer and closer. Over the course of the series Roarke also develops friendships with some of Eve's colleagues. While these are represented as sincere, the narratives insist over and over again that no one is as significant to Roarke and understands him as well as Eve does. This is another way in which the character of Roarke – as the hero who is only truly connects to the heroine – and the In Death series in general incorporate conventions of the popular romance genre that mark it as *fantasy* I argued earlier the genre fundamentally is.

Another way in which narrative seriality is realized in the In Death series is in the story about the community that develops around Eve and Roarke in the course of the series. At the beginning of the series this community is nonexistent. While Eve and Roarke both have acquaintances and colleagues neither of them has family and neither of them belongs to a community. Over the course of the narrative this changes as they not only make friends, but their friends also connect to each other. The most important relationship Eve develops in the series besides her romantic connection to Roarke is her relationship with Peabody. This relation goes through a significant evolution. Initially Peabody is Eve's temporary and later permanent lower-ranked aide whom Eve is training to become a detective. Their hierarchical relationship – reinforced by Peabody's long-standing professional admiration of Eve – slowly develops into a friendship. While Eve is often uncomfortable sharing her inner turmoil with Peabody, their professional relationship and friendship nonetheless steadily grow closer and closer. When Peabody makes the detective rank, she and Eve become official partners (though

as a Lieutenant Eve still outranks Peabody). By this time their personal friendship has become solid and Eve cements her emotional trust in Peabody by telling her about her traumatic past – Peabody thus becomes the first person apart from Roarke and Mira in whom Eve confides. This act is not only indicative of the growing emotional closeness between Peabody and Eve, but also of Eve's own emotional growth and development.

Several other friendships develop throughout the series, though none of these is as close or as extensively portrayed as the one between Eve and Peabody. When Eve's and Roarke's friends start developing friendships with each other – Mavis and Peabody become good friends, for example – the *In Death* narratives are more frequently marked by a real sense of community. Often, this community develops around the suspense plot and the professional identities of most characters. Their collaborations to catch the killer are often very intensive and time-consuming and tend to create close bonds between the different members of the investigative team. It is, for example, not uncommon for all members of Eve's team to spend the night at her home during the most intensive moments of the investigation so as to maximize the time they are working together. Increasingly, however, Eve and Roarke are also shown to connect to this community outside of their professional identities. They for example attend a barbeque at Mira's house, Eve and Peabody organise a bachelorette party for Louise on the evening before her wedding to Charles, Eve, Roarke, Peabody, McNab and Charles and Louise all attend a cosy dinner party at Louise and Charles' place, etc. While such happy community scenes – which in tone somewhat resemble the typical family scenes that are a staple in Roberts' other serialized narratives – are still rare in the *In Death* narratives, in the later novels in the series they are increasingly part of the narrative. These scenes are depicted as the outcome of a long and nuanced process of community building that is narrated over the course of the entire *In Death* series.

While over the course of the *In Death* series an important and tangible community has then developed around Eve and Roarke that resembles (the development of) communities that are present in many of Roberts' other serialized narratives, there are nonetheless some important differences. A first difference is that, in part because the *In Death* series is open-ended, this community development is an on-going process without, currently, a clear endpoint. Unlike in Roberts' other narratives, where the process of community building comes to an end in the series' final instalment in which the developed community has normally reached a happy, balanced, harmonious state, in the open-ended *In Death* series the community remains in evolution and does not reach a definitive equilibrium. A second important difference is indirectly connected to this first characteristic, is that in the *In Death*

community that are no children. Eve and Roarke, the central couple around which the community is built, have no children nor are they planning on having any in the immediate future. This is something that sets Eve and Roarke significantly apart from all other post-HEA couples in Roberts' narratives, which, as I have discussed earlier, usually do have children. The topic is discussed a number of times by Eve and Roarke throughout the series and these discussions make clear that neither of them feel ready to reproduce. While Roarke does explicitly formulate the wish to one day start a family with Eve, this time has not yet come. Eve is much more reluctant towards the notion of having children and is shown to think of it as something in the distant future. Eve and Roarke's shared desire to postpone having children is, I argue, an indication of the fact that both their own identities and the identity of the community of which they are part – and which they would further develop by having children – are not (yet) stabilized and harmonious. In all Roberts' other narratives parenthood is equated with the definitive consolidation of the identity of both the parents' and the community of which they are part. While these identities might be in flux throughout the courtship narrative, once Roberts' romance protagonists become parents their identities and the identity of the community they constitute is represented as stable, harmonious and happy. In this way, as the second generation novels indicate, these couples provide their children in turn with happy and stable (community-driven) identities. In the *In Death* series both forms of identity consolidation – for Eve and Roarke and for the community of which they are part – have not (yet) been reached. This is, I think, a function of the fact that it is an open-ended series and that, as I have indicated in this discussion, one of the driving narrative forces in the series is the further development and expansion of the identities of its protagonists and its core community.<sup>24</sup>

This postponement of parenthood for Eve and Roarke is, finally, one more way in which the performance of the romance identity is complicated in this series. Whereas in Roberts' other series the HEA that is reached at the end of the romance is, in the narrative depiction of the post-HEA, shown to coincide with not simply marriage but also the building of a family, in the *In Death* series these different steps in the romantic union are very explicitly differentiated from each other. While Eve and Roarke are firmly located in the post-HEA throughout most of the series, they are equally firmly depicted as not being ready and able to take up the role of parent because they lack the stable identity that, in Roberts' *happy* romance universes, parents are shown to need in order to provide their children with happy

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<sup>24</sup> This interpretation is supported by the fact that Roberts herself has often said that Eve's pregnancy – something that fans often ask for – would put a definitive end to the series.

childhoods. Instead, Eve's and Roarke's post-HEA consists of a repetitive partial re-enactment of the core dynamic of the romance courtship – they run into and overcome barriers time and time again – in a process that is represented as consistently strengthening their romantic union. In this depiction the notion of the HEA, which I have argued throughout this dissertation is one of the most crucial elements of the popular romance genre, is then thoroughly complicated. It is in this complication, I now suggest, that the series' ambiguous and complex relationship with the popular romance genre is in part narratively performed. And yet, as my discussion of the series' paratext now demonstrates, the *In Death* novels are quite often used as popular romance novels in the romance community.

## **2.4 Paratext**

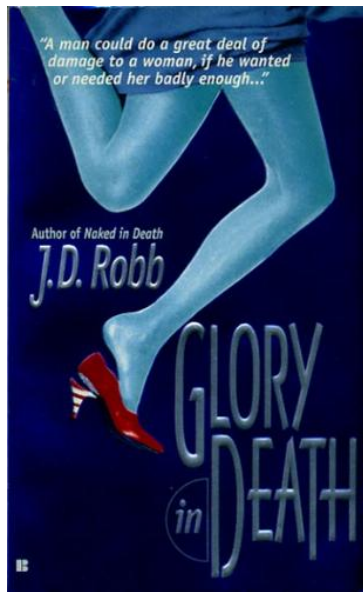
The paratextual performance of authorial and generic identity and the relationship between these two in the original editions of the *In Death* novels is complicated by two factors. First, there is of course the fact that the author name "J.D. Robb" is a pseudonym of the author known as Nora Roberts. While the Robb pseudonym might initially seem to operate separately from the Roberts identity, my analysis of the paratexts of the original editions of these novels indicates that even before Roberts officially comes out as Robb in 2001, the connection between the two separate author names is paratextually acknowledged, if not emphasized, in these books. This implicitly turns the Robb pseudonym into a subset of the authorial identity that resides under the author name "Nora Roberts" from the beginning of the series onwards. A second complicating factor is that, as my discussion of the narrative characteristics of the *In Death* series has established, these texts narratively perform at least three different generic identities – suspense, romance and futuristic science fiction; to an extent this generic hybridity is also paratextually acknowledged.

The following discussion makes a strict distinction between the original editions of the *In Death* novels published before and after 2001; it first considers the paratexts of the original editions of the eleven novels published between 1995 and 2001 and then goes on to paratextually analyze the fifteen novels published in the series between 2001 and 2008.

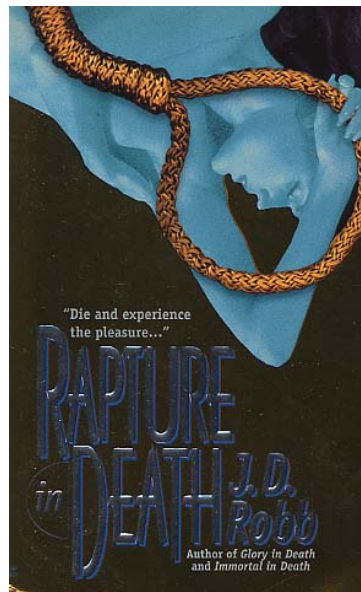
### **2.4.1 J.D. Robb before 2001**

All first eleven novels in the *In Death* series are originally published in the mass market paperback format, which, as I have remarked before, marks them as genre fiction in the

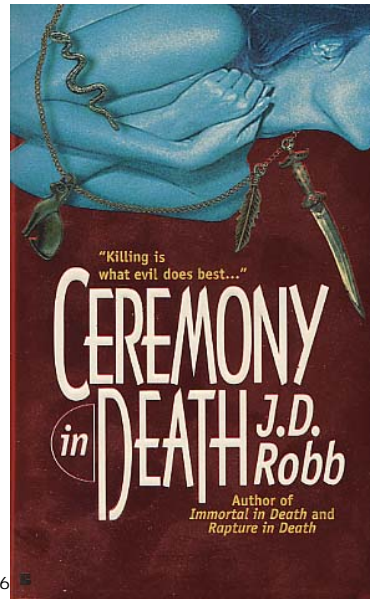
United States. The front covers of these editions most prominently perform a suspense generic identity.



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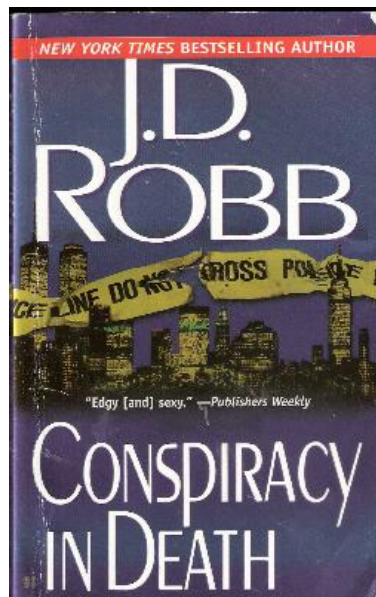
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The dark colour schemes, the imagery, the prominent title with the word “death” and the suggestive tag lines (“Die and experience the pleasure...”, “Killing is what evil does best...”) most clearly create a suspense identity. The romance and futuristic science fiction identity that are narratively performed by these novels are not part of this peritextual zone. The novels’ seriality is recognized on these covers by the similar design style, composition, titles (“in death”) and the explicit printing of the titles of previous instalments in the series on the cover. While the author name “J.D. Robb” is not a focus on these front covers of the first seven instalments in the series, from the publication of the eighth instalment, *Conspiracy in Death*, onwards the Robb name becomes a more prominent aspect of these covers, which adopt a new design.

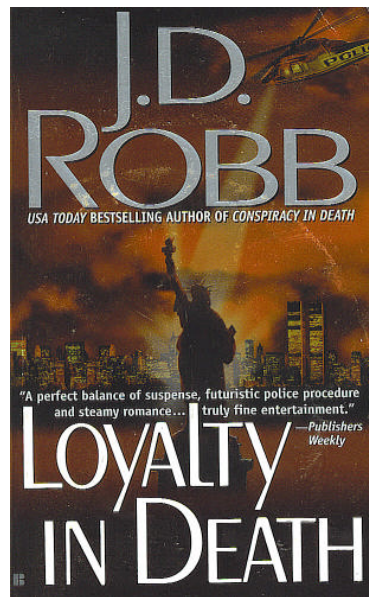
<sup>25</sup> Front cover, original edition *Glory In Death*. Scan.

<sup>26</sup> Front cover, original edition *Rapture In Death*. Scan.

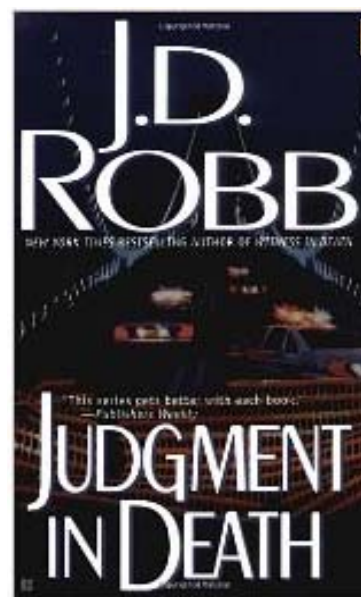
<sup>27</sup> Front cover, original edition *Ceremony In Death*. Scan.



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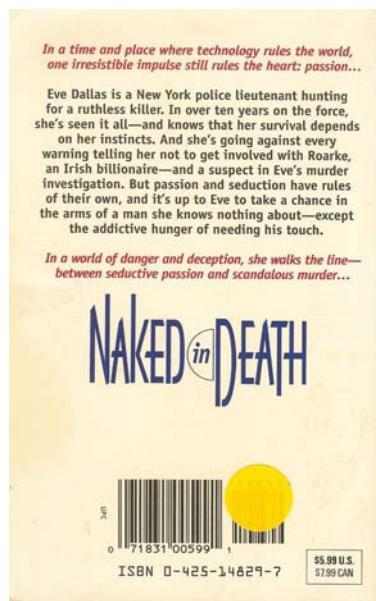
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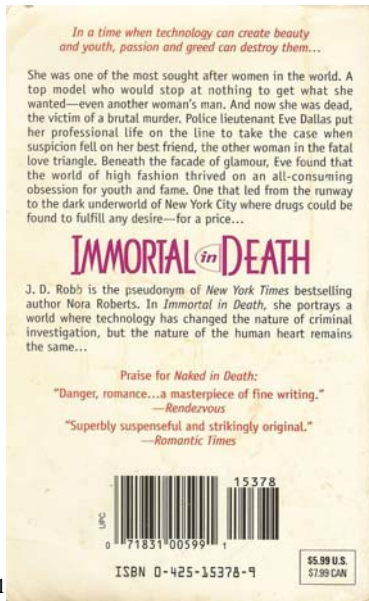
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While these novels still clearly perform a suspense identity – that is strongly urbanized in these cases – the author name “J.D. Robb” is a much more prominent element in these compositions. This is both indicative and constitutive of the increasing success and fame of the Robb name.

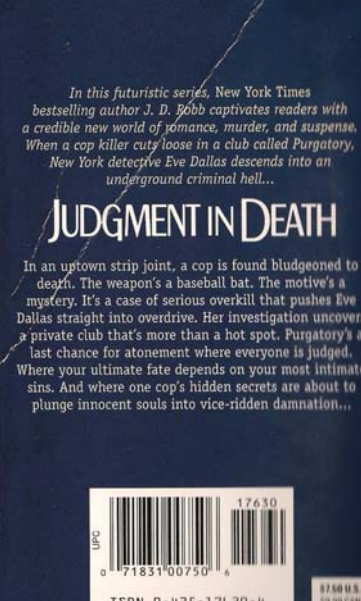
As is conventional, the back cover performs a more complex identity.



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The conventional partial summaries focus on the suspense plot; in the case of the first two instalments in the series this summary combines the focus on suspense with a focus on the

<sup>28</sup> Front cover, *Conspiracy in Death*, original edition. Scan.

<sup>29</sup> Front cover, *Loyalty in Death*, original edition. Scan.

<sup>30</sup> Front cover, *Judgement in Death*, original edition. Scan.

<sup>31</sup> Back cover, *Naked in Death*, original edition, 1995. Scan.

<sup>32</sup> Back cover, *Immortal in Death*, original edition, 1996. Scan.

<sup>33</sup> Back cover, *Judgment in Death*, original edition, 2000. Scan.

romance courtship narrative that develops in both these stories. That romance identity is also performed in the praising quotes that appear on the covers from *Immortal in Death* onwards and that are systematically pulled from romance specific publications such as *Romantic Times*, *Rendez Vous* and *Affaire de Coeur*. In the new cover design used from *Conspiracy in Death* onwards these quotes disappear again, which significantly reduces the performance of the romance identity on these covers. One of the for this study most significant changes on these covers is that from *Immortal In Death* (the series' third instalment) onwards the text on the back explicitly establishes that J.D. Robb is Nora Roberts:

J.D. Robb is the pseudonym of *New York Times* bestselling author Nora Roberts. In *Immortal in Death* she portrays a world, where technology has changed the nature of criminal investigation, but the nature of the human heart remains the same. (back cover, original edition, *Immortal in Death*)

A similar text, explicitly establishing the Robb-Roberts connection and at the same time implicitly differentiating the In Death novels from Roberts' other work, appears on all back covers of the original editions of the *In Death* novels until *Conspiracy*. In the new design adopted from then onwards this explicit recognition of Robb-Roberts disappears again.

The paratextual recognition of the Robb-Roberts connection never truly disappears, however. Each of these novels contains paratextual references to Nora Roberts on the pages inside the book. These are least prominent in the series' first novel, *Naked in Death*, in which only the colophon, in which the copyright of the text is recognized as belonging to Nora Roberts, establishes this connection. The ad in the back that announces novels by Roberts is, in hindsight, of course no coincidence, but was at the time of publication not as such an indication of the Roberts-Robb connection since ads for novels by different authors are not unusual. In *Glory in Death* the recognition is made more explicit by the advertisement in the back which presents the two published In Death novels headed by the phrase "Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb". This phrase definitively establishes the connection between Roberts and Robb. From *Immortal in Death* onwards the peritextual recognition of the Robb-Roberts link becomes significantly more prominent when Roberts' name and part of her published novels are added to the oeuvre page that is included in the first pages of these books. Under the heading "titles by Nora Roberts" this oeuvre page lists all of Roberts' single title romantic suspense standalones. This list is followed by a list headed by "titles written as J.D. Robb" – a phrase that then explicitly recognizes the connection between the Roberts and Robb author names. This oeuvre page recognition never disappears again from the peritext of the In Death novels even when, with the changed cover design that is adopted from the publication of

*Conspiracy in Death* onwards, the connection Robb-Roberts temporarily disappears from the In Death outside cover again.

The paratextual performance of generic identity remains somewhat fraught on these inside pages. On the one hand the summaries of the novels that appear in these pages are geared towards the suspense plot. Likewise, the authorial identity that is implicitly created for Roberts/Robb in the oeuvre pages is exclusively associated with the subgenre of romantic suspense and not with that of popular romance: not only Roberts' categories, but also her single title romance trilogies are omitted from this list of works by Roberts. On the other hand the praising quotes that increasingly appear in these inside pages are systematically pulled from romance specific sources – *Romantic Times*, *Affaire de Coeur*, etc. – and often laud the novels for their use of romance elements. These then do quite strongly perform the romance identity and indicate, moreover, that the novels circulate in the romance community.

This is further confirmed by some of the expitextual elements of the first eleven novels in the In Death series. Nine of these eleven novels are reviewed by *Romantic Times* at the time of their original publication.<sup>34</sup> In many of these reviews the connection between Roberts and Robb is explicitly articulated.<sup>35</sup> The review of the first novel in the series – which is raving – opens with: “Superstar Nora Roberts dons a new pseudonym and proves why she is one of the world's most remarkable storytellers in this ground-breaking novel of life and death in the 21st century” (Helfer). In *Romantic Times* the In Death series is thus openly presented as authored by Nora Roberts from the very beginning. This indicates that the connection between Roberts and Robb was established in the romance community from the start. *Romantic Times'* reviews of the series are overall raving. Particularly in the beginning of the series, Robb/Roberts is commended for the originality and novelty of the series:

Superbly suspenseful and strikingly original, this snazzy venture into the future will leave fans eagerly awaiting the next Eve Dallas adventure (idem).

Some authors break the rules very successfully; a very rare few define them. Nora Roberts, writing as J.D. Robb, is a spectacular innovator who always leaves her fans desperate for more (Helfer “Glory In Death”).

Ms. Robb is in superlative form as always, devising one brilliant turn after another to keep us seething with curiosity. And through it all we continue to be mesmerized by the gutsy Eve, one of the best heroines to come our way in a long, long time. (Helfer “Immortal In Death”).

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<sup>34</sup> Only *Rapture in Death* (#4, 1996) and *Conspiracy in Death* (#8, 1999) are not reviewed by *RT*.

<sup>35</sup> This is the case in the reviews of *Naked in Death*, *Glory in Death*, and *Vengeance in Death*.



Initially the reviews also explicitly comment on the narratives' innovative mix of three genres – romance, suspense and science fiction –; in later reviews these comments disappear, presumably because the novelty wears off for both the reviewer and the reader, and the reviews focus more on summarizing the suspense plot and the evolution of the characters.

That the In Death series circulates in the romance community before 2001 is furthermore also indicated by the fact that Eve and Roarke are consistently voted amongst the readers' favourite characters at romance blog *All About Romance*. Between 1996 and 2001 Eve and Roarke are consistently placed in the top three (and often at the very top spot) in the annual readers' poll that elects the readers' favourite hero, favourite heroine and favourite couple. Yet while such reader based polls indicate the popularity of the series and its protagonists amongst romance readers - a notion that is also borne out by the fact that no less than seven of the nine early In Death novels reviewed in *Romantic Times* are nominated for one of the fanzine's awards – none of these novels wins a Rita Award. This lack of awards by RWA for the series is indicative, I believe, of the novels' fraught relation to the romance genre. As I have discussed earlier in this dissertation, RWA has a wide but clear-cut definition of what (narrative) elements constitute and define a popular romance novel and strictly speaking none of the In Death novels incorporates all of these crucial elements. Although these novels then do not win the most important romance awards, the series' popularity in both the American romance community and mainstream popular culture is steadily on the rise. In 1999 this increasing success is consolidated by *Loyalty in Death's* appearance on the *New York Times* bestseller list (*The Official Nora Roberts Companion* 55); this marks the first appearance of Robb on this list and is indicative of the increasing popularity of the series and performative visibility of the Robb author name.

This analysis then clearly indicates that even before Nora Roberts officially comes out as J.D. Robb in 2001 the connection between Robb and Roberts is paratextually acknowledged and performed. The author name "J.D. Robb" thus never really functioned as an authorial identity separate from the Roberts authorial identity but was, from the very start, essentially a subpart of the Roberts identity. While this connection was acknowledged, in the original editions of these first eleven novels it is never emphasized. In the space where the author name is most conventionally placed – the front cover, the spine, and the title page – only the name "J.D. Robb" appears, which does strongly develop this name as the author name for the novel in question. This ambiguous paratextual performance of authorial identity – the Robb name is coined separately from the Roberts name, but that separation is never fundamentally or

consistently performed and instead breached from the very beginning – is related, I believe, to the fact that the Robb pseudonym is from the beginning conceived of as mainly a marketing gimmick. Says Roberts' long-time agent Amy Berkower:

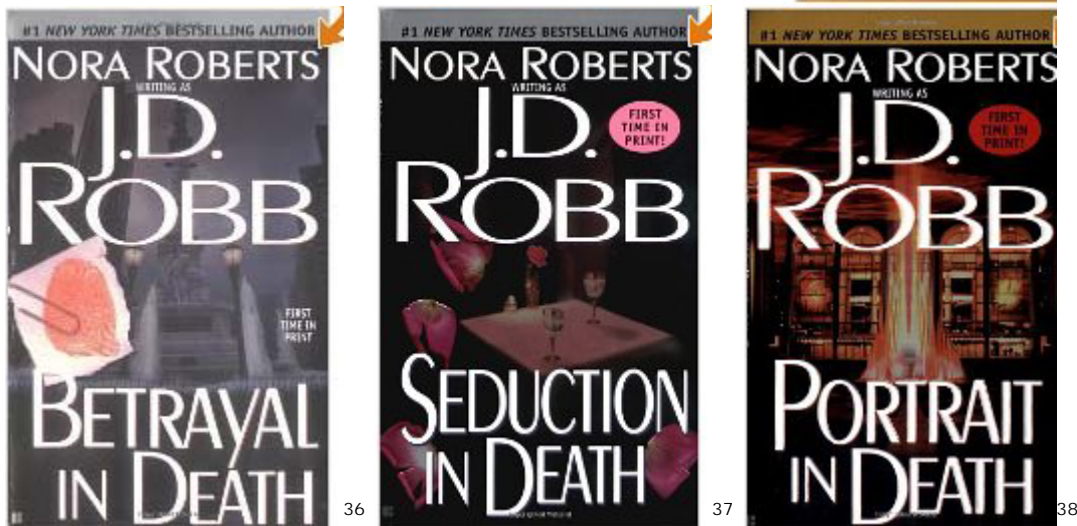
But even though Nora was writing one hardcover, one trilogy and a few category romances, she still wasn't satisfied. She needed to write and publish more books. Though I'd encouraged Putnam Berkley to publish more books than they wanted, I felt we could push them no further. So we came up with the idea of a pseudonym, something Nora originally resisted. She felt like it would be betraying her fans. But when I explained to her it was simply a marketing gimmick ... which would allow her more shelf space in the bookstores, she relented and J.D. Robb was born. (Little, "The Mind of An Agent." 59)

This explains, I believe, the ambiguity surrounding the performance of the Robb identity as both separate from and connected to the Roberts identity. To the extent that the publisher (Putnam/Berkley) feared an oversaturation of the market with Roberts books it was important to differentiate the In Death books from the Roberts name and brand. To the extent, however, that this is a very successful name and brand, a limited recognition of the connection is commercially interesting.

While the connection has then always been somewhat performed – in both the novels' narrative and the paratext – the official unveiling of the connection was nonetheless turned into elaborate media campaign surrounding the publication of the series' twelfth instalment, *Betrayal In Death* (*The Nora Roberts Companion* 292-93). This campaign played up the notion of betrayal and suggested readers and booksellers had been "betrayed" for years by one of the today's most popular bestselling authors.

#### **2.4.2 J.D. Robb since 2001**

After Nora Roberts officially comes out as J.D. Robb the connection between the two author names is emphasized in the novels' paratexts. The front cover and spine of the original editions of the books introduce the author as "Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb."



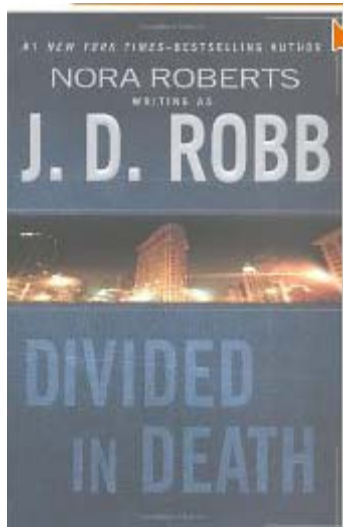
As we can see in these images, the Robb name is considerably bigger than the Roberts name, but both now appear on the front cover and the spine. A picture of Roberts takes up the entire back cover. Inside these books, the oeuvre page still lists both works by Roberts and Robb, but this list now includes Roberts' romance trilogies (although not her categories, of course). The praising quotes in the front of the book regard both Roberts and Robb books, as do the advertisements in the back of the books. Overall, the connection Roberts-Robb is strongly and prominently performed in these peritexts.

The generic identity that is predominantly performed in these peritexts remains an urbanized kind of suspense. The first few In Death books published after Roberts' coming out as Robb adopt the same cover composition and design as had been adopted from the publication of *Conspiracy in Death* onwards, which visually signals the consistency of the series, even if the author name has been in a way adapted (from "J.D. Robb" to "Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb"). The series' cover design template changes with the publication of *Divided in Death* (2004), which is the first In Death novel to originally be published in hardback, and again with the publication of *Survivor in Death* (2005).

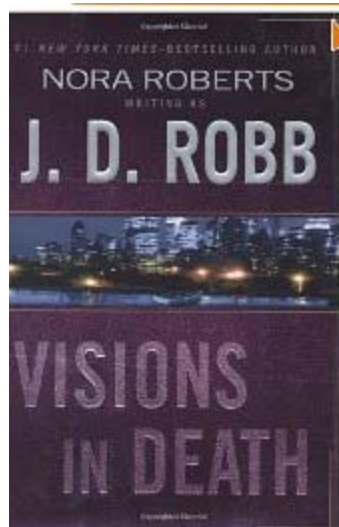
<sup>36</sup> Front cover, *Betrayal in Death*, original edition, 2001. source: [http://www.amazon.com/Betrayal-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425178579/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1317132852&sr=8-1#\\_](http://www.amazon.com/Betrayal-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425178579/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1317132852&sr=8-1#_)

<sup>37</sup> Front cover, *Seduction in Death*, original edition, 2001. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Seduction-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425181464/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133019&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Seduction-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425181464/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133019&sr=1-1)

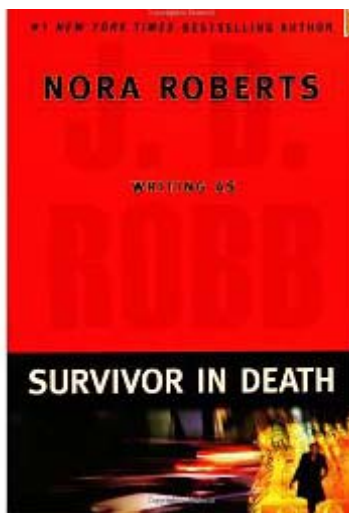
<sup>38</sup> Front cover, *Portrait in Death*, original edition, 2003. source: [http://www.amazon.com/Portrait-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425189031/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133373&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Portrait-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0425189031/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133373&sr=1-1)



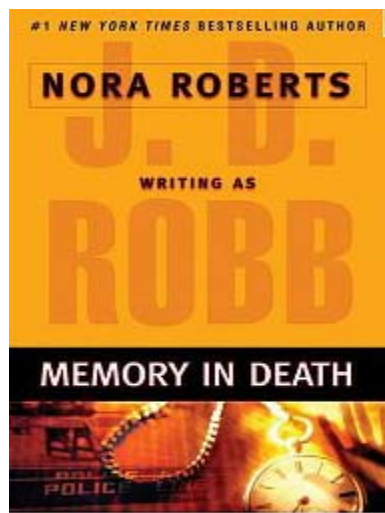
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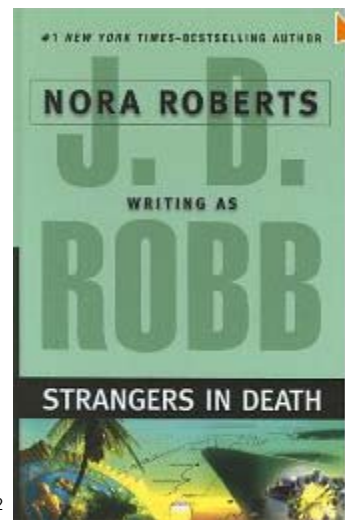
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The latter design template, which makes the double author name even more of a visual focal point, remains in use for the rest of this period. While the imagery used on these covers continues to trigger suspense associations, the original hardback format dissociates the novels from the category of genre fiction. Much like Roberts' other original hardcovers published in the period, the inside pages of these novels are composed in much more sober, less blaring and obviously commercial tones. Gone are the advertisements, excerpts and pages with praising quotes. Instead there is simply the occasional blank page. Both the hardcover format and the peritextual focus on the author name indicate that by the mid 2000s the peritextual

<sup>39</sup> Front cover, *Divided in Death*, original edition, 2004. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Divided-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399151540/ref=sr\\_1\\_1\\_title\\_2\\_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133598&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Divided-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399151540/ref=sr_1_1_title_2_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133598&sr=1-1)

<sup>40</sup> Front cover, *Visions in Death*, original edition, 2004. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Visions-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399151710/ref=tmm\\_hrd\\_title\\_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317133734&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Visions-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399151710/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317133734&sr=1-1)

<sup>41</sup> Front cover, *Survivor in Death*, original edition, 2005. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Survivor-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399152083/ref=sr\\_1\\_1\\_title\\_2\\_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133848&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Survivor-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0399152083/ref=sr_1_1_title_2_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133848&sr=1-1)

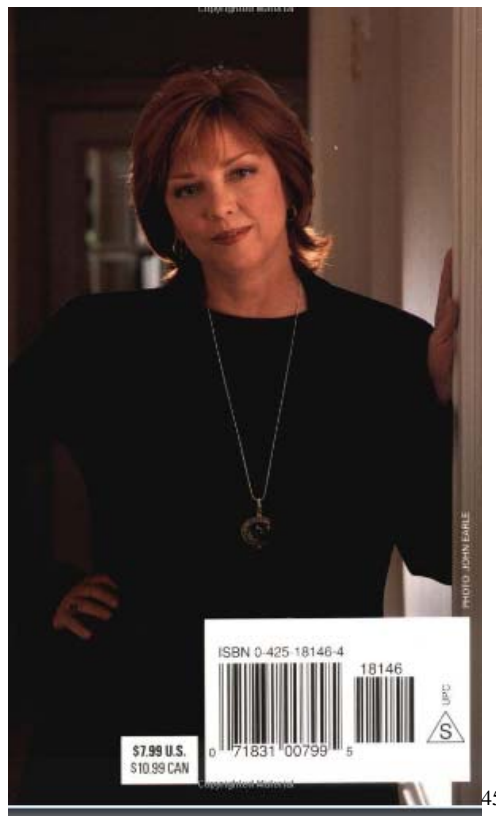
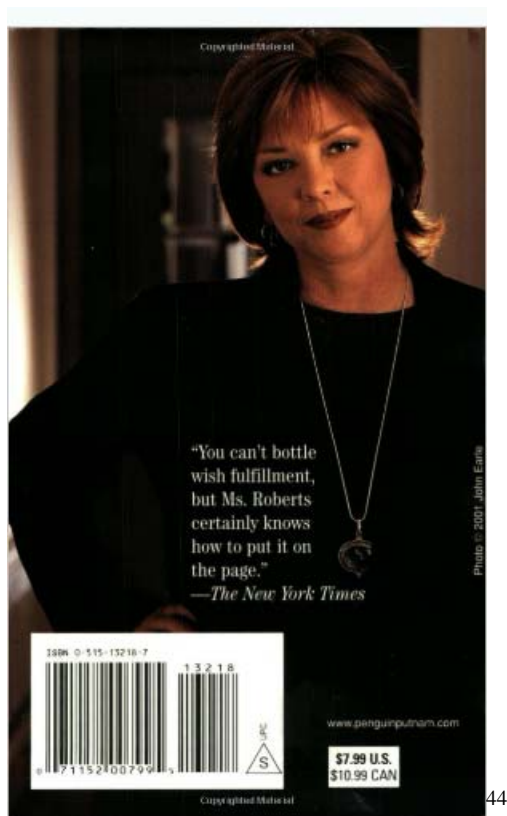
<sup>42</sup> Front cover, *Memory in Death*, original edition, 2006. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Memory-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0786282320/ref=sr\\_1\\_1\\_title\\_2\\_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133972&sr=1-1#\\_](http://www.amazon.com/Memory-Death-J-D-Robb/dp/0786282320/ref=sr_1_1_title_2_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317133972&sr=1-1#_)

<sup>43</sup> Front cover, *Strangers in Death*, original edition, 2008. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Strangers-Death-Wheeler-Hardcover-Robb/dp/1597226688/ref=sr\\_1\\_1\\_title\\_2\\_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317134084&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Strangers-Death-Wheeler-Hardcover-Robb/dp/1597226688/ref=sr_1_1_title_2_h?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1317134084&sr=1-1)

performance of textual identity in the original editions of the In Death series is undergoing a similar change as that of Roberts' romantic suspense stand alones. It is dissociated from the category of genre fiction and mainly focussed on the authorial identity.

The epitext of the In Death novels originally published between 2001 and 2008 does in most regards not differ significantly from the epitext of the In Death novels published before 2001. *Romantic Times* continues to systematically publish raving review of these novels. Interestingly, while before the official reveal the connection between Roberts and Robb was quite often explicitly noted in these reviews, after Roberts officially comes out as Robb this is relatively rarely so. This indicates, I believe, that by the early 2000s the association Roberts-Robb has become so strong and widespread in the romance community –i.e. *Romantic Times'* target audience – that it does not bear repeating. Eve and Roarke also continue to regularly figure in *All About Romance's* annual character popularity poll, though their popularity does seem to have decreased somewhat since 2003. One significant epitextual change that does take place is that in 2006 J.D. Robb officially wins her first Rita Award for *Survivor in Death* in the “Best Romantic Suspense” category. To an extent this win speaks to the particular strengths of this novel, which has a plot twist that involves Eve and Roarke temporarily being in charge of a nine year old girl who survived a murderous attack that wiped out the rest of her family. The novel, which specifically addresses the theme of children – Eve and Roarke again realize they are not yet ready to start their own family – and in which Eve is strongly confronted with her own past – Eve recognizes herself in the traumatized nine year old -, is often considered a particular fan favourite and this is, I believe, reflected in its Rita win. This award might furthermore also be indicative of the extent to which Roberts' authorial identity – of which J.D. Robb is a subpart – is associated with the popular romance genre. This is indicated, I argue, by the fact that even though *Survivor in Death* formally does not comply with RWA's definition of romance – while its ending is emotionally satisfying and optimistic, the novel does not feature a central love story in which two people fall in love and try to make the relationship work; in this novel Eve and Roarke are already in love and face only very minor conflicts in their established romantic union – the novel does win one of the RWA's central awards. In my interpretation this win indicates that by the mid 2000s Nora Roberts' authorial identity has become so strongly and pervasively associated with the popular romance genre – an association that exists both in the popular romance community and in mainstream American culture – that her entire oeuvre is almost automatically *used* as popular romance novels, even when particular individual novels, like *Survivor in Death*, do not in fact narratively and/or peratextually (strongly) perform this identity.

While since 2001 the J.D. Robb identity has become an official and openly acknowledged subpart of the authorial identity residing under the author name “Nora Roberts”, a few subtle strategies are nonetheless developed in the paratexts of these novels that attempt to somewhat differentiate the Robb (sub)identity from the overarching Roberts identity of which it is part. The perhaps most important or significant of these strategies is the authorial picture that is printed on the back covers of respectively the Roberts and Robb books. When Roberts initially comes out as Robb, the exact same authorial picture appears on the back cover of the Roberts and Robb books



From the publication of *Purity in Death* (2002) onwards, however, the authorial picture used for Nora Roberts' novels and In Death novels shows increasing differences

<sup>44</sup> Back cover, *The Villa*, original edition, 2001. Scan.

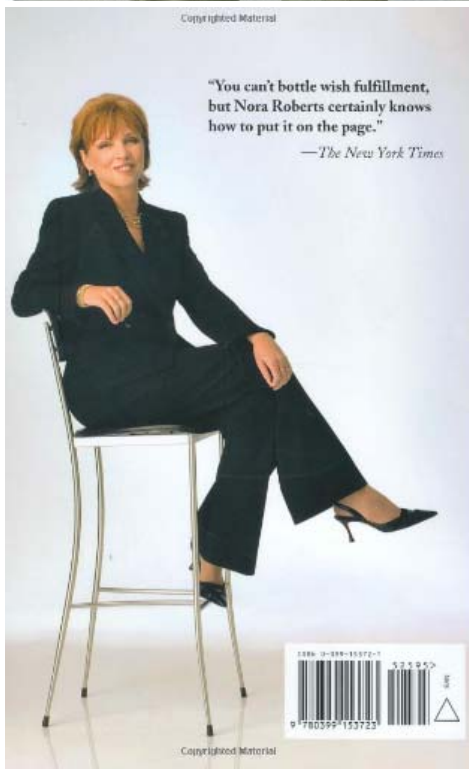
<sup>45</sup> Back cover, *Betrayal in Death*, original edition, 2001. Scan.



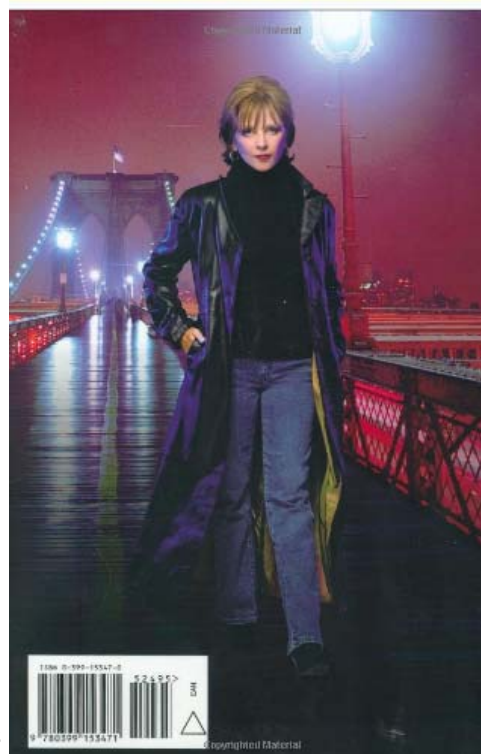
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- <sup>46</sup> Back cover, *Three Fates*, original edition, 2002. Scan.  
<sup>47</sup> Back cover, *Purity in Death*, original edition, 2002.  
<sup>48</sup> Back cover, *Angels Fall*, original edition, 2006. Scan.  
<sup>49</sup> Back cover, *Born in Death*, original edition, 2006. Scan.

As we note here, a different, darker and edgier image of the author is presented in the J.D. Robb authorial pictures while a softer, perhaps more approachable image is created in the Nora Roberts authorial pictures.<sup>50</sup> These pictures not only have generically different associations – the Robb images have (urban) suspense undertones, while the Roberts images have more romance-like associations – but present a whole different image of nonetheless the same person, which indicates that there are attempts on the part of the producer of these books to differentiate Roberts from Robb, even as Roberts is identified as Robb throughout the books peritext as well.

This ambiguous treatment of the J.D. Robb author name and identity is, I believe, part of a wider development that is taking place in this period in the oeuvre of Nora Roberts. As the discussions in this and the previous chapter have demonstrated, in the period between 1994 and 2008 Nora Roberts' authorial identity is effectively divided into first four and later three authorial "subidentities", each of which is connected to a different type of text. There is Nora Roberts the category romance author, Nora Roberts the romance trilogy author, Nora Roberts the romantic suspense author and Nora Roberts writing as J.D. Robb the futuristic romance police procedural author of the *In Death* series. While this differentiation of authorial identity is most explicit in the J.D. Robb case, in which an actual other author name is adopted, I argue that it is in fact on-going in the whole of Roberts' oeuvre in this period (and, to an extent, also between 1987 and 1994, when a very similar authorial identity differentiation is developed between Nora Roberts the category romance author and Nora Roberts the single title romantic suspense author). While, as the discussions in this chapter have indicated, all of these identities are narratively and even paratextually clearly differentiated from each other, in this period, unlike in the previous one, they increasingly also share characteristics. Perhaps the dominant characteristic they share is their affiliation with the popular romance genre. With the possible exception of the *In Death* novels – this is an ambiguous case, as my discussion above makes clear – all of Nora Roberts' novels narratively and paratextually perform the popular romance identity. While in some novels and subidentities this generic identity is more prominently performed (the categories and the trilogies) than in others (the romantic suspense stand alones, the *in death* series), it is to some extent present in all of Roberts' books. Other characteristics these books have in common more or less across the board is the focus on the theme of community (which often gives rise to serial narrative

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<sup>50</sup> This softer and more approachable image is indeed in line with conventions of the genre as I have discussed these in part one, based in part on the observations Annick Capelle made in this regard.



structure) and, often interlaced with the latter, on the concept of identity. Both these themes, but most strongly and particularly I believe the theme of community, develop over time into trademarks of Roberts' author voice and authorial identity. Due to this process over time the narrative representations of these themes – and again, this is most obviously the case for the community theme – effectively function as narrative performances of Roberts' authorial identity. Although this identity develops and transforms over time it is also, despite being subdivided into four subparts, in certain ways consistent in all of Roberts' novels, as is indicated by the increasingly explicit branding of Roberts' author name on the covers of these books. While this branding certainly has dominant commercial purposes – the brand name “Nora Roberts” has over the course of the last fifteen to twenty years developed into a commercially very powerful entity – it is to an extent, I then argue, also a reflection of a textual reality that is that makes up part of these texts' (shared) identities.

### **3. Conclusion: the issue of the reissue**

The discussion in this chapter, as in the previous two, focussed on the increasing importance of Roberts' authorial identity in the identity performed by her novels. This is a process, I have demonstrated, that develops in different ways and to different extents on both the paratextual and the narrative levels of the text. Narratively, as I just pointed out, Roberts' work is on the one hand increasingly marked by recurring characteristic elements that are increasingly associated with Roberts' authorial voice and identity and that thus, in effect, come to perform this identity. On the other hand the narrative performance of generic identity is an important aspect of all Roberts' narratives. This generic identity (almost) always includes popular romance; frequently suspense and/or fantasy or science fiction are also performed. In this study the focus has mostly been on the manner in which the popular romance identity is narratively concretized in Roberts' work. My analysis of the evolving representations of the core romance conventions in Roberts' work demonstrates clearly that over time Roberts' work on the one hand actively takes part in the generic evolutions that are taking place in the period in which the author is active – think for example of the increasing sexual and professional emancipation of the heroine and the demystification and narrative rise to prominence of the hero. While I believe it would be incorrect to claim these generic evolutions originate in Roberts' work, my analysis has indicated that Roberts' oeuvre – enabled in this by its exceptional popularity – has actively formed and stimulated these generic evolutions and perhaps pushed them in particular directions. On the other hand it has

also become clear in this study that Roberts' narratives always incorporate the core conventions of the popular romance genre – there is, for example, not a single Nora Roberts novel with an unhappy ending. Each and every story Roberts writes – with the possible exception of the *In Death* novels (cf. above) – thus performs the popular romance generic identity.

On the level of the paratext the relation between genre and authorship in the textual performance of identity plays out a quite differently for Roberts' oeuvre. Whereas on the narrative level the authorial identity performance is always tightly interwoven with the generic identity performance, in the paratext – and most specifically in the peritext – an evolution takes place in which the authorial identity becomes increasingly dominant over the generic identity. These paratextual evolutions in Roberts' oeuvre are, I believe, mainly prompted by commercial impulses and interests. As long as the publisher, who composes the peritext, believes the generic identity “popular romance” attracts more readers than the far more specific authorial identity “Nora Roberts”, the generic identity dominates the peritext (and often also the epitext). Once, however, the authorial identity becomes a positive commercial factor, this identity becomes (increasingly) prominent in the peritext. This process initially takes place in an overarching generic framework; think for example of the enlarging of Roberts' name on the cover of some of her category romances from the early to mid-90s. In later work this generic presence decreases. In this chapter I have, for example, described how the peritexts of Roberts' more recent novels carry less and less popular romance cues (no more clinch images, no more original mass market paperback editions, etc.).

The importance of this general development – that is, the extent to which Roberts' authorial identity gains paratextual (and particularly peritextual) dominance over the generic identity popular romance – is evidenced most clearly by the reissues that appear regularly in the period discussed in this chapter and almost continuously from the early 2000s onwards . Assembling a complete overview of these reissues has proven to not only be a bibliographical challenge but also turned out to fall outside of the scope and both the financial and time resources of this dissertation. Not only are there simply too many reissues of Roberts' novels to manage this completeness within the scope of this dissertation– it concerns here quite literally hundreds of editions – but the bibliographical care with which this kind of contemporary popular literature is published (or more precisely, the lack thereof) has proven insufficient to easily assemble a complete overview.<sup>51</sup> It is, for example, often only possible to

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<sup>51</sup> I have, for example, contacted both Roberts' publishers and Roberts herself asking for information about all different editions that have been printed of Roberts' novels but no one could provide this information. I have also

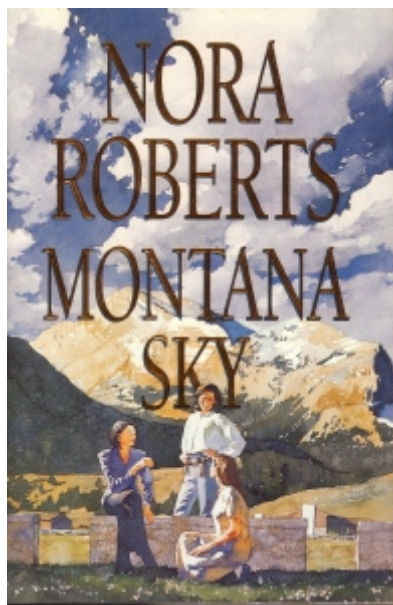
determine the precise date of a particular printing via indirect means (e.g. the other titles of the author that are printed on the oeuvre page) since the colophon usually only mentions the original date of publication. Since the peritext changes with each printing, it has proven all but impossible to systematically assemble all bibliographical information on the vast number of reissues of Nora Roberts' novels that could be pertinent to this study. However, in spite of these lacunae, I can nonetheless, I believe, discuss the relevance of the core mechanisms and the conceptual significance of these reissues to the overall objectives of this study into the relationship between genre and authorship in Nora Roberts' popular romance novels.

In this discussion I make a firm distinction between two types of reissues. On the one hand there are what I refer to as the conventional reissues. These are reissues of Roberts' work that are produced in concurrence with the conventions of the book industry. To this category belong, for example, the mass market paperback reissues of Roberts' novels that are originally published in the hardcover format. As I remarked in part I of this dissertation, such paperback reissues conventionally appear within a year after the novels' original hardback release. These conventional reissues, produced according to the standard habits of the industry, do not significantly set Roberts' work apart from that of other authors. On the other hand there are what I refer as the unconventional reissues. These are reissues of Roberts' work that are not produced according to the ruling conventions of the book industry and/or the popular romance genre and as such set Roberts' work apart from that of most other authors. To this group belong mainly the numerous reissues of Roberts' older category romance novels that have been appearing more or less incessantly since the early 2000s.

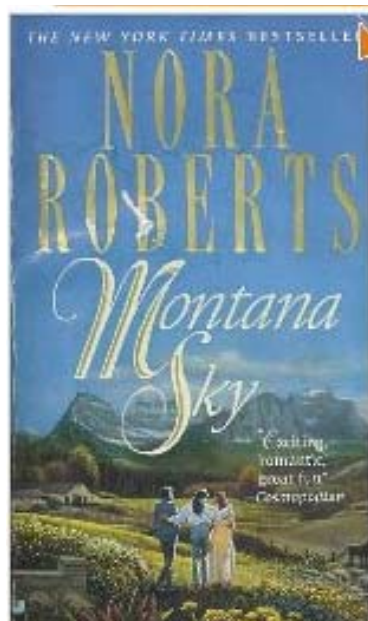
A concrete example of each type of reissue illustrates both the principles according to which they are composed and the bibliographical challenges these principles might pose. A conventional type is for example *Montana Sky*, which is originally published as a hardcover in March 1996 and reissued a first time as a mass market paperback a year later.

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searched the archives of the American and Canadian National Libraries, but this did not yield the desired result either.

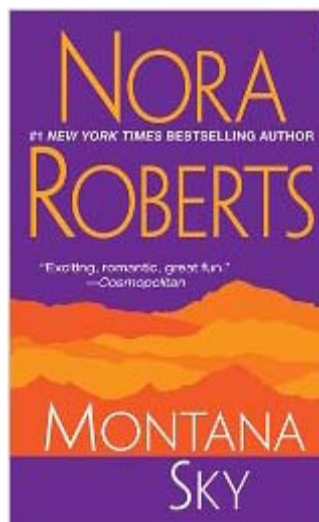


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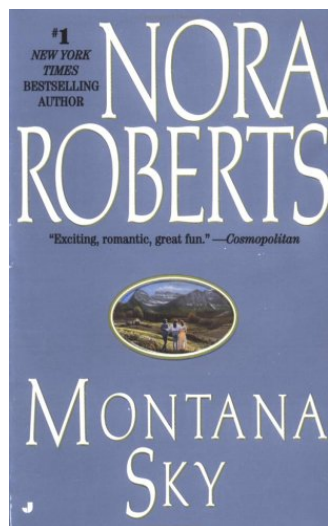


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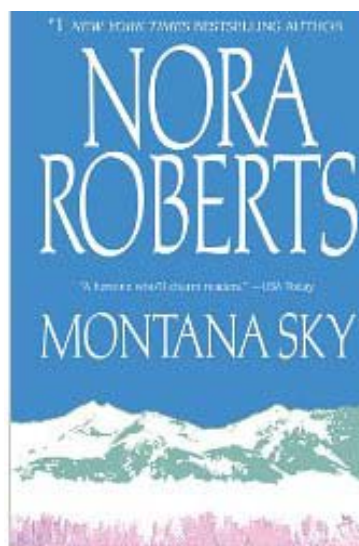
Both editions have (significantly) different peritexts, as is most obvious in their front covers pictured above, but contain the same story text. In the years that follow several reprintings of the paperback edition are released by the publisher; it is all but impossible to trace precisely how many of these reprintings appear over time. According to information on websites such as amazon.com and fantasticfiction.co.uk there are multiple such reprintings, all of which have different peritexts. Amazon, for example, makes mention of additional paperback editions of *Montana Sky* released in 2000, 2006 and 2009.



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<sup>52</sup> Front cover *Montana Sky*, original hardback edition, 1996. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0399141227/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0399141227/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

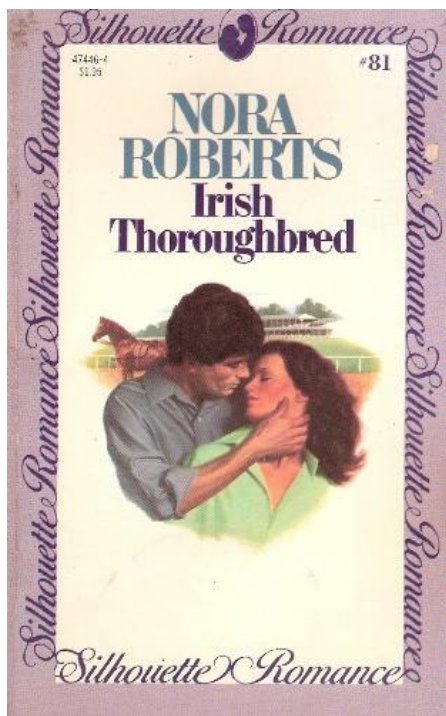
<sup>53</sup> Front cover *Montana Sky*, paperback reissue, 1997. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/B000GZCEBM/ref=tmm\\_mmp\\_title\\_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/B000GZCEBM/ref=tmm_mmp_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1)

<sup>54</sup> Front cover *Montana Sky*, paperback reissue 2000. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/0515120618/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_title\\_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/0515120618/ref=tmm_pap_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1)

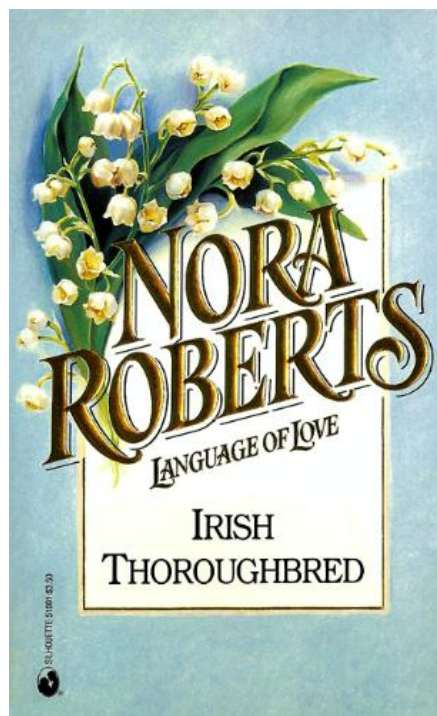
<sup>55</sup> Front cover *Montana Sky*, paperback reissue 2006. Source: <http://simpleloveofreading.blogspot.com/2011/02/wednesday-random-recommendation-45.html>

The peritextual differences between these editions might be minor (e.g. an updated oeuvre page and different advertisements) or more substantial; as the pictures above indicate, some of these editions have different front covers, for example, and at least one appears in the trade paperback format. While such extensive and long-time reissuing of relatively “old” popular literature is somewhat unusual – it is not a standard practice that a single title romance novel originally published in 1996 is still being reissued in 2009, as *Montana Sky* is – and is as such indicative of Nora Roberts’ exceptional popularity, I nonetheless consider these reissues to belong to the category of conventional reissues because the principle of reissuing a hardcover single title romance novel as a paperback is itself standard.

The different editions that over time have appeared of Roberts’ very first novel, *Irish Thoroughbred*, are an example of what I consider unconventional reissues. *Irish Thoroughbred* is first published as a category romance novel in the Silhouette Romance line in May 1981. If the conventions of the category format had been followed, no reissue of this novel would ever have appeared since, as I have discussed earlier, category romance novels are conventionally not reissued. However, exceptions are made in Roberts’ case and in February 1992 a first reissue of this novel appears as part of the Language of Love series.



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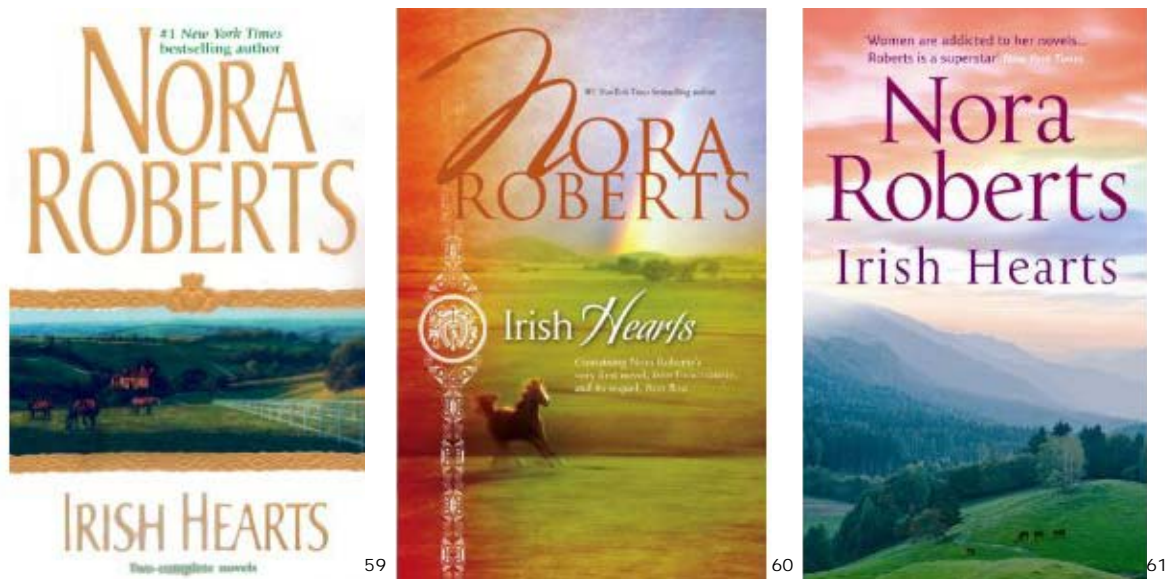
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<sup>56</sup> Front cover *Montana Sky*, trade paperback reissue 2009. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/0425205754/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_title\\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Montana-Sky-Nora-Roberts/dp/0425205754/ref=tmm_pap_title_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1317114304&sr=1-1)

<sup>57</sup> Front cover, *Irish Thoroughbred*, original edition, 1981. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0671474464/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_0?ie=UTF8&index=0](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0671474464/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_0?ie=UTF8&index=0)

<sup>58</sup> Front cover, *Irish Thoroughbred*, 1992 Language of Love reissue. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510012/ref=cm\\_ciu\\_pdp\\_images\\_1?ie=UTF8&index=1](http://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-media/product-gallery/0373510012/ref=cm_ciu_pdp_images_1?ie=UTF8&index=1)

The peritextual differences between these two editions have been discussed earlier in this dissertation. In 2000 the novel is again reissued, this time in a compilation entitled *Irish Hearts* which also contains the story text of Roberts' *Irish Rose* (1985), a category romance novel with a (minor) narrative connection to *Irish Thoroughbred*. The compilation *Irish Hearts* appears for a first time in June 2000 to accompany the release of *Irish Rebel* (Silhouette Special Edition, 06/2000), a second generation novel relating the courtship narrative of one of the children of the couple united in *Irish Thoroughbred*. Since 2000 several reprintings of the *Irish Heart* compilation have been released in the United States, but again I find it all but impossible to determine precisely how many. In this case Amazon lists re-releases in at least 2001, 2007 and 2009.



As these front covers indicate, the peritexts of these different printings of the compilation – and thus the story text of *Irish Thoroughbred* – differ significantly from one another. They are always updated and are usually executed in a contemporary and fresh tone; indeed the above covers of *Irish Hearts* do not indicate that the two story texts it contains were originally published in 1981 and 1985. This, as I discuss below, is one of the problems of the reissue. Reissues of this type – an original category romance novel by Nora Roberts is reissued in a newly titled compilation (that includes other narratives belonging to the series, if seriality is applicable) with a fresh, updated peritext that makes the book look new – have abounded in the last decade. I consider them unconventional because they run counter to one of the core

<sup>59</sup> Front cover, *Irish Hearts*, original edition 2000. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Nora-Roberts/dp/0373484003/ref=tmm\\_mmp\\_title\\_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Nora-Roberts/dp/0373484003/ref=tmm_mmp_title_0?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2)

<sup>60</sup> Front cover, *Irish Hearts*, reissue 2007. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Nora-Roberts/dp/037328540X/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_img\\_popover?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Nora-Roberts/dp/037328540X/ref=tmm_pap_img_popover?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2)

<sup>61</sup> Front cover, *Irish Hearts*, reissue 2009. Source: [http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Roberts-Special-Releases/dp/0263875180/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_title\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Irish-Hearts-Roberts-Special-Releases/dp/0263875180/ref=tmm_pap_title_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1317116062&sr=1-2)

conventions of the category romance novel, which is that these are very contemporary, even transient books that are, by definition, not re-released but always original, of the here and now. As such they strongly set Roberts' work apart from that of the vast majority of other popular romance authors. It is then particularly this second type of unconventional reissues that I now, in conclusion to this chapter, discuss.

These reissues are marked by two important paratextual characteristics. First, while these are story texts that are originally published as category romance novels – and thus, on the level of the narrative, incorporate the complex array of narrative conventions that apply to this format – in these reissues the format-constituting paratextual elements of the category romance disappear. Often, these reissues appear in the trade paperback format, as the examples above indicate, the author name “Nora Roberts” is always the most dominant element on the front covers and there are no strong generic romance cues (such as e.g. a clinch image) on these covers. These reissues then breach the very strict and tight identity harmony that conventionally exists between the narrative and paratextual level of the book – a harmony that is, I have established in the first part of this dissertation, essential to the category format. A story text that incorporates the complex multitude of narrative conventions of the category romance novel is published in a format that most resembles a single title romance novel – a romance format that tells an in many ways different kind of romance narrative than the category romance novel. In these reissues, I then argue, a disconnect and potentially strong contrast exists between the narrative identity performances – which is mainly generic – and the peritextual identity performance – which is mainly authorial. Not only this disconnect as such, but also the fact these reissues are almost antithetical to some of the core principles of the category romance format is indicative of the (commercial) strength and importance of Roberts' authorial identity by the early 2000s.

A second important characteristic of these unconventional reissues is what I refer to as the “time dissonance” that marks these reissues. That is, in these reissues romance narratives written ten, fifteen, twenty years or more ago – the *Irish Thoroughbred* narrative was presumably written in 1980 and last reissued twenty-nine years later – are reissued in hip, fresh, modern peritexts that create the impression these are hip, fresh, modern, recently written narrative texts – which is, of course, not the case. Such time dissonances are important in the case of the popular romance genre and Nora Roberts' writing. As I have elaborately and systematically demonstrated in this dissertation, both the concrete narrative representations of the romance generic conventions and Roberts' authorial writing style undergo substantial changes and evolutions in the course of the almost thirty years in which Roberts has been

active as a romance author. When an older romance novel by Roberts is then reissued in a fresh and updated peritext – one which performs a contemporary and therefore *different* generic and authorial identity than is performed in the narrative itself – a second form of disconnect is formed between the peritextual identity performance and the narrative identity performance of these books.

These two forms of dissonance between the narrative and the peritextual (and more generally paratextual) identity performance are particularly significant in the context of the popular romance novel because they run counter to some of the core (commercial) principles that drive the genre. These principles, as my discussion in part I established, are essentially based on the mechanism of meeting reader expectations. This implies that the peritextually performed identity – which normally plays a substantial role in creating reader expectations – should ideally quite closely match or reflect the narratively performed identity. This is a principle that lies at the very core of the contemporary popular romance genre and that influences many of its generic mechanism and conventions. This core generic principle is, however, violated in these unconventional reissues: books which often at least to an extent peritextually perform an identity that does not match the narrative identity performance. This disruption of some of the core principles of the popular romance genre is prompted, it seems to me, by the commercial power Roberts' author name and identity have accumulated by the early 2000s, when the name "Nora Roberts" has become such a strong commercial brand it overpowers the core commercial principles of the popular romance genre. This is one of the elements that most strikingly illustrates how the authorial identity Nora Roberts has, over the years, outgrown the contemporary popular romance genre.

While the author name "Nora Roberts" and the authorial identity that resides under this name have then over the course of the past ten years or so slowly outgrown the paratextual and commercial boundaries of the contemporary popular romance genre and have developed into a stars at the firmament of the contemporary American popular literature, we should be careful not to underestimate the extent to which the name "Nora Roberts" for very many users still automatically implies the generic identity popular romance. Indeed, both within the contemporary popular romance genre, but certainly also outside of it in mainstream American popular culture, the name and authorial identity "Nora Roberts" are thoroughly associated with the generic identity popular romance. This is apparent, for example, in the fact that in mainstream media Roberts is nearly always represented as the contemporary popular romance



author par excellence, the queen of pop romance, the voice of a genre, etc.<sup>62</sup> This association between the authorial identity “Nora Roberts” and the generic identity popular romance is importantly and constantly reinforced by precisely the appearance of this seemingly endless stream of reissues of Roberts’ older category work. Although the (legal) person Roberts left Silhouette/Harlequin a decade ago, during the last ten years this popular romance publisher par excellence has reissued a seemingly new Roberts book almost every month.<sup>63</sup> These reissues constantly re-establish and reinforce the association between the authorial identity “Nora Roberts” and the stereotypical kind of popular romance identity that the name Silhouette/Harlequin is associated with in popular American culture.

Although Roberts no longer writes category romances and is no longer affiliated with Silhouette/Harlequin, her ties to the popular romance genre remain very strong. To an extent she indeed seems to court the association between her authorial identity and the popular romance generic identity; she for example continues to attend the yearly RWA national conference – an event that always gets quite a bit of media coverage – and continues to speak up for the genre in the media, which are acts that clearly perform her authorial identity as a popular romance author. The representations of Roberts that usually appear in the media then indicate that as far as Nora Roberts has a presence in American mainstream culture today, that presence is inextricably bound to the popular romance genre of which she is the most successful and famous disciple.<sup>64</sup> This implies then that for very many users of American culture the performance of the authorial identity “Nora Roberts” automatically also implies the performance of the generic identity popular romance. Genre and author are one and the same, though always also already different.

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<sup>62</sup> See for example Sachs (2007) and Collins (2010).

<sup>63</sup> In a personal interview (2010) Roberts indicated that one of the main reasons she and Harlequin/Silhouette did not come to a new agreement was their difference of opinion over the publisher’s reissuing policy. Roberts did not agree with the extent of Harlequin’s reissuing. This is a clear example of the fact that the person Nora Roberts and the author “Nora Roberts” are not one and the same, but two very different entities. While the person Nora Roberts has left Harlequin and does not support the near-constant reissuing of her work, the author “Nora Roberts” remains connected to Harlequin and thus the generic associations they stand for.

<sup>64</sup> It is this very strong and widespread association between the author name “Nora Roberts” and the popular romance generic identity that might explain why the author name “J.D. Robb” is kept on even after its connection to Roberts has so publicly been revealed and is consistently paratextually performed.



## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

This dissertation makes, I believe, a number of significant contributions to the academic study of popular literature in general and to the study of the popular romance novel in particular. As the first in-depth study of the oeuvre of American romance author Nora Roberts it inaugurates the long-overdue academic exploration of this massively popular body of work. As the first book-length study focussed on the oeuvre of a single contemporary popular romance author, this dissertation not only analyzes one of the most important shifts that has occurred in the genre over the last thirty years – the emancipation of the individual romance author – but also suggests a model of study that adequately addresses the methodological challenges of corpus selection and actively refutes the still-lingering stereotype of generic sameness that continues to surround the popular romance genre. As one of the first thorough explorations and articulations of some of the genre's most important paratextual conventions, this study also begins to fill what I consider to be one of the more glaring gaps in our scholarly knowledge of the popular romance genre. Finally, as a more or less chronological analysis of a corpus of two hundred popular romance novels steadily published over the course of nearly thirty years, this study also uncovers, substantiates and analyzes a number of the evolutions that have occurred in the genre in this period. Here, too, this dissertation refutes the stereotypes of static sameness and rigorous formula that still surround the popular romance genre in our culture. While I believe, and hope, that these concrete results provide significant contributions to the study of Nora Roberts and the American popular romance novel, in this short conclusion I would like to briefly widen my scope by considering some of the central trends and concepts that implicitly pervade this dissertation, revisiting broader theoretical and methodological questions that were raised in my introduction.

As I announced in the introduction to this work, I have consistently attempted to take my corpus of popular romance novels seriously as a literary scholar without, however, ignoring or negating its pervasively popular character. This has led me to apply theories, concepts and methods common in the study of literature to a corpus of texts with which these concepts are conventionally not associated. This approach has indirectly yielded a number of interesting findings. It demonstrates, on the one hand, for example the methodological usefulness and conceptual applicability of many of these theoretical concepts, which are shown to be relevant outside the scholarly context in which they are most conventionally located. A study such as

this one verifies then the claim that literary theory concerns *all* kinds of literature, not only those with which it is most commonly associated. On the other hand this approach indicates strongly that a number of complex literary dynamics and concepts traditionally associated with highbrow literature are equally strongly at work in lowbrow and popular literature. This finding substantiates the underlying claim of this dissertation that – aside from the kind of literary complexity possibly present or not in a popular (romance) text (by Nora Roberts) that might, for example, be uncovered (or found to be absent) in a traditional close reading of the text – the processes in which these text develop identity and thus meaning are at the core equally complex and layered as those at work in highbrow, canonical or critically respected literature, in which their presence is, for many scholars of literature, a presumed and even self-evident fact.

One of the literary concepts that has been central in this study and through which this reading of the corpus has been developed is of course the notion of genre, which has been shown to be inherently complex even when it regards a kind of literature that is ostensibly not. This focus on the notion of genre this study has uncovered and substantiated, I believe, the presence of a constant double dynamic or tension in this literature that constitute part of its core characteristics. On the one hand, my analyses indicate, in the popular romance genre a number of strategies are developed by means of which the genre is constantly evolving. Some of these strategies, it emerges, are related to the historical and socio-cultural situated-ness of the genre; think here for example of the professional and sexual emancipation of the romance heroine that runs as a leitmotiv through Roberts' corpus (and the popular romance novel more generally) in the period discussed in this dissertation. It is fairly obvious, I think, that this generic evolution comes about largely in response to broader socio-cultural changes in the position of women in society. Other strategies of evolution are based more on what I would describe as “literary” dynamics; think here for example of the increasing importance of the individual author in the genre and of the increasing presence of generic hybridity. Many of these evolutions, some of which lead to a significant expansion of the genre's (narrative) register, create differentiation and stratification within the genre. Slowly a structure of centre and periphery, even of “higher” and “lower” forms or romance, is coming into being within the generic system of the popular romance novel. While the core dynamics and patterns of this kind of evolution are, I believe, beginning to be uncovered and traced in a study such as this one, it is self-evident that much more future research is necessary to determine the precise scope and trajectory of these developments.

While the analyses in this dissertation have indicated that these evolutions and expansions are substantial – far more so than the stereotypical image of the genre implies and holds possible –, they have also shown that there is an important kind of consistency within the genre. That is, that these strategies of expansion and evolution always develop within certain generic boundaries or constraints that provide a form of consistency to this body of literature that is, I believe, one of its most crucial and core characteristics. Popular romance novels take their core generic conventions seriously, even when they expand into (narrative and/or paratextual) registers typical of other popular genres or develop other (narrative and/or paratextual) strategies that broaden their identity. The core of the popular romance novel is a sincere and authentic loyalty not simply to the (historically and culturally specific) conventions of the genre, but to the notion of conventionality itself. This loyalty is also apparent in the generically other registers that appear in these novels, which are performed in manners that not only respect (and thereby reinforce) the core generic constraints of the romance genre but also of the generically other genre that is brought into the fold.

There are of course limitations to what this study allows to conclude, given its methodology and corpus. My analyses indeed uncover developments and pathways a single study cannot all substantiate and explore. Although Roberts' oeuvre incorporates a number of the evolutions that are ongoing in the popular romance genre at the time the author is writing, there are also always also numerous evolutions and developments in the genre that do not appear in Roberts' oeuvre and that have therefore remained unrecognized in this dissertation. As I have acknowledged earlier in this dissertation I have also often relied on quite conventional, rudimentary and even stereotypical conceptualizations of other genres in my analyses and thereby perhaps implicitly perpetuated a stereotypical and static conceptualization of these other generic entities. Both these limitations of this study are symptomatic, I believe, of the underlying fact that within the poststructuralist dynamic conceptualization of genre I have deliberately adopted in this study, a complete tracing, mapping and comprehension of the inherently dynamic entity is all but unachievable. That does not mean, however, that we, scholars, should not try – and there are a number of avenues that further studies could choose to continue unravelling these dynamics.

The second concept via which the reading of Roberts' oeuvre in this study is mainly developed is the Foucauldian notion of authorship and, concomitantly, oeuvre. My discussions have illustrated, I believe, that the construction of this oeuvre and authorship constantly revolves around the tension between familiarity and recognizability on the one hand and evolution, innovation and development on the other hand. Whereas the first pole of

this construction is easily associated with popular literature, the second part of this dynamic might for many seem antithetical to the very concept of popular literature, which is much less than highbrow literature associated with concepts such as “oeuvre” and “author” as these have been developed in this study. Indeed, the notion that popular (romance) writers do the same thing over and over again while critically respected authors develop oeuvres that revolve around innovation, alienation and originality is widespread in our culture.

My analyses indicate that this authorial identity or authorship is developed via a number of (increasingly streamlined) strategies, which suggests a significant degree of deliberateness in the development of the author (in the Foucauldian sense) “Nora Roberts”. These strategies are textual – narrative – as well as paratextual. In part they then simply have to do with what the writer writes; think here for example of the use of serialization, the increasingly typical narrative representation of the theme of community, but also the particular mixes of narrative registers from different genres for which Roberts becomes increasingly well known. These strategies also include paratextual elements such as the increasing dominance of the author’s name “Nora Roberts” on the cover of the books – a name that over time is effectively turned into a brand in its own right. All of these strategies actively construct the author “Nora Roberts”; they are not only geared towards constructing a sense of evolving and layered individuality but also towards deliberately, consistently and strongly attributing this notion to the signifier and author’s name “Nora Roberts”. The Foucauldian conceptualization of authorship is crucial in this process precisely because it conceives of the author as an entity that functions as a principle of coherence of meaning. The use of the Foucauldian author concept in this study has then enabled me to conceptualize, uncover, trace, and analyze the development and functioning of all these strategies as strategies of author development. Allowing for a construction of the author that is inherent complex, composite and layered, this interpretation of authorship, finally, also enables the romance genre to develop strategies of cultural legitimation and emancipation.

While the analyses in this dissertation allow us to conclude, I think, that the construction of this authorship is a deliberate and very carefully managed long-term project – a notion that has been substantiated in this dissertation for the author Nora Roberts, but the principle dynamic of which applies much more widely, of course –, in these discussion the conceptual limitations of my approach have, perhaps, also become apparent. The rigorous – and in my view methodologically necessary – focus on the notion of performance does not accommodate, for example, an extensive exploration of the entities that actually construct the text. Hence, I have, for example, made no reference to the different roles played by the person

Nora Roberts and the team that surrounds her, which includes her agent, various editors and other people in the publishing business. This team, numerous interviews indicate, played a crucial role in the development and careful managing of the authorial identity – the brand – “Nora Roberts” that has been analyzed in this dissertation. Within the strict methodological principles adopted in this study, however, the textual and paratextual gestures perform the developments that are seen as crucial for the analysis. Given the resulting insights that I have formulated, it seems to me that this methodological rigor is very productive indeed.

## POSTSCRIPT

One of the most tricky and challenging aspects, I have come to learn over the last four years, of conducting an oeuvre study of an author who is not only still alive, but still active as an author is the inherent unfinished-ness of this oeuvre. This is especially true for an author as prolific as Nora Roberts. When I began working on this project in October 2007 what have turned out to be the final eight novels of this corpus had not yet been published. Aware of the standardized publication rhythm that had been developed for Roberts by 2007 – a schedule that foresees the publication of five new novels and one or two new novellas every year – I quite quickly decided for purely practical reasons to not look at work published after November 2008. While at the time this decision was mainly motivated by pragmatism, considering the thirteen new novels and two novellas by Roberts that have been published between November 2008 and October 2011, I suspect that over the course of these last two and a half years Roberts might have began yet another new phase in her oeuvre. Although it is, I believe, still too soon to tell, two developments in these thirteen new novels lead me to formulate this hypothesis. First, Roberts has for now apparently stopped writing the paranormal romance trilogies that by the end of 2008 reached a kind of climax in the Sign of Seven trilogy. The new series that has since appeared – The Bride Quartet – is not a trilogy and does not feature paranormal elements. Instead, these four narratives have the conventions of straight contemporary romance and strike a tone that, in my interpretation, is more typical of Roberts' earlier category romances. Second, since the publication of *Salvation in Death* in November 2008 – the first novel published that is not a part of the corpus of this study – all peritextual reference to the author's name "Nora Roberts" have disappeared from the original editions of the novels in the In Death series. Although I have not analyzed this significant peritextual change exhaustively, it seems that all peritextual references to Roberts, including the authorial picture, have been removed from the In Death books published since. A separate website for J.D. Robb has also been launched (to which Roberts' official site does link). This seems to indicate that strategies are now in place that attempt to ignore and thereby downplay the Roberts-Robb connection.

While it is too soon to determine, I think, if and how these two changes will further play out in Roberts' future books and whether they indeed do, as I suspect now, herald the beginning of what we will come to recognize is a new phase in Roberts' oeuvre and in her authorial identity, they do suggest that both the readers and the scholars of Roberts' massive



oeuvre are in for more from this most popular of romance authors. Future studies will have to determine what this “more” precisely constitutes.



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