

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Men, masculinity, and popular romance

By Jonathan Allan, Ph.D.



Why this research is important

Romance novels are largely written by women, for women. This research is important because it draws attention to ‘female-authored masculinities,’ which remains a fairly understudied topic. As such, in this project, I am interested in thinking through the ways in which romance novelists present masculinities and men. What might it mean, for instance, that the romance novel presents a static vision of masculinity? In many ways, today’s romance novel still embraces Erving Goffman’s (1963) ideas about the “one complete, unblushing male,” who is a “young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports,” and Goffman

What you need to know

In this project, I consider a range of texts, from *Harlequin* romances to *Fifty Shades of Grey* and beyond to explore the ways in which authors represent and present the male body, ideas of masculinity, and men. In particular, this project reflects on a growing body of scholarship in critical studies of men and masculinities that argue that men and masculinity are becoming more fluid and more inclusive, and yet, when confronted by the popular romance novel, we see a continued interest in and desire for traditional masculinities.

continues, “any male who fails to qualify in any of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.” While most readers prefer their romances heroes to be unmarried, most of these qualities find their way into romance novels. However, there are exceptions. What might it mean for novelists, if they seek to challenge these ideas? For example, what happens to the ‘virgin’ hero, rather than heroine, in the romance novel? Or, what happens in romance novels that are about two men? This project, thus, seeks to study masculinity and the romance novel.

How the research was conducted

This research brings together critical studies of men and masculinities to the study of popular romance novels. In particular, I read novels closely and look at how the authors construct and imagine masculinities. I am also interested in the covers of these novels, particularly the ways in which the artists portray and imagine the male body.

What the researcher found

Thus far, I have found that while there are challenges to masculinity in the popular romance novel, the vast majority still uphold the ideas and ideals of traditional masculinity. However, my research on this topic is not done yet; I have a number of texts that I still need to explore and consider and I imagine that I will find some challenges to what I have found thus far. What is interesting is that romance novels are, I think, reflecting on the complexity of gender and gender relations. For instance, we have seen a marked shift in 'safer sex' practices in novels; this is a response to the culture in which the novels are being read.

How this research can be used

This research will likely be of interest to scholars studying popular romance novels, but also, I hope, it will be of interest to a general readership interested in the romance novel.

About the researcher

Dr. Jonathan A. Allan is Canada Research Chair in Queer Theory and Professor in the Department of English and Creative Writing and the Gender and Women's Studies Program. He is the author of *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* (University of Regina Press, 2016) and, with

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Publications based on this research

Allan, J. (Forthcoming). And he absolutely fascinated me: Masculinity and virginity in Sherilee Gray's 'Breaking Him'. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*.

Allan, J. (2018). The purity of his maleness: Masculinity in popular romance novels. *Journal of Men's Studies* 24(1), 24–41.

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