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Boredom and the Unoriginality of Romance Fiction

Romance is a literary genre full of stock characters, predictable plots and hackneyed settings. By its own definition, its stories are committed to the well-worn narrative arc of a love story with a happy ending. Yet, its conventional nature does not hamper its appeal. Romance is one of the most popular fiction genres worldwide, bringing in billions in revenue for its publishers, many of which focus exclusively on romance writing. Viewed from this perspective, it appears that its millions of (predominantly female) readers have an insatiable appetite for reading variations of the same stories over and over again. While other popular literary genres such as crime, thriller or horror are strongly focussed on novelty, suspense and shock, the question of ‘what happens next?’ or ‘how will it end?’ are virtually irrelevant for romance readers. Many romance fans are high-frequency readers, consuming significantly more books than the average reader. They will be well aware of the literary conventions of the genre, its recurring stock characters and usual plot devices. Yet, they never seem to tire of it, despite its repetitiveness and predictability. In the field of boredom studies, predictability and repetitiveness are frequently seen as closely correlated with the experience of boredom. It is assumed that a task that has a predictable outcome or one involving endless iterations of the same will offer little to hold the subject’s attention. It is also unlikely to offer significant meaning that can justify the time invested. Yet, in the case of the romance novel, its many avid readers are far from bored by the stories. Many are, in fact, deeply engrossed in them, not only reading many books in quick succession but also exchanging views and discussing books with friends and fellow enthusiasts. Some readers have even admitted to being almost ‘addicted’ to their romance reading habits. By combining insights from romance scholarship and boredom studies, this paper aims to shed light on the seemingly contradictory ability of romance stories to entertain and excite, despite their inherent unoriginality. Drawing on sociological studies of romance readers, it investigates the mechanisms that seem

capable of counteracting the boredom-inducing aspects of repetition and convention in romance stories. Incorporating approaches from psychoanalytic thought, it also addresses the peculiar relationship between a narrative genre centred around desire and an emotional state that has frequently been described as a 'desire for desires'.