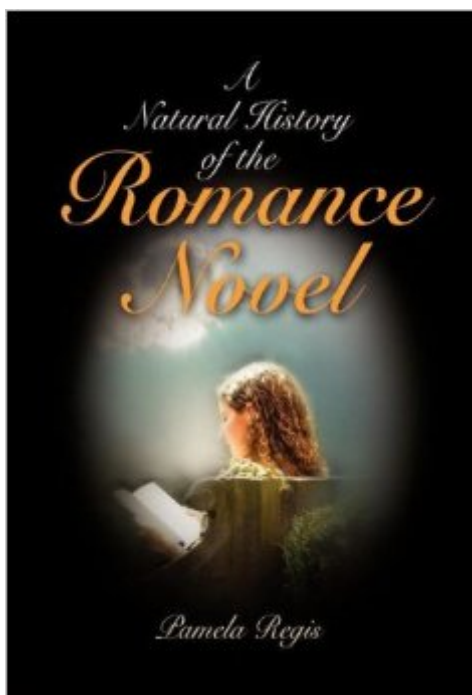


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# A Natural History Of The Romance Novel



## Synopsis

The romance novel has the strange distinction of being the most popular but least respected of literary genres. While it remains consistently dominant in bookstores and on best-seller lists, it is also widely dismissed by the critical community. Scholars have alleged that romance novels help create subservient readers, who are largely women, by confining heroines to stories that ignore issues other than love and marriage. Pamela Regis argues that such critical studies fail to take into consideration the personal choice of readers, offer any true definition of the romance novel, or discuss the nature and scope of the genre. Presenting the counterclaim that the romance novel does not enslave women but, on the contrary, is about celebrating freedom and joy, Regis offers a definition that provides critics with an expanded vocabulary for discussing a genre that is both classic and contemporary, sexy and entertaining. Taking the stance that the popular romance novel is a work of literature with a brilliant pedigree, Regis asserts that it is also a very old, stable form. She traces the literary history of the romance novel from canonical works such as Richardson's *Pamela* through Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*, and then turns to more contemporary works such as the novels of Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts.

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## Customer Reviews

If an indignant member of the 'If you have any criticisms of romantic novels or their defenders, then it must be because you have never read any/don't understand the genre' school wishes to post an angry comment on my objections to the arguments advanced in Pamela Regis' book, then please don't. I have read many romantic novels and even sometimes, write them. Three stars, because I don't believe in giving low star ratings because I disagree with a writer's arguments. I don't normally write such scathing reviews, but this book's soft treatment of rapist heroes really dismayed me and I thought the author did the genre no favours by putting forward illogical arguments. With this book, though, I was really tempted to give a low star rating, if only because the author falls over backwards to justify the heroine of 'Pamela' in her idiotic choice of marrying her one time would be rapist Mr B. In this, she makes the following astounding statement: - 'The story can be called oppressive, I think, only if one believes that marriage is an institution so flawed that it cannot be good for a woman.' Excuse me! What sort of an argument is this? (Steam bursts from my ears!) I can't dispute that Professor Regis does think that, but it's a ridiculous assertion. The story can be called oppressive because it romanticizes the relationship between a would be rapist and his victim in the most distasteful way. The story can be called oppressive, because the heroine is wholly oppressed by Mr B both before he puts the relationship on a nominally respectable basis, and afterwards, when he controls her every behaviour. Not only that, but Regis has unfortunately neglected her research.

Pamela Regis' book, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, is a remarkable example of circular reasoning in literary analysis. She sets up a very specific definition of the concept "romance novel" -- namely "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines." In Chapter 4, *The Definition Expanded*, she then narrows this definition by defining eight aspects which she perceives as necessary to the form: *Society Defined*, *The Meeting*, *The Barrier*, *The Attraction*, *The Declaration*, *Point of Ritual Death*, *The Recognition*, and *The Betrothal*. It should be noted that in this context, she presumes that the "betrothal" will occur between the hero and heroine, thus eliminating from the "romance novel" category an immensely popular work such as Anthony Hope's 1895 *The Prisoner of Zenda*, which followed the trope of love between hero and heroine sacrificed to the more imperative needs of honor and duty. Given these tight limits on what

the author is willing to consider to be a "romance novel," she focuses on tracing the form from Joseph Richardson's 18th century epistolary blockbuster, Pamela, through Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and other selected 19th century authors, picking up Georgette Heyer in the first half of the 20th century, and continuing through Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts. From the perspective of the historian rather than the literary critic, the major deficiency of the book lies in its lack of attention to authors who, in their own time, were blockbuster bestsellers.

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