

The Heroine as Reader, the Reader as Heroine: Jennifer Crusie's *Welcome to Temptation*

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Abstract: This article examines Jennifer Crusie's *Welcome to Temptation* (2000) as a response to academic accounts of the nature and value of reading the popular romance from the 1980s and 1990s and as an anticipation of later, more positive accounts of the relationship of readers and this particular form of fiction, such as Pamela Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. The structure of Crusie's novel reveals a counter argument to a series of persistent criticisms of romance readers and their fiction. Through the encounter with the hero, himself a text, the heroine gains textual power as a reader and an author. Her further active participation in the imaginative experience of romance allows her to author a new reality for herself, and to enter into a relationship with the hero that signals a new pattern for their community, overthrowing the patriarchal hierarchy of the past.

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In July, 2011, an opinion piece in the “consumer commentary” of the British *Journal of Family Planning, Reproduction, and Health Care* sparked a brief flurry of worry and debate on both sides of the Atlantic about the pernicious effects that reading popular romance fiction might have on women’s contraceptive choices. On inspection, the essay turned out to have no solid basis in research or data; indeed, although its author, Susan Quilliam, was the author of several self-help books, she had no medical or academic expertise of any kind.^[1] The piece and its reception, however, remind us of the persistence of the idea that reading romantic fantasy misleads women as to the nature of their circumstances and condition in life. It makes of the female reader, in short, a “female Quixote” (Lennox, 1752), a Catherine Moreland (Austen, 1818), or an Emma Bovary (Flaubert, 1856).

In the 1980s, this concern was central to the early feminist studies of popular romance fiction, even among scholars who considered themselves to be defending both the genre and its readers. Tania Modleski’s early essay “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances,” for example, suggests that in immersing themselves in “the wonderful world of Harlequin Romances” women find themselves rewarded for the same kind of “self-subversion,” as opposed to self-advocacy, that haunts them in the world outside these novels (Modleski 435). Janice Radway, a few years later, was equally wary. “Although in restoring a woman’s depleted sense of self romance reading may constitute tacit recognition that the current arrangement of the sexes is not ideal for her emotional well-being,” she observes in *Reading the Romance*, “it does nothing to alter a woman’s social situation, itself very likely characterized by those dissatisfying patterns” (212). Despite the fact that the romance readers she interviews explicitly tell her otherwise (see, for example, 100-102), Radway remains skeptical of their claims that reading romance changes their lives for the better, and she hypothesizes instead that reading the romance causes readers to stay trapped in unhappy or chafing personal circumstances. “This activity,” she writes, “*may very well obviate the need or desire to demand satisfaction in the real world because it can be so successfully met in fantasy*” (212, emphasis mine).

When romance authors begin to write their own critical essays on the genre in the 1990s, they often take up the question of romance’s effect on its readers. You can find accounts of the genre as heartening, empowering, or leading to various forms of psychological health in many of the essays gathered in Jayne Ann Krentz’s anthology *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* (1992), notably those by Laura Kinsale, Linda Barlow, Susan Elizabeth Phillips, Mary Jo Putney, Diana Palmer, Kathleen Gilles Seidel, and Krentz herself. The claims made by these authors frequently echo those made by the readers Radway interviews (but does not quite believe); likewise, several of these authors take on Radway, Modleski, Kay Mussell, and other scholars by name, quoting from their work and defining their own views against those of the academics. Clearly, then, by the start of the 1990s, academic accounts of popular romance were well known within, and contested by,

the romance community. By the middle of the decade, when Jennifer Crusie began to study, write, and write about popular romance, those accounts and debates might well form a part of an aspiring romance novelist's education.

Several of Crusie's early category romances, including *Anyone But You* (1996) and *The Cinderella Deal* (1996) can profitably be read in dialogue with first-wave popular romance criticism, serving as implicit defenses of popular romance fiction and the act of reading it. Likewise, many of Crusie's essays, especially those published in 1997-1998, draw on her own life experience and her graduate training in literary studies as they defend the genre against charges from both the patriarchal right and the radical-feminist left. Perhaps her most accomplished work in this vein, however, is found in the New York Times bestseller *Welcome to Temptation* (2000). In this novel, Crusie implicitly confronts flawed popular and critical conceptions of the romance genre, including the notion that romance is an undemanding and addictive form of fantasy that misleads women readers about their actual lives. Without simply dismissing what is problematic in our relationship with the fictions we enjoy, Crusie offers a nuanced argument for the liberating power of reading and writing the romance. Over the course of the novel, Sophie Dempsey, Crusie's protagonist and a figure for the reader and writer of romance, becomes a reader of her own self. Her romantic relationship with the novel's hero, mayor Phineas "Phin" Tucker, encourages her to have fantasies that become a means of reading what lies inside her and of reading the world of things and people around her. Crusie argues through Sophie that active participation in imaginative experience can connect a woman more fully to herself and to others, that it empowers her to transform her life and the life of the community around her, and, further, that whether this possibility is realized depends on the quality of responsiveness to experience in the reader—either a real experience or a fictional one—and not at all on the subject matter of the experience, whether it is a real-life relationship or a popular romance.

Fantasy, Vanity, Reality

Crusie, Radway, and ordinary readers agree that a boundary exists between "real life," "the world [we] actually inhabit," "the world of actual social relations," and "the separate, free realm of the imaginary" (Radway 55, 60, 117). According to the critics of romance, however, from 18th century moralists to Susan Quilliam, confusion between the two realms seems to be the inevitable effect of the genre, at least on women readers. Crusie does not deny that individuals can confuse fantasy and reality, but rather suggests that confusion about boundaries between the two realms is not specific to women or to one form of fantasy, the romance, but rather arises in the vanity and egocentrism of the person experiencing the fantasy. To make her case, Crusie opens the novel by locating her heroine's imaginative experience as a reader and writer in the larger context of accepted imaginative experience in American popular culture. She then juxtaposes her heroine's fantasy experience against the experiences of a cast of secondary characters, both male and female, whose participation in popularly accepted forms of fantasy, those not subject to critical derision for association with women, leads them into moral error.

When Crusie's heroine Sophie Dempsey arrives at the edge of the title's small Ohio town, she expects problems to appear "like bats, dive-bombing them from out of nowhere" (2). She is quoting a film, as Crusie heroines often do (in this case, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), and, in the process, announcing her awareness that things might not be as they seem. Sophie's experiences as a filmgoer confirm what she already knows from her grim adolescence as the daughter of an itinerant, small-time con artist: small towns are "dangerous" (2). Behind the blue skies, waving maple trees, and fluffy clouds, Sophie instinctively looks for the Bates Hotel, the bats, and the host who offers fava beans and Chianti. Where Sophie's younger sister, Amy, sees "Pleasantville," Sophie sees "Amityville." She finds the "deserted tree-lined road before them" leading to Temptation "ominous" (3). "A muddy river stream[s] sullenly under a gunmetal bridge at the bottom of the hill," the houses are "smug," and a "flesh-colored," "bullet shaped," and "aggressively phallic" water tower dominates the landscape, each detail suggesting that this town embodies a world overshadowed by masculine power (4).

In these first perceptions of Temptation, in which Sophie relies on her experience of popular films, she does appear to be an anxious mis-reader of her environment, much like Jane Austen's naïve heroine Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey*. Yet in a significant twist, the fantasies from which Sophie derives her first flawed reading of the town of Temptation are *not* associated with women or with romance, even of the gothic variety. Furthermore, from the moment Sophie arrives in Temptation, she finds herself surrounded by other characters immersed in fantasies, as though—in this novel, at least—such immersion were simply part of the human condition, not an isolated or unusual case. Crusie gives each of these self-absorbed individuals a different and commonly accepted form of fantasy experience. Few critics of popular culture would condemn high school plays, local repertory theater productions, small-market newscasts, or stacy wedding videos as potentially harmful; instead critics assume participants in these activities can navigate between their on-stage experience and ordinary life and benefit from their involvement in imaginative acts. Yet each of the supporting characters turns out to be so deeply immersed in an apparently innocuous fantasy that he or she grossly misreads his or her familiar environment and relationships with others. Clearly, then, it is not a specific genre of imaginative experience that misleads or deludes its participants, nor is it women in general as participants in fantasy who feel its potentially harmful effects. Rather, as Crusie's narrative demonstrates, the flaw lies in the characters themselves.

Consider, for example, the overlapping fates of Frank and Georgia Lutz and actress and sometime porn-star Clea Whipple, all of whom grew up (unlike Sophie) in the Ohio town of Temptation. Before the novel begins, Clea and Frank, who played opposite each other in a high school production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, pretended, for the show, to be in love. In an adolescent failure to distinguish fantasy from reality, they went on to have sex (very disappointing sex, at least for Clea), and this in turn precipitated Frank's hasty marriage to a jealous Georgia, who faked a pregnancy to trap him and spite her rival.

At the start of the novel, Clea has returned to Temptation to make a video that will, she hopes, restart her film career. The chance to see Frank again immediately stimulates her capacity for fantasy. Before they meet, he is "Frank the football star, Frank the high-school-theater leading man; Frank the wealthy developer; Frank the generally magnificent" (23). Alas, although he has continued to play that high-school leading man, ever more inappropriately cast as a youthful hero, the real-life adult Frank turns out to be "pudgy,

badly dressed, and annoying" (36). When we first encounter him in the novel, he is eagerly waiting to play the lead in the Temptation production of *Carousel*, opposite his wife, Georgia, the "Coppertone Toad," (54) who imagines that with an application of suntan lotion she and her son's twenty year old girlfriend can be mistaken for sisters. Clea promptly loses interest in the actual Frank, and instead casts Frank's twenty-year old son Rob as the leading man of her current fantasy and would-be comeback film.

Crusie casts a cool, appraising eye on all of these characters. The Lutzses don't come off well: as they continue to "play" the youthful leads, both husband and wife lose their dignity in vanity, and they pay for their lack of self-awareness in a loveless marriage that was always, after all, based on a lie (Georgia's faked pregnancy). Clea, though, comes off worse. Abandoning her fantasy of a reunion with Frank, she concocts a new one, a sort of narcissistic caricature of a woman-empowering romance novel plot. It is, she explains, "a great story, about *me* coming home to meet *my* old high-school lover and being disillusioned, and then meeting his son, who seduces *me* and sets *me* free of my past, and *I* drive off into the sunset with him, getting everything *I* ever wanted" (177, italics are mine). Although she describes this as "a real woman's fantasy" (177), Clea's plot could not be further from the fantasies enjoyed by Radway's Smithton readers, who repeatedly emphasize their interest in the developing relationship between the hero and heroine, and not simply in the heroine's individual triumph. When Clea acts out the fantasy she has scripted for herself, not only on film for Amy Dempsey's camera, but in the "movie set" of a town, Temptation, seducing Rob and humiliating Frank and his wife Georgia, the egocentrism of her fantasy-life proves to be entirely anti-romantic, undermining the Lutz's marriage just as it undermined Clea's own marriage to the callow and selfish anchorman Zane Black.

As the novel goes on, the Lutzses' self-absorption gradually makes them objects of our pity. Clea's, by contrast, becomes more and more morally disturbing; ultimately, she turns out to be capable of watching with "depraved indifference" (370) as her ex-husband Zane dies in front of her. The most pernicious form of fantasy-entrapment in the novel, however—even worse than Clea's, because it threatens to infect a whole community, and it leads to an actual murder attempt—belongs to the Garveys, Stephen and Virginia, a couple who cast themselves as the moral "pillars" of Temptation, and are seen as such by Sophie (see 6, 7, 8, and 27).

The Garveys' initial act in the novel is a face-saving fiction, a lie about which of them was driving the beige Cadillac that hits Sophie and Amy's car. We do not learn this right away, however—instead, we learn that the Garveys are publicly and consistently contemptuous of fiction. They are not readers, film fans, or theater-goers, and they are keen on censorship, especially when it comes to anything sexual. Not simply hypocrites, they are profoundly self-deceiving, so caught up in lies about their own morality and importance to the community that they cannot distinguish the real version of events from their subjective version. Their lack of experience with imaginative fiction renders them unable to judge character effectively. (Virginia, for instance, simply admires celebrity; she has no capacity to judge the character of either Zane or Clea.) A pervasive and unconscious subjectivity shapes their interactions with others, which renders them bad citizens, bad neighbors, and bad parents.

Virginia's version of events, in particular, turns out to be so detached from reality that it borders on the criminally insane. A former store clerk, Virginia married up in

marrying Stephen, the son of one of the town's two most politically powerful families. (The other, even more important, is the Tuckers.) For over twenty years, she has devoted herself to the fantasy that her daughter, Rachel, will marry the town's mayor, Phin Tucker: a marriage that would end the generations-old, quasi-dynastic rivalry between the two families and would certify Virginia's position in the upper circles of Temptation society. Utterly incapable of seeing herself as others see her, Virginia perceives others, including her daughter, as projections of her own wishes and resentments. She offers, in effect, a nightmare version of the maternal "nurturance" which Radway argues romance readers seek from romance novels and specifically from romance heroes (Radway 137), and Virginia's daughter Rachel does everything she can to escape her mother and find good sex and independence, not nurturance, in a relationship with the deliciously non-heroic "Eeyore of LA," porn producer Leo Kingsley (182).

Clea, the Lutzes, Virginia and Stephen: each of these supporting characters, whether female and male, has developed a controlling fantasy that inflates the self and distorts his or her relations with others.^[2] Without ever having read a popular romance, each fails to distinguish between a fantasy world and the real one. In contrast to those misperceiving characters, Crusie's protagonist, Sophie, is an exemplar of how a woman's interaction with fiction can, over time, make her more perceptive of herself and her world. Without ever showing Sophie reading a romance novel (or any other kind of novel, for that matter) Crusie uses the novel's heroine and her evolving relationship with Phin, its hero, to show how that devalued figure, the romance reader, can negotiate the difference between the fictional worlds she enters as she reads and the world of "actual social relations" (Radway, 60) that she returns to, and can change, when she is not reading.

Reading an Old-Fashioned Novel (or a Hero)

Before discussing Crusie's heroine Sophie, let me briefly pause to note an account of women's reading that is essentially contemporary with Radway and Modleski, yet quite contrasting in its conclusions. Published in 1982, just between *Loving with a Vengeance* (1981) and the first edition of *Reading the Romance* (1984), Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* offers an overlapping, but considerably more positive account of how a woman's reading, however private an act it seems, can also be a way of interacting with the actual world. "Reading an old-fashioned novel," she explains—that is, as opposed to a novel inspired by the "New Feminism" (24)—offers real-world benefits to readers, since it

makes a woman's secret life public, valid, as more and less real as everything else. Recognizing the problems and the conventions of a woman-centered novel, the reader feels part of a community and a tradition of women who talk well about their lives and link them, by language, to larger subjects. Looking up from a novel about a girl's settling on a husband and a destiny so as to assert higher moral and aesthetic laws and her own alliance with them, the reader can feel the weight of her woman's life as serious, can see her own self as shapely and significant. (24)

Brownstein is not speaking of reading *popular* romance novels here, but her description of the plots and values of those “old-fashioned novels” makes it clear that they are in fact *romance novels*, at least according to Pamela Regis’s working definition of this genre from the 18th century to the present: “a work of prose fiction that describes the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (14). In Brownstein’s account, then, the romance reader enters into a “reflective, observant life” that stands in sharp contrast to the unreflective, self-involved lives of Crusie’s flawed secondary characters. Reading, a sojourn in the free realm of the imaginary, leads to a wider and richer perception of the real—although “the real” turns out to be a complex, not entirely obvious thing. “Looking up from a novel,” in which a reader has encountered “talk” and “language” that links her life to that of others, the reader finds her life as “valid and as more *and* less real as everything else” (14). More *and* less, not more *or* less: a shift which suggests that the fabric of reality has its own elements of fantasy, of story, woven inextricably within it.

Brownstein’s account of the reading experience in a literary context may differ in tone from Radway’s less optimistic account of reading romance, but it squares remarkably well with the accounts given by Radway’s interview subjects, women who form a community in which they are able to discuss what Brownstein calls “the conventions of a woman-centered novel” (24) and connect their reading experience to their experience as wives, mothers, and friends. These Smithton readers might well have been on Crusie’s mind when she constructed Sophie, the heroine of *Welcome to Temptation*. Sophie’s alert consciousness may link her to the larger tradition of heroine-centered fiction, but like the Smithton readers described by Radway, Sophie is characterized first and foremost not by self-awareness, but rather by a profound (and profoundly gendered) sense of herself as a caregiver, a nurturer of others who is never nurtured in return. After the death of their mother in an automobile accident, Sophie mothers and nurtures her sister Amy and her younger brother Davy, and she continues to do so in a self-abnegating way even after they are all adults. Early in the novel, when asked by Amy to articulate her own desires, she thinks to herself that she doesn’t really have any, outside of caring for her family. “When she thought about it, it was sad,” Crusie writes. “Thirty two years old, and she had no idea what she wanted from life” (68).

At the opposite extreme from characters like Clea and Virginia Garvey, who are unable to see reality through the lens of their fantasies, Sophie sees *only* reality. Or, at least, she sees a “version” of it: one in which, she tells Phin, “you have to be careful all the time and you get nothing for free” (95). In the conversation leading up to her first sexual encounter with Phin, Sophie might be momentarily distracted by the effects of rum and diet coke and the “romantic” ambience of moonlight and a flowing river—the word “romantic” comes up a half-dozen times in the scene—but she is quick to notice a “fish stink” that spoils the mood. “Reality,” she calls it, “making its usual appearance just when she was getting somewhere” (94).

Sophie insists that her fish-stink “version of reality” is “empowering” (94): a term that she seems to have derived from pop culture representations of feminism. “I’ve read *The Second Sex*. I’ve read *The Cinderella Complex*. I’m responsible for my own orgasm,” she tells Phin, quoting the movie *Tootsie* (93). Since she also quotes early and often from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Psycho*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, however, we might well conclude that her wary realism stems from something else: a

determination not to base real-world actions on a controlling fantasy, of whatever sort, the way that characters in these four movies do. (Trapped in altered psychic states, these characters are extreme versions of the deluded characters who surround Sophie in *Temptation*.) This determination, however, has not allowed Sophie to escape a conventionally female destiny. As the novel begins, she is in a relationship with a man who presumes to interpret her to herself—named Brandon, like the hero of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, he is Sophie's former therapist—she's sexually repressed; and she's responsible for the care of younger, though adult, siblings. Sophie's resistance to fantasy in general, and especially to fantasies about anything "romantic," has enabled her to pride herself on being self-sufficient, but it has not provided her any affirmation that her "secret life," in Brownstein's terms, is "valid," "real," "serious," "shapely," or "significant" (24). In fact, that "secret life" has grown so secret, she hardly knows it's there.

For Sophie to get to a new version of reality, then, she must begin by allowing herself to entertain fantasies. Unlike Catherine Moreland, Emma Bovary, or a Smithton reader, Sophie has no pile of romances by her bed to let her escape into a fascinating (or dangerous) fantasy life, nor does she have a shelf of "old-fashioned" literary or domestic fiction, of the kind extolled by Brownstein. Her access to fantasy, to fiction, to reading as an affirming and self-transforming act, comes, instead, through Phin. Phin is connected with reading in multiple ways. As they drive into town, Sophie and Amy first encounter him as a text to be read: his name appears in full on a small sign "in antique green" that says "Phineas T. Tucker" (3). The rusting sign leads Amy to speculate that "Phineas T. must be older than God;" and to imagine that "he hasn't had sex since the bicentennial," immediately evoking associations of Rotary Club meetings, expanding waistlines, and old boy networks. When they meet in person for the first time, Phin turns out instead to have "broad shoulders, mirrored sunglasses, and no smile," a look that sends "every instinct [Sophie] ha[s] into overdrive" (25), especially her instincts for perception and interpretation. Uniting her experience of film with her actual history of living in a series of small towns, Sophie reads Phin as the embodiment of "every glossy frat boy in every nerd movie ever made, every popular town boy who'd ever looked right through her in high school, every rotten rich kid who had belonged where she hadn't" (25). She may not be reading him like a book, but she views him like a movie, and even hears "ominous music on the soundtrack in her head" (25).

Sophie's initial "reading" of Phin connects him simultaneously to men she has previously encountered and to male characters in movies she has seen—movies in which women like her are not the romantic leads. This reading places them on opposite sides of any number of binary oppositions: insider and outsider; male and female; established authority and resistance to it; college educated and under-educated; upper class and no class. (Sophie may arguably have achieved middle-class status as an adult, but her upbringing as a drifter haunts her, as when she describes Phin as "starring in *The Philadelphia Story*," while "she looked like an extra from *The Grapes of Wrath*" [28].) To the experienced romance reader, of course, these tensions merely set the stage for a familiar plot structure: one in which a hero who is, as Radway says, "wealthy" or "aristocratic," an "active and successful participant in some major public endeavor" (130) falls for and elevates, through marriage, a poor but honest heroine.

To our surprise, then, as well as Sophie's, both her and our initial "readings" of Phin turn out to be incorrect, or at least incomplete. This small-town aristocrat finds his position at the top of the patriarchal pyramid in *Temptation* to be "mind-numbing" (14), and as he presides over a tedious town council meeting in the opening chapter, he turns out to be stuck between the "sepia-toned" photos of past Tucker mayors and the narrow, repetitive prospects for his future (13). (The family campaign motto, trotted out for endless campaigns, haunts Phin: "Tucker for Mayor: More of the Same" [10].) His power, rooted in his family's history, is exactly the sort of political, legal, and financial power that Radway says women "do not possess in a society dominated by men" (149), but this Volvo-driving, golf-playing, college-educated mayor of a small town, son of its most prominent family, emblem of male privilege in America, is no figure for the "autonomous masculinity" Radway sees in romance heroes, and still less for the contemptuous brutality Modleski observes in an older generation of heroes (Radway 148, Modleski 437). Far from displaying "male emotional reserve, independence, and even cruelty" (Radway, 158), Phin is consistently seen by the reader as living "in relation" with other people: colleagues, friends, and family. His ties with those around him, including his relationship with his young daughter, may be flawed by his own lack of self-fulfillment, but they are unmistakably loving, and as the novel begins, Phin is utterly at home with domesticity.

In fact, as we learn a bit later in the novel, if it weren't for his sense of family duty (a sense he shares with Sophie), Phin would just as soon stop being mayor and retire to his second job as owner of the town bookstore, Tucker Books. Located in a "pale green Victorian" house, this store seems as "old-fashioned" as any domestic novel described by Brownstein, and Phin lives right above it, yet another link between him and the art of fiction (22). In fact, since Phin is the character who utters the novel's title phrase—"Hello, Sophie Dempsey," her worst nightmare said. "Welcome to *Temptation*" (25)—we might say that as the novel begins, at least potentially, Sophie and Phin are not just its heroine and hero, but figures for the reader of this very romance and for this very romance text.

Trading Textual Strategies

With all of this textual and metatextual material in mind, let's return to the novel's initial sex scene, the scene where Sophie's transformation begins. In this scene, we now notice, Phin offers sex to Sophie in the precisely the same way that the romance novel, in Radway's account, seduces its female readers. In the critic's view, romance fiction supplies the Smithton readers "with an important emotional release that is proscribed in daily life because the social role with which they identify themselves leaves little room for guiltless, self-interested pursuit of individual pleasure" (Radway 95-96). Phin, in turn, encourages Sophie to go for "pleasure" with "no guilt," "no responsibility," to leave her social role behind and "let somebody take care of you for a change," to "be selfish" and lose herself temporarily in a (sexual) fantasy, proving herself to be—not prudent and nurturing—but "wild," "reckless," and "satisfied" (95-96).

We are not, however, finished with this seduction scene. Radway, after all, interprets romance fiction as merely "compensatory literature," a temporary respite from the female reader's "social role" that does not enable, and may even discourage, actual lasting change

(95). Phin does more, introducing Sophie at once to sexual *and* textual pleasures. His sexual invitation to Sophie, for example, arises from a twist he gives to an old Appalachian song, the first “text” (aside from himself) that he brings to the story. The song’s lyric about a woman wandering the mountains in search of a new lover sounds at first like a lovely fantasy to Sophie. But when Phin reveals that Julie Ann, the heroine of the song, meets a bear in the woods and becomes a ghost, Sophie immediately rejects the “romance” of the song. The “bear” in those lovely woods is like the river’s “fish stink”—reality intruding on fantasy to destroy it. Phin, the bookstore owner, quickly shows Sophie the power that an experienced reader actually has over the text at hand. Without missing a beat, he rewrites the end of Julie Ann’s story, telling Sophie, “Okay, she’s not dead. The bear ate her, and she came her brains out” (93). Phin’s revision of the song shows Sophie two ways of being an active, creative reader. You can find yourself in a text as a character, as he spontaneously casts her as the heroine and himself as the bear, and you can even enter the text as an author, changing its “version of reality,” in this case, the ending, to make it less menacing and more enjoyable. (It’s notable that his punning revision of the song leaves the key verb unchanged: the bear “ate her” in both versions of the song, but what that phrase means is changed utterly.)

In direct contradiction to the argument that romance reading renders women passive and invisible, then, Crusie designs the interaction between her hero and heroine as a dynamic of liberation. In fact, these early scenes can be read as a step-by-step rewriting of those early academic worries about the effects of the genre. Where Modleski argues that reading Harlequin romances invites a woman “to obliterate the consciousness of the self as a physical presence” (435), for example, the first effect of Phin’s presence and the oral sex he offers is Sophie’s *increased* awareness of her body. She becomes more corporeally real to herself. She has been ignoring injuries and nervous habits. Now she feels “every muscle and nerve in her body celebrating” (98), and the process does not end here. In the scenes that follow, she also becomes more psychologically real to herself, more self-aware. As soon as the sexual “mindlessness” fades, she realizes that she has just “cheated” on Brandon, her ex-therapist, and she leaves Phin to take responsibility for her behavior by calling Brandon and confessing. In a comic twist, he responds like an academic romance critic responding to a romance reader, refusing to take her word for what has happened and interpreting her behavior in psycho-political terms. He first describes her behavior as “going for a little harmless excitement by necking with an authority figure” (102). He then further defines her actions, saying,

You’re rebelling against the oppressive social structure that’s made your family outcast, by corrupting its most powerful and popular adherent. And now you’re sending me a wake-up call—literally—that I’m not paying enough attention to you (102).

Compare Brandon’s interpretation to Radway’s claim that the romance reader identifies with the heroine when “she secures the attention and recognition of her culture’s most powerful and essential representative, a man” (84). Like a condescending scholar, he speaks with smug assurance that Sophie’s actions in relation to Phin can be explained in terms of her victimization at the hands of an “oppressive social structure” (102), and he refuses to believe that what has happened signals any real change in her.

Sophie, however, refuses to accept his interpretation. In a sign that her own transformation has begun, Sophie listens to her body's message of satisfaction and refuses to be convinced by Brandon's interpretation of her behavior. Not only does she insist that no interpretation can change the reality of her encounter with Phin, but she shows that she has learned some of Phin's textual strategies. Brandon's suggestion that they will soon get her "straightened out," for example, leads Sophie to consider that she might choose to be "bent," and she does not hesitate to identify specific sex acts, claiming them in frank, colloquial language. Far from confusing fantasy and reality, then, Sophie has gained perspective on her real situation. She is absolutely clear that her enjoyment of and satisfaction in her sexual encounter with Phin are bad signs for her relationship with Brandon, and as she acknowledges to Amy the nature of the encounter—"Phin was sort of a kinky fantasy, sex with a guy I don't know, swept away in the dark by the river, all that stuff" (105)—she begins to realize Phin's role as a key to discovering her "secret life," in Brownstein's phrase (24), not just as someone who has fantasies, but as the active author and reviser of them. She takes ownership of the encounter by "reliving the whole thing all over again, dwelling lavishly on the moments that were particularly perverse and unlike her, fixing the awkward parts. By the time she'd reviewed it a couple of times, it was so glossy, it could have been a hot scene in a movie" (106). The romance reader becomes romance writer; her mind "click[s] along, rewriting her night," and she begins to type, coming to terms with her experience through creating a text.

Constructing a New "Version of Reality"

In her essay "A Story of Her Weaving: The Self-Authored Heroines of Georgette Heyer's Regency Romance," Karin E. Westman tells us that heroines who trade in the "currencies in which men trade—money, sex, and wit" "succeed in authoring their own stories" (166). The realization that she can interpret, revise, and author her experience, using the medium she is most familiar with, surprises and empowers Sophie—a heroine named, Crusie has said, after Heyer's heroine in *The Grand Sophy*^[3]—and those around her notice a change. Clea and Amy, for example, read Sophie's "script," are surprised and impressed, and ask her to write more, eager to appropriate Sophie's experience for their own purposes. Even the physical environment around her changes, at least in Sophie's interpretive gaze. Earlier in the novel she metaphorically "reads" the wallpaper pattern of the farmhouse kitchen where she works as a set of "mutant cherries" (65; 110): reminders of her own humiliating loss of virginity to a town boy who used her for sex but discarded her as a person unworthy of his respect and affection. Once she has reshaped her experience with Phin into a text of her own making, Sophie realizes that she has "misread" the wallpaper based on her history as a victim and an outsider, and she recognizes that the print on the wallpaper is a faded set of apples, not cherries, the change in fruit suggesting a considerable change, however unconscious, in how she interprets her past.

Realistically, Crusie does not let a single exposure to fantasy to accomplish a complete transformation of her heroine. Such change does not happen overnight, nor does it happen in a vacuum. Amy and Clea may want more scenes, but Sophie doesn't think she can write more, and within hours, a deliberately cruel and contemptuous comment from

Clea's husband, Zane, sets back Sophie's brief progress toward self-realization. Zane's claim that "Sophie couldn't write for *Sesame Street*," that "she's so repressed, she's sexless" (115), attacks her for usurping two of the male currencies to which Westman refers in her essay on Heyer: sex and authorship. When Sophie tries on her own to write a new scene based on penetrative intercourse (the "Phallic Variation," she calls it), Zane's "voice [keeps] interrupting her thoughts" (117), as though contesting her right to phallic authority. Her "two hours" of composition are "anguished," and she erases the words on her screen six times because they are "stupid." As she looks at the wall, "the cherries sneer back" at her. "Evidently they hadn't gotten the good news they were apples" (118).

At this point in the novel, then, fantasy and authorship fail Sophie, leaving her unable to silence self-doubt and resist the patriarchal backlash embodied by Zane. Crusie helps us understand why they fail her through the novel's second sex scene, Sophie and Phin's first "Phallic Variation." As they have sex, Sophie is unable to respond—indeed, she decides Zane is right about her, that she's too "detached" or "prissy" or "straight" for "headbanging sex" (135). But the real reason for her lack of inspiration earlier, and lack of satisfaction in the act, lies in her motivations: ultimately, she's "doing this to write a sex scene for a movie she [isn't] even sure she want[s] to make" (135), not as a means of escape or self-discovery. Once again, Phin-the-text comes to her aid. Unfazed by her lack of response, he asks her what her fantasies are when she masturbates. Though she won't answer as he reels off possibilities, he intuits one of her fantasies from her reaction. It is, appropriately, a "discovery fantasy," and Phin feeds her sense of it, until once again Sophie experiences a spectacular orgasm, "discovered" not just by her sister, who walks in as they're having sex, drawn by the sound of a shattering lamp, but by Phin (who "discovers" what she wants, metaphorically illuminating it by breaking that lamp) and by Sophie herself (who "discovers" that she can in fact be, as Phin puts it, both "kinky" and "heart-stopping" in her sexiness [141]). The next morning Sophie writes the new "lamp scene" without difficulty, breaks off her relationship with Brandon, and agrees to "sacrifice herself to the mayor" to get another great scene for Amy's project, happily thinking to herself "I have ideas" for it (146).

In the chapters that follow, Sophie becomes an increasingly active and imaginative participant in her lovemaking, not just taking charge of exactly how kinky and exciting it will be, but demanding to *learn* from it, scene by scene. "This is like college," she tells Phin: "I never got to go [. . .] And I always wanted a degree. So I'm getting it from you" (156). Her sexual education changes her overall "version of reality," rendering it decidedly more optimistic. As she leaves one encounter, for example, she "look[s] dazedly out at Temptation's Main Street baking in the late-afternoon sun" and thinks "*Nice little town*" and "*Pretty*" (159), a far cry from her initial sense of the town as "bat country." This is only a momentary glimpse, one that can be (and is) quickly dispelled by reminders of her position as an outsider, but such moments become increasingly common, and increasingly native to Sophie, as the novel goes on. Although she is repeatedly tempted to persist in her former construction of reality, particularly romantic reality, she soon learns to correct herself without prompting:

Well, that was men for you. She glared at the cherries across from her. Took what they wanted and then—

It occurred to her that this thought wasn't getting her anywhere. It was the same thought she'd been having for fifteen years without any insight or growth, it was the thought that had led her into two years of mind-numbing security with Brandon, it was the thought that had kept her from having the kind of wickedly abandoned sex she'd been having since she'd met Phin. It was, in short, nonproductive.

Worse than that, it was boring.

'I'm through with you,' she said to the cherries. 'It's a brand-new day.' (166).

When Phin appears a page later, Sophie is literally reconstructing her reality by repapering the kitchen in brand new "apple" wallpaper, and Phin finds her irresistible. "I had you at 'hello,'" she exults, revising the heroine's moment of triumph from *Jerry McGuire* in the direction of female agency (the original says, "you had me") and telling Phin, as she leads him off to the shower, to "imagine the possibilities," a clear reversal of the imaginative power dynamic between them (170).

By the second half of *Welcome to Temptation*, Sophie's transformation is complete, at least on the sexual level. Rather than Phin and Sophie mutually discovering Sophie's fantasies, the two begin to act out Phin's—but this time, the progress is played for comedy, not just because his are so familiar and quickly declared (he knows this side of himself quite well), but because their execution gets interrupted by multiple, increasingly dramatic events across the central chapters of the novel. Because of this repetition, we get to see Sophie taking the lead, per Phin's fantasy scenario, over and over again, reinforcing our sense of her new, Phin-like confidence. In fact, after one interruption, Sophie jokes about her effect on him in phrases that mirror Phin's early cockiness: "You were repressed," she tells him, "Which is why God sent me to save you" (288; Phin says the same words to her on 141). Her intimate nickname for him throughout these scenes, "bear," recalls their first encounter on the dock: "your fantasy, bear," she tells him, for example (287). And their final sexual encounter in the novel is an almost move-for-move revision of the first, as Sophie handcuffs him to his own bed, tells him that in *her* version of the ballad, "Julie got the bear," and proceeds to give him an "orgasm he doesn't have to work for" (330). Authorship, authority, and sexuality are inextricably (and quite playfully) intertwined.

The Empowerment Plot

If the only result of Sophie's exposure to fantasy, fiction, and Phin were a change in her sex life, of course, Crusie's brief on behalf of romance would be rather limited. It would suggest that romance was essentially reducible to erotica, or even pornography: a claim that has, of course, been made about the genre, sometimes as a criticism and sometimes in its defense, by academic critics. Instead, Crusie distinguishes between the limited sexual version of her transformation and something broader or deeper, of which sex is only a part. She draws that line of distinction in two ways. First, she has the first group of sexual fantasies that Phin elicits from and acts out with Sophie becoming part of the script she is writing, while the later love scenes do not. That script, in turn, is then filmed and edited into the two contrasting versions of Clea's comeback video, *Cherished* (Amy's vision of

“classy porn” for women) and *Hot Fleshy Thighs* (Leo Kingsley’s decidedly non-classy version of what his male market wants). Yet even as usurped or corrupted by others, Sophie’s work as an author retains its liberating effects: *Cherished* helps Rachel Garvey get out of town and make a new life with Leo, becoming a producer in her own right of female-oriented pornography, while *Hot Fleshy Thighs*, stolen by Stephen Garvey and shown on local cable TV, provokes a political firestorm for Phin and ultimately becomes the catalyst that breaks the old political “version of reality” for the town.

That firestorm would have destroyed Phin, not the Garveys, however, were it not for the other transformation of Sophie: the one that is *not* reducible to her discovery of her sexual “secret life,” but that is just as clearly dependent on her learning to “read” herself in the safe context provided by Phin. In the second half of the novel, in addition to the sexual encounters that are connected to Phin’s fantasy, we find a series of encounters that are mediated primarily by the couple’s growing companionship and intimacy. Traces of fantasy play may show up: movie quotes, flirting with fictional roles, the use of the word “bear,” albeit as a verb. (“He whispered ‘Now’ in her ear and rolled to bear down on her,” we read in one scene [307].). Alongside these, however, we find declarations like “My dad would have loved you” and questions like “So how was your day?” (306). Post-coital pleasure and emotional security blend into one another for Sophie, who feels “safe and satisfied and *better*” after their lovemaking (308). In this context, Sophie’s abilities as a reader of herself come to the fore, and she draws on this capacity to recognize and name her own mental and emotional states. “When they were both calm again,” Crusie writes, “she told him the truth: ‘I love you’” (308).

Phin, however, despite his comfort with sexual fantasy, has not learned to read his own heart as clearly. Although both Sophie and the reader are sure that Phin loves her (“of course he did, the dummy, she had no doubts about that,” she thinks), that love is now as much Phin’s “secret life” as Sophie’s sexual fantasies were to her at the start of the novel. *He* now needs *her* to mediate that knowledge for him so that his “secret life,” the emotional one, can be consciously known. Sophie deliberately steps into that role. After years of fleeing from her family legacy of con artistry, she tells herself, it is time for her to “be a Dempsey,” to use her family skills at interpersonal manipulation to “get what she needed”: which is, in this case, to get Phin to admit that he loves her (309). In the pages that follow, Sophie uses these skills in a pair of crucial scenes that show the private and public impacts of her transformation. Privately, she metaphorically re-reads what she knows of Phin’s weaknesses (“Sex. Shirts. Pool.”) and uses a combination of her sexual allure and grafter upbringing to defeat a distracted Phin at his living room billiard table, leaving the stunned Phin to declare to his friend Wes, the local police chief, that “I’m going to have to marry her” (314). Publically, at the Town Council showdown that results from the airing of *Hot Fleshy Thighs*, she uses exactly the same skills of “reading” a crowd and manipulating its emotions to bring the town around to Phin’s side, turning them against the Garveys. These are, we note, the same skills at the con that she used *unsuccessfully* in a scene at the start of the novel, interrupted by her sister Amy, but having accepted and embraced them as “a Dempsey” she now seems fully empowered to use them.

Alongside its sexual liberation plot, then, *Welcome to Temptation* also insists that Sophie’s encounter with fantasy (Phin) eventually leads to the more far-reaching, real-life empowerment that Crusie and other romance readers—in Radway and elsewhere—have long claimed on behalf of the genre. A comparison with one of Crusie’s early essays is

revealing, since in her “Romancing Reality” essay, Crusie cites an anecdote from Susan Elizabeth Phillips to explain precisely this empowering effect. (The Phillips piece in question is her contribution to the *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women* anthology.) According to Phillips, Crusie notes, even “a best-selling novelist and happily married wife and mother” might need a little sojourn in romance, and when Phillips “sat down after a tense time in her life to relax with a stack of category novels,” she found “something magical” happening: she “felt better. Calmer. In control.” She writes that the novels did not offer the fantasy she thought romance novels would, “that of a wonderful man or a glamorous, fulfilling career. I already had those things.” Instead, she writes that the “fantasy” they gave her was “one of command and control over the harum scarum events of my life—a fantasy of female empowerment” (55).

This is a beauty of a fantasy, especially since it’s not fantasy at all. Phillips already had command and control, and to this day she remains one of the most empowered women I know. The romance fiction she read simply reminded her of her own capabilities, thereby reinforcing her own experience of reality. (55)

Like Phillips, Sophie is “reminded of her own capabilities” by her encounters with Phin, and those encounters leave her ready and able to embrace her talents at “command and control.” In the novel’s version of this empowerment plot, however, the excursion through fantasy does not “reinforc[e] her own experience of reality.” Rather, it enables her to have a new “version of reality,” one which changes not only her relationship with Phin, but also the social world around them. In fact, because he is the mayor, the two changes turn out to be one.

The Marriage Shift

As I argued a few pages ago, Mayor Phin Tucker is something of an unhappy patriarch, just as trapped as Sophie is in a deadening, “mind-numbing” world of sameness and repetition. (To underscore this parallel, the adjective “mind-numbing” appears twice in the novel: once to describe Phin’s years as mayor [14] and once to describe Sophie’s years with Brandon [166].) Phin is as burdened by his social role as Sophie is, and as concerned with family duty; in fact, his family pressures, embodied by his mother Liz, might be read as even more ominous, given the multiple references to *Psycho* that crop up throughout the book. Phin is no Norman Bates, driven to murderous madness, but he is, by his own admission, “stuck” (another adjective the novel applies both to Phin [33] and Sophie [68]). No wonder he responds so eagerly to the opportunity to meet the “loose” women who have shaken up the Garveys by their mere arrival in Temptation (17), and no wonder his mother responds so coldly and threateningly to his increasingly public relationship with Sophie, not just to Phin’s face, but behind his back, visiting Sophie early in the novel to remind her precisely where she stands in the socio-political structure of Temptation.

Liz plans to intimidate Sophie, or, if that fails, to buy her son’s lover off, as she did his late first wife, Diane. Sophie, however, is unshaken, and she uses her initial, primarily

sexual capacity for fantasy to present Phin's mother with an image of her son simply as a man, stripped of his social and political trappings, "gorgeous and smart and funny and kind and skilled" and "sexy as hell" (163). As their relationship develops beyond the merely sexual ("We're more than just the sex," he tells her), Sophie's impact on Phin likewise reaches beyond the sexual. It reveals to him just how frozen and dangerous his relationship with his mother has become, and he stands up to her, ordering Liz to "back off or you'll lose us" when she tells him and his daughter, Dillie, to stay away from Sophie. When all three Tuckers meet up with Sophie at a Little League baseball game, Phin pushes back against his mother's wishes to make his romantic relationship with Sophie obvious to the community at large, since "his smile to her pretty much telegraphed to everybody everything he'd said before"; when Liz angrily tells him that Sophie has "destroyed" his life, he agrees, adding that the life she destroyed was "a fucking wasteland; all Sophie did was clear the brush" (351-2).

Well before he admits to Sophie that he loves her, then—a declaration the novel postpones until its final triumphant pages—Phin finds himself freed by her from his "stuck" status, realizing in the process that he wants to replace that "wasteland" with a public, legal relationship. Just moments after being beaten at pool, in fact, is when he tells Wes "I'm going to have to marry her" (314). Not sex, not love, but *marriage* seems crucial here. Why?

First-wave romance scholars often lamented the connection in romance between fully expressed female sexuality and heterosexual marriage. Radway, for example, found it frustrating that even in ostensibly progressive novels, "in every case, these romances refuse finally to unravel the connection between female sexual desire and monogamous heterosexuality" (16). Crusie, by contrast, frames the issue of marriage in terms of a redefinition of heterosexual power dynamics. Most romances, she argues in an early essay, "feature a struggle between the heroine and the hero to achieve a balance of power defined by their own terms so that the commitment that takes place at the end of the book is not a surrender but a pact" ("Romancing Reality"). Like other female novelists before her, then, and like Pamela Regis, a more recent romance scholar, Crusie sees in fictional marriages at the ends of novels the opportunity to signal not a woman's proscribed destiny—say, her submission to compulsory heterosexuality—but a shift in a society's structure and values. As Regis explains, the role of the wedding at the end of a romance novel is to make clear the change that has taken place in the broken society in which the love story is set: an indication, for her, of the genre's debt to Shakespearean comedy. A literary novel like David Vann's *Caribou Island* might argue that marriage is "the death of self and possibility" for both partners (194), but the romance novel is concerned with marriage as a measure of the freedom a particular society affords individuals to marry whom they will. For Regis, then, the hero and heroine choose to marry when the plot liberates them from barriers that have constrained them in old patterns, and their marriage signals that those barriers and patterns are no more (Regis 15,33).

Regis, in describing the fall of the barrier between lovers, specifically cites the line in *Pride and Prejudice* in which the "union [of Elizabeth and Darcy] must have been to the advantage of both" (Regis, 17). Where Regis describes this moment as a moment in which "the heroine is free of the barrier," Crusie writes this moment as a moment of mutual liberation of hero and heroine, Phin and Sophie (Regis, 17).

In the town of Temptation, the patterns that constrain hero and heroine alike are summed up by two motifs introduced to the reader in the opening pages and repeated

throughout the novel. As Sophie and Amy drive into town, they encounter in quick succession the Tuckers' campaign slogan, "More of the Same" (10) and that flesh-colored, ostentatiously phallic water tower, which tells us that the particular "sameness" that's being repeated is patriarchy itself. In such a context, a purely sexual relationship between Sophie and Phin cannot provide real freedom. It's simply too easy, for them and for Liz, to interpret their sexual relationship as part of a familiar pattern from the old patriarchal version of reality: a prominent man (a "town boy," one of the "hill people") seeks sexual release with a woman outside his class and community (a "loose" woman, a "cheap" woman, one of Phin's "liaisons," a bite of "the devil's candy"). In sleeping with each other, they might simply be "crossing the tracks," betraying family and class loyalties, consorting with "lepers," with "Not Our Kind," and so on. The static, unchanging, patriarchal social order of *Temptation* has plenty of room for them to meet in the shadows, even as it codifies a version of marriage—embodied in the Lutzes and the Garveys—that is as unhappy and unequal as any feminist scholar might fear.

By the end of the novel, however, each of these motifs has been transformed, and with it, the underlying pattern it represents. The water tower remains in place, but a series of new paintjobs and rainstorms has changed what it resembles: first a phallus, it then looks like a lipstick, and finally like a breast, an image simultaneously sexual and maternal. If the phallic water tower symbolized the constraining power of patriarchy over the town, that hold is broken—not through a revolutionary change, like tearing down the water tower entirely, but through a subtle shift that you have to be a "reader" of the tower, an interpreter, to notice. The meaning of the Tuckers' campaign slogan undergoes a similar shift. In the final pages of the novel, Phin proposes to Sophie, brings her his mother's ring, which all the Tucker brides have worn, to seal the deal. After some hesitation, she agrees, and he tells her that he's through with being mayor after this term, so they'll be left with boxes of unused family campaign posters. Thinking of those posters, Sophie has a sudden realization—not just about them, but about her talents and her future life. "She could make a difference," she thinks,

She was good at making people do what she wanted. She was born to make people do what she wanted. "My God," she said, as the full meaning of her family's legacy for lying, cheating, and scheming hit her.

She was born to be a politician.

"Sophie?"

She leaned back against Phin. "I think I'll take your name," she said, smiling up at him sweetly. "Sophie Dempsey Tucker. It sounds..." She looked at the ring again. "...powerful." (380-81)

The slogan will remain unchanged, still offering "more of the same," but the gender and background of the "Tucker" in question will actually be quite different. Just as the water tower now signifies female power, not patriarchy, just as Julie Ann's being "eaten" by the bear means sexual pleasure, not her death—indeed, just as the bear may have been, in Sophie's version, "gotten" by Julie Ann—the external facts remain the same, but their meanings have changed, especially where gender and power are concerned.

Crusie invites us to extend this analogy still farther. The marriage between Phin and Sophie, we imagine, will look at first glance like any other marriage: they are married, as are the Lutzes, the Garveys, and so on. Under that superficial sameness, however, the power dynamics of the relationship will be entirely different. This couple will share what Crusie's essay calls a "balance of power" between husband and wife; in fact, their "pact" will probably cede more power to Sophie, just as Phin seems to like it. ("Your life just changed," she tells Phin on the final page of the novel, "but it's okay. You can trust me" [381].) Just as girls' weddings at the end of 18th and 19th century novels represented shifts in the patterns of earlier societies, Sophie and Phin's "marriage is a new pattern for each of them, and a new pattern for the town.

And since a culminating happy marriage is a characteristic feature of the romance novel as a genre, we can extend the pattern one step further still. As read by the first generation of critics, back in the 1980s, romance novels seemed to offer "more of the same" in terms of sexual and marital roles, whatever their readers and authors might have claimed. Crusie suggests, by contrast, that this sameness likewise masks a subtle but substantial change in gender roles and power dynamics. Radway is quite right that we have not left "monogamous heterosexuality" behind, in this as in so many romance novels (16). But not all monogamous heterosexuality is alike, this final scene suggests, and just as the familiar signifiers of marriage—including the engagement ring that Sophie stares at with such obvious pleasure—need to be read well and in context in order to be truly understood, the same is true for the familiar signifiers of the romance novel genre.

Conclusion

In several of her essays from the late 1990s, Jennifer Crusie tells the story of how she became a reader of romance reluctantly, even warily, in pursuit of her doctoral dissertation. Like Sophie, she expected the worst from the books, but in the process of reading "one hundred romance novels" for her research, she found a form of narrative that "promised that [. . .] a woman [. . .] could strip away the old lies about her life and emerge re-born, transformed with that new sense of self that's the prize at the end of any quest" ("Let us Now Praise Scribbling Women," March 1998). That transformation spills over, Crusie testifies, such that "when the heroine emerges transformed from the romance story, so do I. So do all romance readers." Crusie's own "new sense of self" included becoming "a romance reader, and then a romance critic, and finally a romance writer"; the plot of *Welcome to Temptation* echoes, distantly but unmistakably, this account of Crusie's becoming a novelist.

If we turn for a moment from accounts of reading romance to accounts of the experience of reading generally, where for the critic there is neither bias against the gender of a reader nor against her chosen genre, we find reading acts and the likely effects of reading described in comparable ways, without alarm or condemnation or special pleading. In James Wood's account of *How Fiction Works*, he explains:

Literature makes us better noticers of life; we get to practice on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life. And so on and on (Wood 63).

Wood does not imagine that the details of a story confuse us about the difference between what is real and what is imagined. He rather asserts that our imaginative experience and our actual experience interact to strengthen our perceptions, and to perceive differently is, perforce, to be a different person, even if ever so slightly. (“As I am,” says Emerson, “so I see.” The inverse is also true.)

Katherine Lever’s *The Novel and the Reader, A Primer for Critics* cites three knowledgeable sources—Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, Gordon Gerould, *How to Read Fiction*, and Joyce Cary, *Art and Reality*—for the suggestion common to each of them that “the reader of a novel is [her]self a novelist” (Lever 44). Lever and her fellow analysts of the act of reading do not condemn readers for “los[ing] ourselves in the imagined world” or letting “the actual world fade away from our consciousness” (Lever 46). In fact, according to Lever,

A good reader can be so lost to actuality that he does not hear bells ring, or smell food burn, or see shadows fall, or feel the tug of a child’s hand. Everything else is forgotten because he is lost in the world of the novel (Lever 46).

The very act and effect—losing oneself—that draw so much condemnation from Modleski or Radway when a book is a romance read by a woman seem to be the acts and effects associated generally with the practice of reading novels. Lever’s imagined reader is male, but she makes an interesting list of details of domestic life to which his reading renders him oblivious. The act of becoming lost in a book in the face of domestic duties like cooking or tending to a child seems to Lever to have value in itself when neither gender nor genre is an issue. Lever claims this value for becoming lost in a book because her understanding of reading is that it is fundamentally active, not passive, and that the reader is in effect a co-creator with the novelist (Lever 44). Crusie, Brownstein, and ordinary female readers have long said that reading novels that are “old-fashioned” or “woman-centered” (Brownstein 24), including popular romance novels, also entails this kind of active, creative reading. Such reading makes us better “readers of life” in general (Wood 63), and as readers of life, we become co-authors of life, or at least of our own lives.

Far from disappearing into fantasy, Sophie Dempsey emerges from her imaginative experience to become a fully realized, freshly empowered “reader of life.” She has always “read” the world around her—clouds, houses, cars, wallpaper—and even the first page of the novel shows this impulse at work, as Sophie “reads” the landscape around her as she drives into Temptation. “Maple trees had waved cheerfully in the warm breeze, cotton clouds had bounced across the blue, blue sky, and the late-August sun had blasted everything in sight,” Crusie writes—yet “Sophie had felt a chill,” knowing that this “riotously happy, southern Ohio landscape” must really be “bat country” (1-2). Sophie reads, we might say, in a particularly pessimistic, even cynical way, one she has learned from her unhappy upbringing and from the movies she has watched so often. Her wary

realism, as she sees it, gets summed up by the phrase she sighs to herself, grimly and sarcastically, at the end of the opening scene: “Nothing but good times ahead” (11).

Crusie ends the novel with a reprise of the opening description, which Sophie now reads through an optimistic, self-assured lens. “Behind [the new family of Dillie, Phin, and Sophie], maple trees waved cheerfully in the breeze, cotton clouds bounced across the blue, blue sky, and the early-September sun glowed on everything in sight” (Crusie 381). The promise of the thousands of campaign posters in Phin’s house—“more of the same”—has thus been fulfilled, but with a twist, since time now seems to be moving forward, not just from “late-August” (1) to “early September” (381), but into an upbeat future. Sophie’s conclusion, likewise, is the same but different. “Nothing but good times ahead,” she says aloud, and kisses Phin, imagining a life in *Temptation* that will be filled, not just with sex and love, but with public social purpose, “mak[ing] a difference” (380). Like the readers of “old-fashioned” and “woman-centered” literary fiction described by Brownstein, Sophie has begun to imagine herself as something more than herself: as a heroine. This particular transformation, Brownstein suggests, is properly (or at least initially) the province of reading imaginative works, of immersing oneself in fantasy, rather than of engaging with critical or philosophical texts. “To want to become a heroine,” she writes,

to have a sense of the possibility of being one, is to develop the beginnings of what feminists call ‘raised’ consciousness: it liberates a woman from feeling (and therefore perhaps from being) a victim or a dependent or drudge, someone of no account. The domestic novel can be credited with strengthening and shaping female reader’s aspirations to matter, to make something special of herself, (Brownstein xix)

In Crusie’s revisionist account—presented both in essays and in novels—we can credit the popular romance novel with this “strengthening and shaping” power, too.

[1] For a point-by-point debunking of Quilliam’s piece, see Holmes and Vivanco. For a detailed expose of Quilliam’s credentials, see Tripler.

[2] This list of minor characters is not exhaustive. Zane Black has his fantasies and delusions, which he tries to impose on reality, as does Amy, whose devotion to self-interest blinds her to the merits of the two films she is making: the audition tape for Clea and the secret documentary she is taping on the side.

[3] “Sophie in *Welcome to Temptation* was named after Georgette Heyer’s *The Grand Sophy* (although I changed the spelling),” Crusie writes, “because I loved the way she went around fixing people, and that’s what my Sophie does too, although not with the ruthless enthusiasm of Heyer’s heroine. My Sophie is stuck fixing people; Heyer’s loves doing it” (*Writer’s Digest Character Naming Sourcebook*, 237).

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