

Tell Me Lies: Lying, Storytelling, and the Romance Novel as Feminist Fiction

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Abstract: Focusing specifically on three novels written in the mid-'90s, *Strange Bedpersons* (1994), *What the Lady Wants* (1996), and *The Cinderella Deal* (1996), this article examines the way in which Jennifer Crusie explores alternative and subversive forms of storytelling, including the telling of lies, in order to construct her own version of the romance novel as feminist fiction. Drawing on a constructivist notion of identity, the article explores how Crusie uses the structure of romance narrative as a way of challenging what she sees as ideological lies that are broadly related to essentialist notions that come out of either patriarchal or feminist assumptions about what a woman should do, how she should think, and what she should be interested in. This article shows how, within these novels, storytelling is shown to be an explicitly performative act that allows characters creative powers of self-determination. In casting storytelling in this way, the article argues, Crusie gives the romance genre a political function that is embodied in its capacity to represent and imagine a degree of performative self-determination emerging from the fabric of everyday life.

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When Mitch Peatwick in *What the Lady Wants* (1995) tells Mae Sullivan that "the first rule in life is 'everybody lies,'" he articulates one of the central motifs that runs through the majority of Jennifer Crusie's novels (24). Lying forms a key part of many of

Crusie's narratives, and most of Crusie's heroines lie. From the "unreal but not untrue" storytelling of *The Cinderella Deal's* Daisy Flattery to the secrets all the characters conceal in *Tell Me Lies* to the cons of the Dempsey and Goodnight families in *Welcome to Temptation* and *Faking It*, characters twist, turn, and manipulate truths, half-truths, and lies with stunning verbal agility. Mitch's favourite catchphrase, "everybody lies," is a symptom of a hard-bitten cynicism brought on by one too many divorce cases. As the narrator notes, "Mitch's take on humanity had deteriorated to the point where he assumed someone was lying if her lips were moving" (*WLW*, 22). But that the issue of lying appears with such regularity in Crusie's novels suggests that it holds a greater significance than simply reflecting a misanthropic world-view. In *What the Lady Wants*, the narrator crucially genders Mitch's lying "someone" as female. On one level, Mitch's misogynistic outbursts echo the story's noir roots, identifying Mae with archetypal femme fatales such as Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and preparing the reader for Mae's attempted manipulation of Mitch through the lies she tells. But such gendering of lying calls attention not only to the lies women tell, but also to the lies they have been told.

In her 1997 non-fiction essay "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real," Crusie writes that romance fiction shows the reader "that a lot of the 'truths' that the different societal ideologies have foisted on her are lies" (92). The relativism of truth and lies implied in this statement points to what is important about lying in much of Crusie's fiction. Throughout many of her novels, Crusie questions absolutist notions of truth and lies in order to examine the contingent nature of the real. Drawing on a constructivist notion of identity, Crusie relates the telling of lies with the telling of stories, showing how different, sometimes opposing, versions of reality can be created through narrative manipulation. Within her fiction, storytelling is an explicitly performative act, openly and self-consciously allowing characters creative powers of self-determination. This article will show how Crusie uses the structure of romance narrative as a way of challenging what she sees as ideological "lies." These lies, however, cannot simply be equated with patriarchy, but are more broadly related to essentialist notions that come out of either patriarchal or feminist assumptions about what a woman should do, how she should think, and what she should be interested in. This article will argue that Crusie explores the ambiguity between truth and lies in order, she argues, to tell "the story that reflects a woman's reality as it could be and as it often is" (*Ibid*). The political function of the romance, she suggests, is embodied in its capacity to represent and imagine a variety of specifically, but not exclusively, female identities that are distinct from the restrictive and limiting conditions in which characters exist. In both "reinforcing" and "re-visioning" the real, the romance genre represents a degree of performative self-determination emerging from the fabric of everyday life.

In "Romancing Reality," along with other non-fiction essays published in the mid- to late-1990s, such as "Now Let Us Praise Scribbling Women," and "Glee and Sympathy," Crusie mounts a vehement and politically-charged defence of the romance genre. In fact, a large proportion of the essays Crusie wrote in the late '90s argue against the critical derision and out-right dismissal that up until the mid-90s had formed the central academic response to the romance. Writing to the profession in the January edition of the monthly newsletter of the Romance Writers of America, Crusie announces her New Year's resolution to make 1998 the year in which she would "improve romance's image" and defeat the "anti-romance bias." Though this was her stated goal for 1998, the exploration of

the capabilities and responsibilities of the genre had concerned Crusie at least since she had begun writing her own romance novels earlier in the decade. The crux of Crusie's defence in this article is her argument that the conventional romance narrative contains radical transformative potential. She bases her argument on a discussion of generic differences between romance fiction, identified here as women's fiction, and "serious" literary fiction, which has most often been implicitly gendered masculine. The core of Crusie's project here is to call into question the generic hierarchy that equates the conventional tragic ending of literary fiction with "reality" and the conventional happy ending of romance with "fantasy." She argues, "It is as unrealistic to say that life is all tragedy as it is to say that life is all happy endings. . . [r]omance fiction, in choosing to show women readers the variety of possibilities in the real world of women's lives, opts for the happy ending as more empowering" ("Romancing" 92). Crusie here gives the romance genre an important political function. By featuring narratives in a woman's voice and from a woman's point-of-view that offer positive depictions of women who take "*active, intelligent control of their lives*," she argues, the romance novel can serve as an ideological antidote to the conventional masculine genres, such as canonical literary fiction or even fairy tales, which routinely depict the failure, punishment, and death of women who transgress established social norms ("Romancing" 84, emphasis in original).

Crusie's focus on the "variety of possibilities" represented within romance narratives points to how she sees the political potential of the romance novel working at an even more fundamental level. In a move that echoes the social theory of "false necessity," popularised by Roberto Unger in late 1980s and early '90s, Crusie identifies the romance narrative as a site of radical critique and transformative potential through its representation of multiplicity in women's experience. Unger argued that institutional and large-scale social change can be reshaped through the realm of the local and the everyday, and embraced a pluralistic and experiential view of social reality. Thus, in the course of everyday life, individuals remain capable of creative responses within apparently repressive conditions. This perspective, Unger argued, "frees the definition of the radical project from unnecessarily restrictive assumptions about the possible forms of social organization and personal experience" (159-60). Crusie, writing at the same socio-historical moment as Unger, also engages with this positive philosophy for social change, but applies it specifically to what has generally been seen as a female form of narrative, the romance. Crusie argues that the romance genre, though often criticized for reinforcing social stability, has the potential to participate in a radical project for social change through the way it rewrites and "re-visions" what could be seen as restrictive assumptions. The best romance novels, Crusie suggests, are those that recast traditional stories which have routinely worked to silence the woman's voice and reign in transgression. Such novels, she argues, which give their heroine the "capacity for action and power," can be seen as a form of "feminist fiction" ("This is Not" 51-61; "Let us Now" 19).

Indeed Crusie, flying in the face of both critical and popular denigration of the genre, argues that there are few forms of fiction which address the possibilities for female agency more successfully and more boldly than the contemporary romance.^[1] But unsurprisingly, Crusie does not confine her defence of the romance genre to her non-fiction writing. In a number of novels written around the same time, she actively puts her theories about the capacities of the romance genre into practice. Focusing specifically on three novels written in the mid-'90s, *Strange Bedpersons* (1994), *What the Lady Wants* (1996), and *The*

Cinderella Deal (1996), this article will now examine the way in which Crusie explores alternative and subversive forms of storytelling, including the telling of lies, in order to construct her own version of the feminist romance novel.

As in her critical work, Crusie offers the romance plot throughout her novels as a corrective to the routine misrepresentation of everyday life found in the majority of implicitly masculinised literary genres. Throughout her early work, Crusie repeatedly presents popular, and oft-caricatured models of 1990s lifestyle in order to parody, critique, and reimagine them, fully exploiting the capacity of romance to open up new, previously unrepresentable, possibilities for her characters. For instance, novels such as *Manhunting* (1993), *Strange Bedpersons*, *The Cinderella Deal*, and *Anyone But You* (1996) question the socially constructed role of the literal-minded, career-driven male. In her representations of Alex in *Anyone But You* and Jake in *Manhunting*, she explores the pressures that are placed on men to conform to images of masculine, career-based success. Both characters shun high-paying, high-pressure, conventionally successful careers (cardiology for Alex and tax law for Jake) in order to pursue jobs that make them happy rather than rich. In doing so, they must resist, in varying degrees, the criticism and incomprehension of their families and friends and their own self-doubt about their choices. While Crusie shows through Alex and Jake the difficulty of resisting social expectations, in her characterisation of Linc in *The Cinderella Deal* and Nick in *Strange Bedpersons*, she explores the sterility of the life that Jake and Alex avoid by eschewing what Roos Vonk and Richard Ashmore designate as the “traditional masculine” role of the yuppie (263). This is most obviously reflected in Crusie’s description of their environment. The black-and-white colour scheme of Nick and Linc’s clothes and furniture reflects not only their lack of vibrancy and imagination, but also represents their narrow-minded sense of morality and social mores. Hemmed in by career obsession and concern for public opinion, Linc and Nick live ordered, controlled, co-ordinated lives. Even Linc’s fantasies do not rise above the prosaic. While interviewing for a job in the prestigious Prescott College, Linc, in a desperate attempt to please the dean, lies that he is engaged to be married, and the domestic life he imagines for himself represents his unquestioning reproduction of conservative patriarchal ideology. This picture, which “seemed so true while he’d been saying it” features “the idea of settling down with some elegant little woman and reproducing in a small town. The pictures had been there in his head, sunny scenes of neat lawns and well-behaved children in well-ironed shorts” (CD 14). One imagines that this clichéd picture seems real to Linc because it reproduces so impeccably the conventional ideals of domestic fulfilment and social achievement.

In contrast to these masculine plots of career-based success, Crusie offers the plot of the romance as an alternative narrative of self for both Linc and Nick. This alternative plot is embodied in the characterisations of Daisy and Tess, who dress and furnish their homes in a colourful array of thrift-shop chic and bring chaos and disorder into the men’s lives. In both *The Cinderella Deal* and *Strange Bedpersons* the tension between black and white and “electric colors” is the central metaphor governing the complex world-views generated by her characters (CD 2). While characters such as Linc and Nick begin the novels secure in their linear ambitions, they are led to understand that other lifestyles and models of success are available for use in their process of self-determination. Crusie’s point is not simply that these well-dressed representatives of yuppie culture require rescue from their own highly masculinised fantasies of fulfilment; what they need is to recognise these fantasies, among several others, as choices over which they ought to have some control.

Daisy and Tess provide for these men an alternative world-view which disrupts their hitherto monochrome existence, giving them at least two, and potentially many other, life narratives to pursue. Crucially, though, the men also provide the same service to the women. In both novels, the ability to look outside comfortable life narratives provokes a good deal of anxiety and introspection in the characters, and this is what drives the romance plot forward. In part, this is manifested externally in the relationships between Linc and Daisy and Nick and Tess, but Crusie is also careful to represent the internal struggles they each experience. She creates in each character a central divide between the part of themselves which accepts and seeks to maintain social norms and the part which rebels against the social positions they have adopted. In Linc, this divide is indicated by the two different portraits of him that Daisy paints, a dignified one in black and white and a passionate one in orange and yellow. In Daisy, it's the difference between her authentic identity as Daisy Flattery and the social role she plays as Daisy Blaise. In Nick, it is described by Tess as his Jekyll and Hyde personality. And in Tess, it is the difference between what Nick calls her Crusader Rabbit persona and her fear of turning into Mrs. Jekyll. In each of these internal conflicts, Crusie represents rebellion as the ability to recognize the constraints imposed by the restrictive world-view to which they had been dedicated.

As the representation of Tess makes most evident, rebellion is not equivalent to a notion of opposition derived from conventional gender politics. In a reversal of standard thinking, Tess argues that she prefers Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jekyll because "Jekyll was the *conservative* guy" (93, emphasis in original). But, in fact, Crusie shows that Tess, in her condemnation of what she calls "that superficial social stuff," is in some ways more conservative than Nick (*SB*, 180). Tess's conservatism is described by her best friend Gina when she accuses Tess of being "bigoted": "If I shaved my head or decided to become a druid or told you I was a transvestite, you'd be there for me, no judgment, no argument. But because I want to join the mainstream, you're going to bitch at me" (*SB*, 181). Gina charges Tess with being conventionally unconventional, blinded by her hippie upbringing to the variety of possibilities available to women and unable to accept a way of seeing the world that differs from her own. Her admonishment of Tess acts as a testament to Crusie's argument that it is, in fact, a considerable mistake to assume that all women should think the same way.

Tess's relationship with Nick, therefore, is as much about changing her preconceptions as it is about changing his. In fact, while she challenges his social position, tempting and cajoling him into rebellious acts against his better judgment—most notably sex in public places—her transformation is perhaps more fundamental. Though Nick decorates in black and white, Tess is the one who sees the world in stark terms of right and wrong, truth and lies. Coming to an understanding of Nick's perspective, though, enables Tess to understand that lies and the truth are complex and mutable concepts. When, like Linc, Tess lies to get a job she really wants, she justifies her lie to herself, thinking "it wasn't really being dishonest. It was being tactful. Maybe Nick was starting to rub off on her" (*SB*, 137). Behind this conventional image of a couple growing closer by sharing character traits is evidence of what Crusie believes is a fundamental and empowering characteristic of good romance fiction. Crusie implies that in the best romance fiction characters do not grow closer because they are required to by the formal conventions of the love plot or the need for the author to create the requisite happy ending. Instead, the relationships that develop

are based upon the mutual ability to recognise such ideological constraints in action and to see the relativity and multiplicity of life in the real world. One of the functions of the romance narrative, therefore, is to model how negotiation can occur between seemingly opposite and essentialised perspectives of identity and how alternative realities can be constructed through the process of imaginative storytelling.

For this reason, where storytellers appear in Crusie's fiction, they appear capable of re-writing the life stories of those they encounter. The fairytale of CinderTess in *Strange Bedpersons* is one such story. CinderTess is a feminist reworking of the Cinderella story, which casts the princess as an active heroine who wins the prince's love with the power of her political commitment rather than her beauty. Repeatedly told as a bedtime story to eight-year-old Tess by Lanny, a member of the commune Tess lived on in the '60s, Tess is profoundly influenced by its exaltation of the countercultural values of the hippie movement. Later, it underpins her strident protest against mainstream society. As she tells Nick, "basically Lanny taught me how to live my life with that story" (*SB*, 112). Tess uses this story as a blueprint for her life, blindly following its precepts and staunchly defending the values and world-view it promotes against what she sees as any form of encroachment, embodied most distinctly in the novel in the figure of Norbert Welch and his conservative Republican politics. When Welch satirizes the original tale and holds the values it advocates up to ridicule, Tess feels that the attack on the story is also an attack on herself: "It was her story, and he was degrading it, degrading her and everything she believed in" (*SB*, 107). In particular, Tess resents this reworking of the fairytale because it holds up to ridicule the model of feminist resistance she has embraced. However, while Lanny's tale seems like a good lesson for Tess to have learned, Tess's fury concerning the new version, especially the narrator's comments that hearing it makes Tess "catatonic with rage" and "blindly incurious" about her surroundings, also suggests that she has been too single-minded in the way she has embraced this lesson. By following Lanny's story so unthinkingly, she has been unable to develop a model of self-identity that actually represents the complexity of her own existence, or that enables her to think through and alter her trajectory.

Tess's fear that Welch, in rewriting the story, will also rewrite her life exposes to her, and to the reader, the lack of control Tess actually exerts over her own life narrative. This is further heightened by the revelation that Welch is actually Lanny, who has transformed from a vibrant figure, who had been "so full of life and so . . . full of ideas and stories," into an "ageing neoconservative with writer's block" (*SB*, 118, 112 emphasis in original). Welch's extreme move to the right, like Tess's entrenchment in the left, is also depicted as the result of his single-minded focus on one narrative and the failure of his ability to tell a multiplicity of stories. Tess's final transformation from feminist stereotype to romantic heroine, therefore, is ultimately signalled in her demand to Welch that he re-write the story again, not to return it to its original form, but instead to make it more balanced, because, as she tells Welch, in presenting only one view-point it is just "too simplistic" (*SB*, 243).

As the representative of professional storytelling in the novel, Welch's true crime is not his conservative politics or his curmudgeonly misogyny. In fact, even while he is most vigorously promoting his anti-feminist agenda, Crusie is careful to point out that, against her better judgment, Tess likes him. Welch's biggest offence is the failure of his imagination. It is the job of the storyteller, Crusie suggests, to see a variety of possibilities available for the narrative's trajectory. This particular talent of the storyteller is explored in

The Cinderella Deal, when the pedantic perfection of Linc's imagined life is countered by Daisy's opinion that it was the worst story she has ever heard. Daisy, a professional storyteller, reinterprets his tale, and from her perspective Linc's fantasy future appears more like a Gap ad than real life: "a woman in a designer apron and smiling, apple-cheeked children dressed in Baby Gap and a stuffy career in a stuffy town" (CD, 41). Daisy finds Linc's story awful not only because it is based on the subordination of the central female character, but also because it is a one-dimensional story, a cardboard cut-out of a future resulting from a failure of imagination. In Daisy's retelling of the story, Crusie exposes the assumptions concealed within this conventional picture of ideal domesticity by exposing the way in which patriarchal narratives of male social and professional achievement often rely on the relegation of the woman to the domestic sphere—encased in an apron and seemingly happy about it. Daisy's recasting of Linc's "elegant little woman" into a "woman in a designer apron and smiling" shows how such seemingly innocuous descriptions encode and naturalise the values and assumptions of essentialised social perspectives. The substitution of "designer" for "elegant," for instance, moves Linc's story from the realm of the aesthetic and the universal and exposes its socio-economic underpinnings.

Through this example of re-writing, Crusie offers a perspective on the radical project of the romance genre itself. In re-writing a conventionalised story of bourgeois normality and fracturing its monologic surface, Daisy's revision transforms Linc's narrative, in Crusie's terms, from an ideological lie into a potentially productive story. But the troubled relationship between lying and storytelling is itself a point of contention. In discussions concerning lying, many contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists agree that different cultures, and even individuals within the same culture, have varying ideas about what does and does not count as a lie. Opinion over the social impact of lying is also divided. Whether seen as immoral and self-serving or as a necessary social skill, lying is a difficult concept to define. Crusie, however, offers her own definition in *The Cinderella Deal* that highlights the transformative potential of fictions of romance. While Linc thinks that telling the faculty at Prescott that he is engaged is a lie, Daisy offers a different perspective:

"It's not a lie," Daisy said. "It's a story."

Linc looked at her, exasperated. "That's semantics. They're the same thing" . . .

"Listen." Daisy leaned forward and gripped his arm to hold his attention. "If you tell a lie, you're deliberately telling an untruth. If you'd told them you'd published six books, or that you'd taught at Yale, or that you'd won the Pulitzer, that would have been a lie. You'd never tell a lie. You're too honest."

"Daisy, I told them I was engaged to you. That was a lie."

"No." Daisy shook her head emphatically. "You told them you wanted to get married and settle down in Prescott and raise kids."

"Well, that's a lie," Linc said, but he could see where she was going. "I told them what they wanted to hear."

"Yes, but it was what you wanted to hear too." Daisy settled back in her seat.

"Sometimes stories are just previews of coming truths. I bet you really do want that deep down inside your repressed academic soul." (CD, 52-3)

Daisy's idea of a lie is something that attempts to alter the facts of the past, while a story presents a vision of a desired present and future—something Linc wants rather than something he's done. Presenting a version of reality as he would like it to be is therefore not a lie, but is instead a possible preview of coming truths, a story he created, which, though fictional, can be made real.

The process through which a lie can foreshadow and even promote real-world transformation can be illuminated by an observation by David Simpson in his essay on "Lying, Liars, and Language." Simpson writes that "A lie is *performed* . . . and so succeeds as an act, if there is just mutual manifestation of the speaker's apparent sincerity; that is, if there is uptake regarding the invocation of trust" (626, italics in original). The efficacy of the lie depends upon the attitude of its receiver, and especially on the development of trust relations with the speaker. For Simpson, the danger of lying is precisely the way that lies "draw on and abuse the core of interaction and mutuality" (637), but for Crusie, it seems that *some* lies—the ones that are, in fact, "previews of coming truths," as Daisy says—do not abuse interaction and mutuality, but rather offer the premises for a new understanding of reality. This new understanding does not always come easily, given the binary divisions that Crusie establishes between Linc and Nick's worlds of black-and-white and Daisy and Tess's worlds of color. Yet precisely because the lie (or story) provokes mis-communication between these characters, it also provokes a productive negotiation over whether or not something is, or is not, a lie. This negotiation moves both parties beyond the "apparent sincerity" and "invocation of trust" at the start of the lie (or story) to a deeper, actual sincerity and a state of mutual trust. The good kind of lie, in Crusie's account, is a *performative* act, then, in a slightly different sense of the word: it makes something happen in the world, allowing both parties to shift their frameworks for understanding, and therefore to rethink their own life narratives. It is the storyteller's role in revealing and resolving these problems of communication that enables the political potential of the romance genre to be expressed.

In both *Strange Bedpersons* and *The Cinderella Deal* it is the job of the storyteller to imagine a variety of possibilities and to tell a number of different stories, and though Welch is an exception, throughout much of Crusie's fiction, storytelling, in particular, and creativity, in general, are most often associated with female characters. Professional authorship, for instance, is depicted in Charity's foray into novel-writing with her autobiographical *Jane Errs* in *Anyone But You*. Tilda in *Faking It* is an artist, and Quinn in *Crazy for You*, an art teacher. Even women who don't make a career of their art or storytelling are often shown to be involved in some form of creative activity. Jessie's cakes in *Manhunting*, Sophie and Amy's film in *Welcome to Temptation*, Margie's cookies in *Fast Women*, Min's shoes in *Bet Me*, and Andie's baking in *Maybe This Time* all contain elements of creativity. This focus on female creativity in a number of Crusie's novels recalls what Imelda Whelehan describes as the "creative energies" of the "feminist bestsellers" of the 1970s. In describing the elements that characterise these fictional counterparts of second wave feminism, Whelehan notes,

[t]hat the women quite often are frustrated artists, writers, or would-be intellectuals makes the point that it is the life of the mind which domestic quietude so often quashes. Creative energies become symbolic of the power of self-determination. (7-8)

The representation of creative heroines such as Daisy positions Crusie's fictional work in dialogue with these earlier novels in order to rewrite the narrative of the creative woman's struggle naturalised by these texts. Whereas the heroines of the earlier feminist fiction prototypically saw their creative energies as under threat and stifled by the romance plot, the generic conventions of the romance narrative represent a position of strength rather than struggle for Crusie's heroines of the '90s. The love relationships that develop in Crusie's novels ultimately enable women to exercise their creative energies because, in coming to understand another's point of view, they are led to challenge their dogmatic attachment to a single value system. The love match serves to radically unsettle their respective, highly naturalised life stories, and thus to expose the grander cultural narratives to which they have become subjected.

Crusie proposes that this kind of experiential challenge to stereotypical or idealistic thinking is one of the principle aims of her conception of feminist fiction. Regardless of whether or not the ideals these heroines learn to embrace appear relatively conventional, they are also learning basic principles of creative self-determination. Crusie's characters are not merely subject to ideology, they are knowingly and willingly complicit with certain aspects of it because it is in their interests to be so. Such complicity is described by the sociologist Stevi Jackson as the "active participation" of the individual in the shaping of their subjectivity:

We create for ourselves a sense of what our emotions are, of what being in love is, through positioning ourselves within discourses, constructing narratives of self, drawing on whatever cultural resources are available to us. This perspective allows us to recognise the constraints of the culture we inhabit while allowing for human agency and therefore avoiding the "cultural dupe" syndrome, of admitting the possibility of both complicity in and resistance to patriarchal relations in the sphere of love. (58)

Crusie's novels enact the potential for human agency that Jackson accords to all self-conscious participants in the sphere of love. It is this which makes lying such an important part of her fiction because, in many of her novels, what can be seen as a lie from one perspective can be seen as a story from another, and the concept of truth is shown to be relative. Through individual creative energy, represented in much of her fiction as the province of the heroine of the romance narrative, stories which are "unreal but not untrue" are naturalised and made real through a continual process of revision and rewriting that transforms pre-existing monologic narratives into negotiated and mutable constructions of alternative realities.

Crusie represents this process in detail in the developing relationship between Daisy and Linc in *The Cinderella Deal*. As they get their story straight before heading to Prescott to convince the faculty of their engagement, Daisy and Linc very consciously define the parameters of their relationship by negotiating the facts that will serve as the basis of the story of their life together—what kind of engagement ring Daisy should have, what sort of clothes she should wear, what house they would live in. Daisy, for instance, upon learning that Linc used to play football on a team named the Yellow Jackets, imagines, "We could live in a cottage called The Hive" (CD, 34). By incorporating details they have

experienced into their imagined life, Daisy and Linc distort the distinction between fact and fiction. Their subsequent sharing of their constructed story with the faculty at the college continues this process, further integrating and subtly transforming their individual realities. When Daisy, on a tour of the town, sees a house she loves and an art gallery that features new artists, she has to remind herself, “*This is not your story.*” But, the narrator comments, “it was too late . . . The universe was doing everything but dropping a big sign in front of her that said *This is it, this is your next move*” (CD, 58 emphasis in original). The transformation of Linc’s reality is signalled by the extent to which he internalises Daisy’s point of view. Though when he moves to Prescott, he thinks he will be there on his own, he holds imaginary arguments with Daisy, justifying his choice to paint all the walls white and to install his sterile and modern chrome and leather furniture in big Victorian rooms: “The really irritating thing about that hadn’t so much been that he caught himself doing it as it was that she’d been winning” (CD, 80). The real power of the storytelling here is not only that it creates new versions of reality, but that it does so by disrupting sterile narratives and introducing a process of internal, dialogic change.

In *The Cinderella Deal* as stories get continually repeated, they begin to work independently to effect change. Though both Linc and Daisy have their own stories—imagined realities that they invent about what they want their lives to be—they lose control of these individual stories when their mutual story, through its repetition, becomes naturalised. Both try to go back to their individual stories after Linc has got the job at Prescott, but their mutual story is sustained by the others who have heard it, most notably Chickie, the wife of the dean. In fact, the story they created to serve them is co-opted by Chickie, who inserts Daisy into her own story in order to create a version of the world that Chickie prefers. Chickie’s desperate desire for companionship thus surfaces in an imagined reality in which she and Daisy do things together like mother and daughter. Though Daisy doesn’t initially move to Prescott with Linc, Chickie carries on the story they began, convincing Linc to buy the house Daisy liked, leaving her notes about the best places to shop, and making plans for the future that involve her. Through her representation of Chickie, Crusie explores the potential of storytelling to transform the wider community through individual actions. It is Chickie’s own personal investment in the story, its ability to allow her reimagine her own life narrative and sense of self that that furthers the integration of Daisy and Linc’s stories with each other and the larger, social narrative of the Prescott community.

The potential these stories have to change the gender politics of the Prescott community can be seen as radical in the way that they destabilize the authority of the lecherous and abusive head of the college, Dean Crawford. However, the effect of Daisy and Linc’s storytelling on the social structures of Prescott is shown to happen incrementally at the level of the everyday. In fact, on one level, the novel can be seen as rather conservative. For instance, the novel seems to enact what Pamela Regis defines, in her exhaustive survey of the elements that comprise the romance genre, as the typical marriage-of-convenience scenario, in which “the vows that the couple has taken create the appearance of commitment before heroine and hero actually commit to each other” (185). By putting the wedding before the declaration of love, Regis notes, the marriage often acts as a “barrier” in the relationship, that is, the “conflict in the novel which keeps the union of the heroine and hero from taking place” (14). Though on the surface, *The Cinderella Deal* appears to be just another marriage-of-convenience romance novel, again Crusie subverts the conventional or

expected structure in order to re-vision the romance novel as a form of feminist fiction. The barrier that is created between Daisy and Linc is not the “appearance of commitment” that forms the stereotypical conflict in the marriage-of-convenience novel. In fact, the opposite is true as Crusie shows how the commitment to appearance makes the relationship real. Ostensibly, Daisy has agreed to live in Linc’s story, and she throws herself wholeheartedly into her role as Daisy Blaise, working hard to become the faculty wife Linc had imagined. But just through her day-to-day social activity, by being neighbourly, making friends, and generally living her life, she gradually begins to change his story, as well as the wider community more generally. As the narrator notes, “Linc wasn’t sure when he first realised he’d lost his grip on his story. The realization came gradually, built up in short encounters” (CD, 153). The marriage, therefore, facilitates the love declaration rather than impeding it and, again contrary to form, the love declaration takes place well before the end of the novel.

Rather than simply being subjected to the constructs of a standardized plot in which their relationship develops, both Daisy and Linc are shown to be actively involved in the process of plotting. These characters are not, in Jackson’s words, “cultural dupes,” but are perfectly capable of both comprehending and rewriting their own meta-narratives. As a professional storyteller, Daisy, in particular, is fully aware of the performative power of storytelling. In her life, as well as in her storytelling career, Daisy frequently invents stories that, like Linc’s, project an imagined and desired reality. Having quit her teaching job to concentrate on her art, Daisy often struggles to pay her bills, and whenever she gets too worried about money, she tells herself “the story of her new life, the one she’d been building for the past four years” in which “the next chapter would be her paintings finally selling, and maybe her storytelling career finally taking off too. And a prince would be good” (CD, 11). Though she wishes for a prince to rescue her, she also realises the emptiness of desires based on little more than culturally sanctioned ideals. “Forget the prince,” she tells herself. “Stories were all well and good, but princes weren’t stories, they were impossible” (CD, 12).

Daisy’s distinction between stories and princes is in fact a distinction between story and fantasy. As in her rejection of the critical hierarchy that associated the romance genre with fantasy in “Romance and Reality,” Crusie suggests through these early novels that the crucial difference between a story and fantasy is that stories can be made to refashion the world while fantasy is the expression of another’s desires. That is, a story is something which, though not immediately real, can exist at some point in the future because it represents an expression of an individual’s desires. A fantasy, on the other hand, expresses a cultural ideal, a universal “truth” that relies a monologic narrative. The danger of fantasy, Crusie implies, is that members of society may be led to commit themselves to abstract, isolated, narratives because they do not take an active part in constructing them. Crusie suggests instead a process through which an individual’s reality is generated by the perpetual process of telling and retelling stories about oneself. This is a creative, inherently messy process, one that is subject to constant re-visioning. After all, this is not a Cinderella story in which the heroine waits in the ashes to be rescued by the prince, but a Cinderella deal in which both characters rescue each other through a series of negotiations addressing and readdressing the various imagined realities of each.

Crusie explores this distinction between fantasy and reality in detail in the opening scene of *What the Lady Wants*. In this scene, she draws on idealised characterisation

derived from two of the most strongly gendered of genres, noir and romance, in order to explore the viability of such exaggerated stereotypes. In order to do so, she introduces sharp, distinct changes in point-of-view that portray the same action from both Mae's and Mitch's perspective. Crusie's long-standing interest in the gendering of narrative forms, attested to by her original PhD research on women's narrative strategies and, more recently, by her collaboration with Bob Mayer on the novels *Don't Look Down*, *Agnes and the Hitman*, and *Wild Ride* is fully exercised in this scene. The he said/she said structure sets up a gendered generic tension between noir and romance that is mirrored in the stereotypes that Mae and Mitch imagine for themselves and each other. In preparing for her first meeting with Mitch, Mae dons the costume of the hypersexual, hyperfeminine femme fatale. She dresses in a tight pink suit, mysterious veil, and stiletto heels, and imagines that the simple act of outwardly conforming to expected appearances will ensure the successful enactment of noir's paradigmatic male/female relationship. In other words, "He'd patronize her because she was female. She'd play him like a piano" (*WLW*, 7). Similarly, Mitch imagines his own noir scenario in which, as the "Sam Spade of the nineties," he takes advantage of the femme fatale's sexual promise, but outwits her attempts to manipulate him (*WLW*, 9).

Before they actually meet, both characters create elaborate fictions about themselves and about each other based on generic expectations of the masculine narrative form of noir. But reality turns out to be much more complex as neither conform to the stereotypes they create. Mitch, the successful-stockbroker-turned-detective-on-a-bet, is not Sam Spade or the dumb, dead-beat loser Mae wants him to be. And though Mae looks the part of the femme fatale, her skirt's too tight, her heels too high, and her veil is "dumb" (*WLW*, 8). More importantly, though, the noir fantasy is obliterated when Mae speaks. "If she'd just kept her mouth shut," Mitch thinks, "she would have been perfect, but no . . ." (*WLW*, 11). The romance genre comes in for equal scrutiny when, in Mae's initial assessment of Mitch, she describes him as "solidly male, with that broad-shouldered, non-gold-chain-wearing, let-me-lift-that-car-for-you-lady kind of doofus sexiness that made women think that maybe they'd been too hasty with the liberation movement" (*WLW*, 14). In this fantasy Mitch is the strong, take-charge, knight-in-shining-armor kind of a guy who is regularly imagined as the stereotypical romantic hero—the kind of guy Mae thinks she needs to help her find her uncle's diary. However, her image of the romantic hero also evaporates when Mitch speaks, and she too wishes, "If he'd just kept his mouth shut. . ." (*WLW*, 15). In this effective parody of generic conventions, Crusie subjects the idealised constructs of openly gendered genres to "Reality. Nature's downer," and shows them to be incapable of withstanding the introduction of the actual voice (*WLW*, 11). When the person speaks—a moment in which he or she acts upon the world and other people that surround them—the fantasy dissolves. Fantasy, whether romantic or noir, is repeatedly shown to be untenable for Crusie's self-determining protagonists as, time and time again, experiential reality intrudes, requiring them to revise their expectations.

Thus, while romantic and other fantasies become harmful when passively adopted, within Crusie's fiction they are obstacles to be surmounted, and can be seen as one of the narrative resources that characters share, reject, and manipulate in the course of a complex process of self-realisation. Her characters become more rather than less anxious, more prone to self-doubt and internal conflict, because their experience of other people, and especially their potential partners, obliges them to reconsider established, essentialised,

and naturalised conceptions of identity. The trick, for Mae, Mitch, and others, is to become comfortable with the contingency this introduces into their lives and adept at the dynamic and reactive processes of self-determination it induces. Sometimes, such as when Mae develops a plan to escape her uncles' control, Crusie's protagonists take a much more active responsibility for these processes. Mae's plan, a paradigmatic example of feminist self-determination, is to use the money to escape the stifling control exerted upon her life by her three overbearing uncles. However, in the terms of the structure of the romance genre, it also serves as the basis around which the romantic relationship at the centre of the novel develops by bringing her to Mitch's office. Thus, it provides the catalyst for legitimation of the existing social order through marriage, and therefore appears to reflect quite closely the criticism that romance novels serve the function of drawing transgressive female subject positions reassuringly back into the patriarchal fold. By ultimately leading to her marriage, her defiant attempts to control her own future, to escape the influence of her three domineering patriarchs, and to make her dream of self-reliant independence come true, are seemingly "placed within wider controlling narratives that normalise their deviance" (Fowler, 97).

But, as their forays into fantasy in the opening scene demonstrate, Mae and Mitch are shown to have an understanding of such narratives. Through this representation of self-conscious participation in narrative construction, Mitch and Mae exert control over the narrative of their romance and their own roles within it, avoiding the "cultural dupe" syndrome. Thus, Mitch's assurance to Mae that "Everybody lies, Mabel. Everybody but us" is more than just a moment of sentimental closure in which Mitch and Mae set themselves apart from the world as a couple (*WLW*, 217). Crusie here holds up to scrutiny the critical commonplace concerning the romance genre which suggests that the consummation of the love relationship simply re-enacts a "truth" that has been obscured all along by the various plot obstacles, what Regis defines as the "barriers" between the heroine and hero (32). In Mitch's revision of his favourite catchphrase, Crusie makes clear that he and Mae are not simply subject to fictional conventions that destine them to be together but throw up barriers against this outcome. They consciously adopt a perspective that switches the world-weary essentialism typified by the "everybody lies" motif, for one which acknowledges the constructed nature of the romance narrative. This is a point that Crusie has made repeatedly throughout her novels; according her characters the expertise to interpret and rethink romantic conventions, she also gives them the opportunity to select their romantic narratives rather than simply becoming subject to them. On one level, Mitch's moment of re-visioning reads as the clichéd enactment of an us-against-the-world mentality, but by recalling so deliberately Mitch's earlier cynicism, Crusie transforms this romantic convention into a succinct iteration of the possibilities of a knowing and self-conscious understanding of such clichés. This is the great positive that Crusie draws from the romance genre: romance is enabling for those individuals who knowingly participate in it.

Thus, throughout her fiction, Crusie draws on the close kinship between lying and storytelling in order to project a new model of romance fiction as "feminist fiction." By associating the telling of stories with the telling of lies, Crusie explores the way in which stories can retell and thus reorient essentialist and monologic social ideologies. In this way, many of her early novels from the mid-1990s form a coherent counter-argument to the prevailing condemnation of the romance genre that characterised critical writing of the

1980s and early '90s, especially such influential works as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance*. This is not to say that after the late '90s this disappears from her fiction. Right up to *Bet Me*, her last single-authored text before she began her collaborative writing project with Bob Mayer, Crusie continued to explore the process through the rejection of an essentialist perspective could transform lies into stories.^[2] One small example will illustrate this. In *Bet Me*, the heroine, Min, participates in what she sees as the lie of Cal's attraction to her because she wants to be with him, but she struggles to maintain this constructed reality:

Min stepped down off the platform and went to him, loving the way his arms went around her, trying not to think about how fat she must feel under his hands, and then he kissed her hard, and she sighed against him, grateful to have him even if she didn't know why he wanted her.

The bet.

Nope, never, that was not it, she believed in him. (*Bet Me*, 263-64)

Min's understanding of the "truth" has been determined by a number of naturalised stories concerning her body. The principal one, that she is fat, has been repeatedly foisted upon her by the novel's spokesperson for conventional female attractiveness, her mother. As one of the most influential women in Min's life, her mother's constant refrains, that if Min doesn't lose weight, no man will ever be attracted to her and that certain hairstyles and clothes don't suit her fat figure, have a controlling influence on how Min views reality.

In response to Min's unquestioning acceptance of this narrow image of female beauty, Cal attempts to reorient Min's physical identity by exchanging her negative euphemisms for "fat" for more positive expressions:

Cal put his fork down. "All right. Here's the truth. You're never going to thin. You're a round woman. You have wide hips and a round stomach and full breasts. You're. . ."

"Healthy," Min said bitterly.

"Lush," Cal said, watching the gentle rise and fall of her breasts under her sweatshirt.

"Generous," Min snarled.

"Opulent," Cal said, remembering the soft curve of her under his hand.

"Zaftig," Min said.

"Soft and round and hot, and I'm turning myself on," Cal said, starting to feel dizzy. (*Bet Me*, 126)

In retelling the story of Min's "fatness," Cal produces a positive response to repressive stereotypes concerning the female body by recasting it in linguistic terms. By locating the basis of Min's self-image in the realm of language rather than the body, Cal helps Min see beyond the restricted and monologic world-view with which she has been inculcated. In revising and rewriting the story of her attractiveness, Cal and Min re-configure Min's body and effect change through the process of storytelling rather than losing weight.

By dramatising the stories people tell and the means through which these stories can effect change, Crusie represents her characters' calculated and active participation in constructing their romantic realities. The promised marriage at the end of the novel, the "happily-ever-after," therefore, does not signal the end of the story, but represents the integration of the negotiated relationship into the community. In *Bet Me*, when Min questions what happens after the happily ever after, Cal's reply that "we're going to take it one day at a time" signifies the continuing dynamism of the relationship (*Bet Me*, 333). Such dynamism is demonstrated in the reappearance of Tess and Nick from *Strange Bedpersons* in *What the Lady Wants*. Though Mitch comments that Tess and Nick's marriage is like "Tinker Bell marrying Donald Trump," Tess's reply that "No, no, he's doing better. . . He put his feet on the furniture the other day," intimates the way in which the relationship continues to develop after the novel finishes (*SB*, 106). In recalling her earlier novel, Crusie playfully provides for the cynical, commitment phobic Mitch an exemplary model of what a healthy dynamic romantic relationship might look like after the "happily ever after." In prompting Mitch to think that "maybe commitment wouldn't be so bad if it was like this," the example of Tess and Nick demonstrates the positive lessons that can be derived from the best romance fiction (*SB*, 106). For Crusie, the representation of an ideal relationship has little to do with its adherence to cultural norms or to their active subversion and critique: genuine partnership takes place in the course of a perpetual interplay of beliefs, anxieties, and half-formed desires, whose resolution cannot and should not be hoped for.

[1] For a discussion of the critical rejection of the romance novel see Regis, esp. pp. xi-xii and 3-16.

[2] Interestingly, the way lies are represented in the co-authored fiction is very different. In the books co-written with Bob Mayer, lying is not ambiguous, but rather more straightforwardly wrong as it becomes associated with issues of trust.

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