

Stacy Holden’s “Love in the Desert”: An Author’s Response

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Do contemporary sheikh romance novels fetishize Arabs and subject them to the unwavering, privileged glare of the Western imagination as Holden asserts? Or is there a way in which all stories of the beloved fetishize and objectify the beloved—both heroine and hero in their turn, regardless of their cultural background or racial make-up, across all subgenres of romantic fiction?

I was an avid and enthusiastic reader of romance novels long before I found myself pursuing my doctorate in English Literature, a habit I continued throughout my graduate studies and on into a career writing them. I’ve written fifty books under various names[1], including six novels written as Caitlin Crews for Harlequin Presents featuring sheikh heroes. As a life-long romance reader, former scholar of literature, and a current author of romances, I feel one could as easily substitute “Scottish highlander” or “Greek tycoon” for “sheikh” and make many of these same arguments.

Just as murder mystery novels rarely focus on protagonists who have no connection to the central murder and no hope of solving it by the close of the book, romance novels rarely spend any time with characters whose conflict cannot be made the critically beating heart around which the rest of the story is erected. It is the rare “Sassenach” (that is: English) heroine in a historical romance novel who, upon finding herself mired in the politics of the Scottish highlands—often after her abduction at the hands of the hero—does not then immerse herself in the (usually) fairly happy culture thereof and, indeed, go on to do such things as broker quiet peace treaties with more high-minded English citizens to whom she may or may not be related, despite the actual and tragic history of English/Scottish relations.

Is this evidence of a certain triumphing of a fantasy version of “Englishness” over Scottish Highland culture or revisionist history with a large helping of problematic post-colonial blindness to go along with it? I’d argue that it is not; that it is, in fact, merely an example of a device that authors use to isolate their heroine in a setting she can’t control and must, therefore, share in detail with readers as she learns to adapt to it and even to enjoy it.

I’d argue that any fantasies in these stories have more to do with the modern woman’s belief in the power of femininity to solve problems and change lives for the better than in any kind of cultural or historical revision. For example, the popularity of this or that band of warriors (see: the alpha heroes of Nalini Singh’s *Psy/Changeling* series, Julie Garwood’s beloved Highlanders, Kristen Ashley’s almost-outlaw biker gang) who are forever altered once the members begin to fall in love.

Further, this kind of setting, be it an impenetrable Scottish castle or a remote desert sheikhdom, puts the hero in a larger-than-life position of dominance over the heroine. There is only one way that a heroine can “win” any battle with such a mighty figure: she must use her love for him, of course, and his for her, to lead them both toward any satisfactory emotional conclusion. And that satisfactory emotional conclusion is, like the solving of a murder in a murder mystery, the point of the romance novel.

I write for the Harlequin Presents category romance line, in which wealth and luxury are the expected trappings of any story. As such, I’ve written five novels featuring Greek tycoons since 2010 and see no conflict whatsoever between each hero’s vast wealth (and occasional personal, private island in the Aegean) and the current economic situation in Greece. Not because the book is “escapist fantasy,” as romances are so often accused of being, but because the point of the book is the power differential between the hero and the heroine and how they address it in their dealings with each other. One of the ways that imbalance is expressed is through the use of incomparable wealth and power to emphasize masculinity, from my Greek heroes to, for example, the proliferation of dukedoms and thus heroes who happen to be dukes of the realm in historical romances set in England. Class and social boundaries (or perhaps supernatural powers vs. their lack in a paranormal romance) are common ways to play with the power gap between hero and heroine in all romance subgenres.

Thus: made-up sheikhdoms where the sheikh-as-hero rules supreme, the better to illustrate that vast difference between the two protagonists. There are as many (I’d argue far more) made-up Mediterranean islands littering the romance landscape; so many, in fact, that one could walk from Gibraltar to the shores of Cyprus on these imaginary land masses without getting the least bit damp. These invented principalities and kingdoms serve the same purpose as the many imaginary sheikhdoms do: they accord the characters near-immeasurable wealth and power, and they thus allow the author infinite possibilities for storytelling involving the manipulation of these elements toward the desired happy ending.

I’d argue further that depictions of these vastly powerful men, whether in contemporary romances or their paranormal cousins which tend to push these concepts even further with depictions of men who become supernatural creatures, are first and foremost powerful ruminations on masculinity and relationships and the ways in which love alone can solve the problems that nothing else can. The reconciliation fantasies that lurk within romance novels are between the heroes and the heroines first and mainly, are

not specific to any particular culture or even in some cases species, and are certainly not restricted to stories featuring sheikhs.

Holden suggests above that these novels operate as “the perfect vehicle to assuage American fears— anxieties found both in readers and in authors—regarding Arabs and their world.” While there are certainly authors who explicitly address religious and cultural differences in their heroes and heroines and those who ignore these issues entirely, these are choices on the part of the authors that I’d argue are almost exclusively in service to the story itself and certainly not constrained to sheikh romances. Romance novels are not the exclusive province of Americans or, indeed, Western women, and thus, the fears they strive to address lie more within the scope of human frailty and the darkness of the human soul than any purely Western, quasi-colonialist gaze on the shifting geo-political landscape. Love in these books is held to be eternal while politics are instead the stuff of the moment and wholly conquerable should our hero and heroine wish it.

It’s worth noting that Harlequin Mills & Boon are truly a global publisher. Authors hail from all parts of the world and write about whatever destinations they please/can make work in their stories. So too do they write about whatever characters they please, as I know firsthand. I’ve written thirty books for Harlequin Presents thus far and have never had any editorial interference with any of my characters no matter their nationality or race. I’ve written heroes and heroines of color and at no point has the characters’ heritage even been mentioned by my editor (or any other editor, to my knowledge) as either a positive or a negative. We’ve always simply discussed the love story.

In the end, all romances concern themselves with the collapsing of boundaries, whether internal or external, in order to lead the characters—and the reader—toward an often hard-won happily ever after. It should then, perhaps, come as no tremendous surprise that authors of these books see very few limits to the things they can make right with the power of love.

That is, after all, the point.

[1] As of July 1, 2015.