

Love Studies

By Maggie Coughlin Worth

A look at the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance and the new school of romance scholarship

Lately, it seems like everyone has something to say about the romance genre. All too often, the remarks are outdated, disrespectful, and frequently downright incorrect. Who out there, we sometimes wonder, is taking us seriously? One answer that might surprise more than a few folks: a growing number of academics. In fact, there's an entire academic organization devoted to studying what we do, and their attitude about romance is far different than many expect.

WHAT IS IASPR?

It's a common joke around Romancelandia that the real business at any conference happens after hours at the hotel bar, and that's exactly how the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) was founded: around a bar table on the final night of the 2007 Popular Culture Association conference. Founders Sarah Lyons and Eric Selinger, along with their tablemates, scholars working in multiple disciplines and hailing from across the United States, Europe and Australia, decided the time was right to create a formal academic association dedicated to studying their shared favorite genre. A decade later, the organization continues to contribute significantly to the academic acceptance of and interest in the romance genre and its

community.

Like any academic association, IASPR (affectionately called *YAS-per* by its members) has a stated mission, namely to "foster and promote the scholarly exploration of all popular representations of romantic love." Members range from students to full professors to independent scholars, who work in disciplines including gender studies, English and literature, sociology, film, sexuality, cultural studies, history, and more.

According to founder Sarah Lyons, a former professor and current editorial director for Riptide Books, the why behind IASPR is simple.

"We felt studying romance was valid and important, and we wanted romance scholarship to have respect," she said. "Today's romance scholars simply aren't interested in asking the old questions about whether romance is 'good' or 'worthy.' We accept that it is, and we recognize that there's so much more to study than the early debate of oppression versus empowerment. In fact, we deliberately reject the oppression argument. We see works of romance fiction as literary and cultural objects, and we see many, many ways of looking at the genre and thinking about what it does and is and means."

Co-founder Eric Selinger, an English professor and IASPR's current president, pointed out that the organization is also important because it provides support and community for new and evolving scholars around the world. Selinger has been teaching courses in popular romance for nearly a decade. Today, he said, nearly half his courses focus on the subject.

"When I started trying to structure my first course, I researched what others were doing and found very little," he recalled. "So now, part of our goal is to normalize the teaching and study of romance literature, to encourage its

inclusion in many contexts and any disciplines, whether it's in K–12 or college or beyond. We're very committed to supporting those who want to teach a course or a section of a course or simply include romance study in some way.

"We launched IASPR at about the same time that the romance scholars listserv and the *Teach Me Tonight* blog (<http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com>) came into being," Selinger recounted. "Then the Romance Scholarship wiki (http://romancewiki.com/Romance_Scholarship) evolved as a listserv project. There was a clear resurgence of academic interest in romance around that time, not only in books, but also in film, poetry, manga, and other mediums, and it's only grown over the years. The wiki has, I think, more than five hundred articles listed now. At one time, everyone studying romance knew everyone else who was doing the same. Now, we stumble on academic conferences put on by people we don't know at universities we weren't aware were interested in romance. It's everywhere: Australia, the UK, Spain, and other regions. The academic perspective is definitely shifting, and there's more and more good stuff happening."

"We're incredibly proud of the community we've managed to build," Lyons added. "Books, articles, friendships, collaborations, support—we're very strong in all these areas and still growing."

WHAT DOES IASPR DO?

"That night in 2007, we basically decided to take over the world," Lyons laughed. "And we decided that we really needed four things: a dedicated academic organization, which is what we were pulling together, a dedicated academic conference, a blind peer-review journal, and a professor at a PhD-granting institution. We're still working on the last one, but the other three are in place."

As it happened, two of IASPR's original members were from Brisbane and were involved with the upcoming Romance Writers of Australia conference, so IASPR decided to hold its first conference at the same time. This worked particularly well as Australia was (and still is) home to several prominent romance scholars and to universities who strongly support their studies. Since then, other conferences have been held in Belgium, New York, York (UK), Greece, and Utah.

Jayashree Kamblé, associate professor of English and vice president of IASPR, said holding regular conferences

has been vital to the growth of romance scholarship.

"This genre is remarkably complex," she explained, "and we see scholars approaching it from so many different angles and disciplines. That's exciting. It's also been exciting to see how our scholarship has shifted in response to evolving concerns in the genre and the industry. Romance, maybe more than any other genre, is sensitive to the real concerns of people, both in the US and abroad, and the papers presented at our conferences reflect that."

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— Jayashree Kamblé

IASPR's seventh conference (themed "Think Globally, Love Locally?") focuses on the relationship between love and locality. Scheduled to take place in Sydney, Australia, in late June, this year's conference is chaired by Hsu-Ming Teo, a cultural historian and novelist on faculty at the University of Sydney.

"The scholarship around romance has really blossomed over the years," she said. "The first wave, in the '90s and before, was very denigrating of the genre and very simplistic. It's not that way anymore. The conference gathers people who are studying romance from across the world and gives them an opportunity to come together, share their research, and generate new ideas. There's plenty to consider. So many subgenres, so many aspects. We're looking at the world's most popular form of fiction, and we take it seriously. We take what women are writing and reading seriously. We apply rigorous scholarly analysis precisely because we respect and value the genre."

One of IASPR's other main contributions is its peer-review journal, the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (nicknamed *Jasper*), which publishes essays and articles about various aspects of romance and romance publishing. In keeping with IASPR's commitment to supporting romance teaching and scholarship, the *Journal* is open-source and online, so anyone looking for articles to use in classes, research, etc., can find them.

Erin Young of SUNY Empire College is the managing editor for the *Journal*. She pointed out that the articles and scholarship featured have included research across a range of areas, including indie authorship, the publishing process, how fan communities interact, the popularity of paranormal romance and what it says about culture, and more.

“IASPR members are involved in a robust, interdisciplinary body of research,” she explained. “We have members looking at the genre from a library science perspective, to ask what’s being shelved and checked out, how diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, sexuality, age, and disability affect romance, and more. One of the things I love about our scholarly community is that we’re very welcoming. Many of our members are independent scholars, and a number of romance writers are also

involved. It’s important to us to consider romance from various perspectives.”

WHAT DOES IASPR WANT ROMANCE AUTHORS TO KNOW?

First, they want us to know our work matters.

“We believe you are important enough to study,” Kamblé said. “There is depth here, real value to be studied and analyzed and considered. It’s important for you to know that your work is worthy and capable of withstanding academic scrutiny—and that romance scholarship is very much at the cutting edge of academic study.”

Also, they view RWA as an important partner.

FOUR RECENT ACADEMIC TEXTS WORTH READING

***New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays* Edited by Sarah S. G. Frantz and Eric Murphy Selinger**

This seventeen-essay collection, published in 2012, is the oldest text on this list, but may, perhaps, be considered the new school of romance scholarship’s declaration of respect for the genre and of the scholars’ intent to stop beating the oppression drum and start looking at deeper, more interesting facets of the genre. Individual essays focus on voice, love triangles, slash fiction, captivity narrative, serials, revisionist and real history, reading romance, PTSD, criticism, etc. Contributors include the editors, as well as Teo and Kamblé, who contributed comments for this article, but also industry names like Mary Bly (Eloisa James) and Sarah Wendell.

***Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* Jayashree Kamblé**

RWA members may be particularly interested in this 2014 book because its production was supported, in part, by the Academic Research Grant, of which the author was the first recipient. Beyond that interesting point, however, *Making Meaning* is well worth reading in its own right, as it explores key topics romance writers think about every day as they go about fashioning stories and creating words. These topics include the impact of money and class, war and patriotism, sexuality and desire, and race and religion. Part history and part analysis, the book clearly demonstrates Kamblé’s knowledge of, and interest in, the genre. At under two hundred pages (including notes, etc.), it’s a quick, engaging read that nonetheless packs in plenty of useful information and thought-provoking ideas.

“RWA, directly and indirectly, has been a tremendous support and presence in IASPR from the very beginning, and we are very grateful for that,” Selinger said.

Kamblé, who is IASPR’s RWA liaison, agreed.

“We owe a lot to RWA because of the Academic Research Grant,” she said. “It’s brought together scholars who wouldn’t have even known about each other and made us that much stronger. RWA has also been incredibly valuable in terms of helping us bring junior scholars to IASPR conferences, which helps strengthen our presence in the next generation of academics.”

They also want us to know they are listening.

“Twitter has actually been an incredible source of information for people interested in studying romance,” Selinger pointed out. “We follow authors, and we listen in

on conversations. We may not interact often, but we are listening, and we take seriously the things that are important to you.”

But, perhaps most importantly, they want romance writers to know that they don’t just study our work; they read it too.

“Today’s romance scholars are also, by and large, readers of the genre and no longer hesitate to say so,” Lyons added. “We share your enthusiasm for great stories, and we love the genre as much as you do. We’re very much part of the romance community now, and that’s the way it should be.”



Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom? **Edited by William A. Gleason and Eric Selinger**

Published in December 2015, this essay collection is divided into four topic areas: romance in context of American history, romance and race, art and commerce, and happy endings. Individual essays examine the origin of romance fiction in America, Southern romance, lesbian relationships post-WWII, Orientalism and feminism, cover art history, romance set in puritan communities, eroticism, and ménage. Authors considered include Beverly Jenkins, Susan Elizabeth Phillips, and Zane. Text is both critical (in the scholarly sense) as well as respectful of the genre and its significance.

Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present **John Market**

This 2016 text outlines various phases of romance publishing, including key publishers, industry trends, etc. It includes often-fascinating analysis of the business end of romance publishing, as well as a few charts/graphs/visuals likely to interest the data lovers among us, and is extremely accessible. The author, while maintaining an appropriate level of academic objectivity, displays a solid sense of what romance is and isn’t and how the reality contrasts, often sharply, with mainstream opinion. Discussion of diverse texts and authors is light, but, to a degree, this only serves to highlight the issue. Due to publishing lead times, exploration of small press and indie authorship is also limited, but the book remains a good primer for anyone interested in the history of romance publishing.