

Cougars, Grannies, Evil Stepmothers, and Menopausal Hot Flashers:  
Roles, Representations of Age, and the Non-traditional Romance Heroine  
(Exegesis)

For Your Eyes Only  
(A Novel)

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Statement of Authorship

*The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.*

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## Abstract

A love story is the fundamental component to a romance novel; it is what drives the genre and what romance writers and readers expect to engage with in some form. However, after the age of 40, a woman is usually denied a place in the central love story by the romance publishing industry via specific mandated guidelines for writers and a flow-on effect for readers. This study and companion novel *For Your Eyes Only* explore the representations of older women as protagonists (the ‘heroine’) in contemporary romance fiction. The work argues that romance fiction maintains stereotypes and archetypes of middle-aged and older women, which limits their roles and behaviour to those of secondary characters, or removes them from the status of central character in romance and places them in Women’s Fiction. This transfer from a novel where the love story is the key element of the plot to novels where a love story is only a sliver of the plot, suggests that older women are not entitled to be the love interest in romance fiction. The exegesis and the novel consider and therefore challenge the constraints that are placed on romance writers who are guided by prescriptive expectations from publishers around the age of romance heroines.

The study indicates that there is increasing evidence of an older age reading demographic for romance texts, which demands romances featuring older women, and there are romance authors who seek to shift the parameters of the central love story so that it is more inclusive of older women. In some respects, this demand reveals that the genre, while still retaining its fantasy and escapist inflections, is being called on to be more ‘truthful’ in its inclusion and portrayal of women across all age demographics.

The exegesis analyses the romance genre, the romance publishing industry, readers of romance and the few contemporary romance novels that feature a mature-aged romance heroine. The creative work, *For Your Eyes Only*, constructs a narrative in which older women as romantic heroines can assert agency. The novel features a heroine who is not answerable to the demands of conventional romantic stereotypes and challenges the conventions of age and the portrayal of non-traditional romance heroines in contemporary romance novels. In other words, rather than become a stereotyped secondary character that is often the case in romance novels, the mid-life romance heroine of *For Your Eyes Only*, with her mature sexuality, life experience, and position in society, is central to the love story and challenges the established and expected roles for a woman over 40 that are typically found in romance fiction.

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### Acronyms and Definitions

AAR	All About Romance website
HEA	Happily ever After
HFN	Happily For Now
HM&B	Harlequin Mills and Boon
Heroine	The female protagonist in romance fiction
Mature/Older Heroine	Aged from 40 to 60 for this study
RWA	Romance Writers of America
RWAus	Romance Writers of Australia
Women's Fiction	Term the publishing and romance industry use as a classificatory term for marketing purposes
YA	Young Adult Fiction



### Keywords

Ageing, ageism, fiction, publishing, contemporary romance fiction, love stories, older women & fiction, older women & romance, romance fiction, romance novels, romance writing, women & ageing, women & fiction, women & romance fiction.



## Introduction

This thesis consists of a creative work, a romance novel, *For Your Eyes Only*, featuring an older female protagonist and a practice-led exegesis that investigates, from my position as a romance writer, several aspects of the romance industry (publishing, romance writing guidelines, online romance reader sites) as well as the cultural field in which representations of women and age are situated. As a romance writer, I acknowledge that the romance publishing industry is profit-driven and market driven. To take risks, as I do in writing about romance and the older woman, may attract a reasonable following, yet is not standard fare for the majority of romance readers or writers. It is a topic then that is largely ‘not for profit’. This being said, I am interested in pursuing my interest in featuring older women as the centre of the romance narrative, a creative endeavour to, as Bly notes in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, “reformulate the formula” (p. 69). There are a number of premises to this project. One is that older women in both society and in symbolic representation are often delegitimised as human beings worthy of consideration. There are of course exceptions, particularly in high-end literary work, as for example the female protagonists of Virginia Woolf’s novels. In the popular literature context however, this relegation of older women to the social and cultural margins is often more pronounced as the romance genre has historically featured young women in the central role, sustaining the fantasy that love is only for the young. The second premise for the thesis is linked to the first. Popular culture has the capacity to inform ideas about social and cultural norms and therefore can be highly influential in the transference of knowledge and attitudes. Tilsen and Nylund (2009) write that “popular and media culture has gained hegemonic status, becoming perhaps the most powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity today” (p. 4). In this respect, the romance genre, as one form of popular culture with a wide readership, helps to sculpt social ideas around love, romance, gender and gendered relationships, gender expectations, and sexualised female and male bodies. The thesis therefore argues, as have other critical engagements with the romance genre, that its sustained focus on the heteronormative youthful female subject of romance constitutes a something of a symbolic annihilation of other forms of female identity.

The third premise to this project is that the romance genre is not a fixed one. While it is a very durable genre, it has also been over many decades, a flexible one, constantly attuning to new readerships, being challenged by authors and scholars, and

responding to changing social patterns and values. While the love story between the protagonists, obstacles to their relationship and the ‘happily ever after’ (HEA) remain stable/staple and defining tropes, there are many types of romances (Historical, Medieval, Regency) and many other contemporary romances generating their own audiences, their own market niches. These include GLBT romance, urban fantasy romance, erotic romance, New Adult, and paranormal romance. The genre, its forms and its conventions have been subject to feminist critical analyses for many years with many approaches substantiating the links between fictional representations of women and cultural realities. For example the most notable and the earliest line of criticism reproaches the genre for reinforcing women’s oppression within a patriarchal paradigm (Greer, 1970; Snitow, 1979; Radway 1984; Mussell, 1984). However, as the genre has evolved in concert with the changing and diverse roles of women, especially with respect to the construction of the romance ‘heroine’, critical analysis has also diversified its approaches. Issues of female empowerment, reader response, author sovereignty, and changes and trends in the publishing industry are of interest to the wide field of romance genre scholarship. This thesis contributes to these conversations from a writer’s perspective.

The thesis is driven by a practice-led approach, which privileges the writing of a contemporary romance novel, *For Your Eyes Only* featuring an older woman as the main protagonist, and the experiences and understandings of what is involved in that process as well as in the attempts to publish. A practice led study is idiosyncratic. As Descartes (Meditation II) would submit, my experience is the only thing about which I may be absolutely certain; what I discuss in my exegesis is an inference from my own experience as an author. My journey as an author who seeks to publish contemporary romance novels that feature a non-traditional heroine, one who sits outside the norm for age, tests the elasticity of genre conventions, and tests conventions of an industry interested in generating profit. The novel and the exegesis contribute to the argument that while the popular romance genre has undergone many shifts in its representations of the heroine the dominant construction of the female protagonist is as a young woman in her twenties. The implication of this is that love and romance are for the young only. This notion is a stumbling block to writers of the genre (such as myself) who wish to write about older heroines (40-60 years of age) in contemporary romance fiction. Fundamentally, the exegesis and the novel explore what happens to the contemporary romance genre if there is an older heroine. What features of the genre, if any, are

altered? Is the love story still central? Do the obstacles faced by the older heroine in her quest for love still fit with the crucial, defining feature of the romance genre? Is there an audience for romance novels with mature-aged romance heroines? Is the true fictional place for women of a certain age Women's Fiction (as defined by the publishers) rather than in the romance genre? The two components of this thesis, the novel *For Your Eyes Only* and the accompanying exegesis, have arisen out of these questions and are my attempts to counterbalance this age bias. As well, I set to explore some of the reasons for the bias through an investigation of the demands of the romance publishing industry, prevailing cultural views of older women and a prevalent idea within the romance industry that considers Women's Fiction as the 'proper' home for women of a older age. These are the difficulties faced by an author who wishes to bend genre conventions and cultural norms.

The questions guiding my research and my creative writing piece challenge why so few older women are featured on a regular basis as romantic heroines in mainstream contemporary popular romance. My claim is that there is a growing readership for the contemporary romance that centres on love and romance for an older woman. The research is not only driven by my own practice, and the knowledge of other established practitioners in the field who have tested the same question, but also by novice writers and avid, older romance readers in the romance reading community whose comments suggest that they would like to see themselves represented in the fiction that they clearly enjoy reading. While there are studies addressing the older female as the central protagonist in popular and literary fiction, such as Byrski's (2010) *Visible Signs of Ageing: Representing Older Women In Australian Popular Fiction* and Brennan's (2005) *The Older Women in Recent Fiction*, there is little research on the role of mature aged women in *romance* fiction, either as supporting players or as the romantic lead. Nor is there much written regarding the implications for the romance genre should the inclusion of mature heroines occur. Further to this is the view held by publishers of the romance fiction that suggests mature-aged female protagonists fit better into *Women's Fiction* rather than in the romance genre.

Women's Fiction is a complicated label. James (2012) states "Readers, not to mention academics and publishers, wrangle endlessly about the definition of 'women's fiction'" (<http://eloisajames.net/bookstolove/2012/05/learning-to-breathe-by-karen-white/>). For some, Women's Fiction is a gendered grouping that separates any writing done by women from the work of male writers, which often leads to discussions

regarding the value of the writing, as well as the agency and oppression of women. Yet Women's Fiction is also a market-driven word in the publishing and romance industry; that is publishers of romance use it as a classificatory term for the purposes of determining where fiction written mostly by and for women might fit into a marketing category, who the potential readers might be, and how the stories will be marketed to that audience. This process is what Thomas (2012) suggests is a 'top-down' model that decides a reader's choice, rather than what a reader might actually want. Thomas' submission emphasises that the romance publishing industry is static, as it is motivated by profit, by what sells best, by what sort of romance novel makes the most money. In other words, romance publishing is 'all about the money.' In the case of the publishers' marketing classification, and purpose of this study, *Women's Fiction* is used to refer largely to the *Bildungsroman*, or any story where the plot is focused on charting the female protagonist's voyage of self-discovery or emotional and physical evolution. This type of narrative might, for example, be a multigenerational saga featuring principally women; or a 'relationship novel,' that is, the female protagonist's relationship with family, friends or significant others. The delineation of the different types of writing for, by and about women, established as a form of classification shorthand by publishers, is what sets romance apart as a genre of its own. Simply put, for publishers, and many readers of the genre, *romance* fiction is driven by a love story with a happy ending, or a possible future happy ending. Women's Fiction *may* contain these elements according to the publishers, but these do not drive the story, character development, relationships or conclusion, and a happy ending is not necessary.

There are elements of the romance genre that confirm the centrality of the romance fantasy, distinctive fundamentals often referred to as the 'formula:' the love story, the obstacles the lead female character must overcome in pursuit of that love, and the HEA, or as the Romance Writers of America (RWA) define it, "an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending" (<http://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=578>). These elements are an engaging part of reading romance, and what Fowler (1991) refers to as "anticipatory delights of this fiction" (p. 99). Implicated in the durability and success of the romance are the readers of romance. Most often, as indicated through reader research over many years, it is female readers of mainstream romance fiction who most enjoy the genre and its conventions, who find pleasure in the text, and afford it a place in their lives for a variety of reasons. For the romance writer there is an obligation to arouse and satisfy the reader's desire for love and romance, based on the view that the

reader wants to read about these aspects, even if the fictionalised form of them is exaggerated and often more fantasied than 'real.' Escapism is a stable promise of genre fiction (Radway, 1984), but particularly within contemporary romance fiction there has been, and continues to be, strong evidence from readers, authors and publishers that such escapism is tempered by recognisable connection with 'real life' issues and experiences without damaging the centrality of the love story. Crusie (1997) advocates that women read romance for many reasons, but one of them is to identify with situations and characters that, despite their fantasised nature, also validate their lives in some way. Aspiring romance writers are advised by publishers and romance writing communities to ensure the heroine is one with whom readers can identify. So while romance, as with other forms of genre fiction, has established conventions, over the decades it has also exercised flexible parameters, attested to by the many changes that the genre has been subject to through various influences from other genres, in response to societal changes around gendered identity and personal relationships and to reader demand.

The malleability of romance as a genre of fiction that accommodates and reflects changing social patterns—and tastes—is well documented historically and in present times, as Thurston (1985), Crusie (1997), and Wendell and Tan (2009) point out. This is not to say that the genre adaptation around the representation of women has ticked all the boxes in terms of identity variants around ethnicity, sexuality, race and class or any number of other aspects including age, which govern social and political life. Historically, as Dudovitz (1990) indicates, the romance genre once reflected or spoke for white, heterosexual, middle class women, yet today Harlequin's Kimani Press and Kensington's Dafina lines have shifted the colour lines and offer representations of multicultural romance. Cawelti (1969) explains that there is a difference between conventions and innovations: conventions are the much-loved plotlines and stereotyped characters known to the creator of the work and the audience, while innovations are ways of making conventions seem fresh. For example, author Suzanne Brockmann takes a familiar romance character, the strong, silent, alpha male Navy SEAL hero, and gives him an unexpected unique quirk; the ability to belt out Broadway show tunes. With new twists on legends and fairy tales, adhering to successful codes and plot elements, surprising characters and occasional innovations, authors have found inventive ways of incorporating political and social issues into their work, while still respecting the integrity of romance as a genre with its set of core conventions around

true love and how to get it. For example, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) romance writing has been generated by authors and readers intent on giving voice to a particular shared community around sexual identity and representation. While such variation on romance fiction is clearly welcome in many quarters by authors who wish to work in a less constrained way with the genre and readers who make their own informed demands on it, there is a less satisfying outcome for writers in my situation who wish to feature older female heroine.

Why should the older reader suffer from a loss of identification when, in fact, identification is touted as a crucial facet to keep in mind when creating a romance heroine? What does this say about the ways in which older women in our society are viewed and represented? The dilemma of representation is complicated by the social attitudes towards ageing in general and specifically towards older women. Therrien (2012) proposes that the romance narrative is a site where competing ideologies come into conflict, where something like gay, straightness, or, as I argue, a woman's age can only be negotiated out 'safely;' that is, in ways that "will not be contested, shifted, or conceded" (p. 165) from cultural norms or power relations. In *The Older Women in Recent Fiction*, Zoe Brennan (2005) identifies the lack of representation of the mature-aged woman in fiction; and she also challenges the 'safe' ways women of age have been allowed to appear in popular fiction, such as Agatha Christie's female sleuth Miss Marple. Brennan's observations on women and age are also pertinent to all forms of popular cultural representations of female senescence with regard to relationships, sexuality, and body images.

Most female protagonists of romance fiction are young women between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, although in recent years the range occasionally pushes into thirty-something. The age of female readers varies enormously, but figures released by the RWA (2011) shows females between the ages 45 and 54 make up the bulk of romance readers, yet industry guidelines for romance writers either 'suggest' or mandate adherence to the younger age range, or as Avon Books' Senior Editor Lucia Macro romance "heroines skew younger" (2012). The market is adept at classifying writing and creating reading communities around their products. Writing mature-aged heroines is seen to represent a "sales risk" as Escape Managing Editor Kate Cuthbert (2012) argues. Thus for the writer who wishes to write about an older female romantic lead, and for older female readers who do not necessarily want to read about the trials and tribulations of a much younger character, the constraints (overt or covert) around



representation and publication of the older female heroine are of social interest and representational concern. In this practice-led study, I argue that *romance fiction is shaped by and in turn shapes forces of culture, opinions, social behaviours, and creative practices*. The relationship between creativity and social and cultural values is a complex, contiguous and cyclical one. Creative writing itself is as malleable as practice-led research. Haseman and Mafe (2009) propose that the formation of a research question does not happen in a clear-cut or immediate manner as it does in more traditional forms of research. Exegetical methodology undertakes “a pluralist approach and use of a multi-method technique...[which is] tailored to the individual project” (Gray, 1996, p. 15). This study, set in a contemporary context, incorporates theory into practice and discusses how my work intervenes in the stable tropes of romance fiction to produce certain desired outcomes. The practice-led research question is therefore addressed through the writing of a novel featuring an older female protagonist and through an exegetical discussion of the ways in which, as a writer of romance genre, I managed this disruptive shift of the genre’s stability and its outcomes. The exegesis examines my creative work, *For Your Eyes Only*, in conjunction with that of other romance writers to demonstrate I faced challenges shaped by the practitioners of romance writing, by romance as a specific genre, by the romance publishing industry and how these related to my creative writing and creative writing practice. As well, the exegesis charts the creative context and evolutionary process of writing the novel within the constructs of popular society around women and age and the conventions that exist in the romance genre.

The outcome of this thesis presents a knowledge base that is connected to what Ryan (2005) suggests is a wide pool of common human experience. In this case the common human experience is that shared by ‘women of a certain age’ who are readers of romance fiction and find themselves under-represented as heroines in the romance genre and the small community of writers of romance who want to feature older heroines but also pay heed to the conventions that are central to the romance genre.

### **Chapter outline**

Chapter 1, the Literature Review, provides an analysis of the scholarship on romance from the 1970s to the present and the ways in which it has been positioned within cultural, critical and publication discourse. Drawing on feminist theories of the female body and the social construction of ‘femininity’, this chapter also establishes that

negative and minimal representations of older women are part of the larger society's abjection of age and female sexuality.

Chapter 2 discusses the topological features of romance fiction and examines the ways in which representations of the older women are relegated to secondary roles within romance fiction. It also explores the romance heroine and her transformation from submissive secretary to boss, and how the heroine's role has changed in the last 30 years. I define stereotypes, archetypes, and traits associated with women and age through an analysis of contemporary romance texts that emphasise roles and age expectations for women over 40 women, and texts, including my own, that disrupt these expectations. I argue that this has implications for the representational value older women have in media, and the ways in which they are represented in romance fiction.

Chapter 3 discusses the guidelines for writers of romance and the prescriptive exclusion of older women as romance heroines. It also recognises the limited research regarding older women and romance, the importance of reader identification as a key plank in the writing, publishing and marketing of romance, the ramification of these aspects for writers and readers with specific reference to my own creative practice. In an attempt to understand the perceived 'safety area' for mature-aged women in Women's Fiction, that is where publishing house marketing departments regard as a safer bet for profits and the notion that non-romantic characterisations are the sort older woman should aspire to, this chapter also examines the normative expectations of the publishing industry and the embedded attitudes regarding older women as romantic leads. I make note of how this attitude can be perceived as a risk aversion, yet also document of the rise of digital romance publishing and this may be the forefront of innovation.

Chapter 4 makes note that there is a demand for greater age representation in romance and offer evidence from social media and reader websites. Authors and readers are becoming increasingly vocal using many forums including annual romance writers' conventions and websites to state their opinions on the need for inclusion of older heroines.

Dovetailing into the desire readers have for inclusion of better representation, Chapter 5 inspects three authors and their contemporary romance novels that feature mature-aged heroines: Jennifer Crusie's *Fast Women*, Jeanne Ray's *Julie and Romeo*, and Nora Roberts' *Black Rose*. I ascertain if any features of the genre are altered if the heroine is older, I establish that the love story is still central, and make note that the

obstacles faced by the older heroine still fit with the crucial, defining feature of the romance genre. This chapter explores how these authors challenge the normative tropes and assumptions in both romance fiction and the industry.

The final chapter offers a reflection on how the normative tropes of romance and attitudes within the industry did or did not impact my creative practice. I compare my work to the three novels in the previous chapter to ascertain how I adhere to or depart from the expected tropological features of contemporary romance. Using the Research Question Model, I address the fundamental questions of what happens to the romance genre if there is an older heroine. In addition, I present reviews of my novel as evidence that there is an audience for romance novels with mature-aged romance heroines, as well as expose the notion that the true fictional place for women of a certain age Women's Fiction rather than romance. I highlight how these comments and reviews respond to the questions I pose. *For Your Eyes Only* can be considered to be the result of my attempt to overcome the stereotyped, exclusionary bias of age that exists in a flexible genre usually quite open to innovation. The synthesis of this thesis illuminates that my writing stems from a lifelong interest in reading stories of older characters with experience and history, as well as a genuine affection for the positive tales of love, that is, romance fiction. The pattern I established as a reader has influenced my writing. The result of this is that I wrote the romance novel I couldn't find, the romance novel I wanted to read.

Overall, my work examines existing stereotypes of women and age, and addresses the limitations of a romance industry that is risk averse *and* the limitations of the romance fiction genre in their exclusion of heroines who are beyond an 'acceptable' age. It is not my suggestion that there is some sort of conspiracy at work within the romance publishing industry, rather this is my experience and my observations of how the industry functions, of the prevalent attitudes regarding women over 40, of the proper or 'safe place' for mature-aged women in fiction, and of the ageism that exists in within romance publishing that omits an older heroine from a story that is regarded by some as only a younger woman's tale. The work reveals an audience of readers ready for more mature-aged romance novels and challenges the embedded assumptions and tropes of the industry with regard to an ageing heroine. My novel tests this deeply entrenched limit for the genre, and ascertains that although an ageing female romance protagonist who contravenes the norm and is perceived as a 'sales risk,' if the romance fantasy remains intact, if the fundamentals of romance remain intact, and if the writing

is good, it is possible to stay, as a heroine, on the romance side of the threshold. Ever-increasing sales of romance e-books and the new flexibility e-books, from a larger audience, to a larger word count, to a willingness to take a risk, offer advantages to new authors in a way the traditional print market does not. Perhaps this change in tradition will also alter ideas about the limits for older romance heroines who are not so non-traditional after all.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### 1.1. Introduction

The introduction to this thesis emphasised its practice-led approach, which privileges the writing of a romance novel, *For Your Eyes Only* featuring a romance heroine whose age contests some of the boundaries traditionally established by the romance publishing industry. This in turn has an impact on writers and writing guidelines around the construction of the main female protagonist. Historically, the scholarship around the genre comes from an academic perspective with a strong focus on the portrayal of the romance heroine and the relationship between this construction and the female reader of the text. In more recent times, pro-active organisations such as the Romance Writers of America and Romance Writers of Australia (RWA and RWAus respectively), as well as the accessibility of the internet where readers have had their say about what they would like to read, have witnessed more interventionist practices in the romance industry. It is from this perspective that this thesis makes its broader contribution. The literature review that follows provides an analysis of romance scholarship and its diverse forms. The analysis reveals that while much has changed within the genre itself and in terms of the critical approaches to it, the construction of the female romance heroine as a young woman in her twenties has remained largely an uncontested given.

The literature review begins with analysis of romance scholarship and the ways in which it has variously engaged with romance writing in terms of the portrayal of women, readers, and the limits (or possibilities) of genre. This analysis highlights that the age of the romance heroine has been a neglected aspect of scholarship due in large part to publisher/writer agreement around the fantasy of romance as an ascription and privilege of younger women. The literature review then examines a number of socio-cultural theories of gender and femininity on which the thesis draws for its analysis of contemporary romance writing and specifically the construction and representation of the older female protagonist. Finally, the review works towards a framing of the creative work in the light of these findings.

### 1.2. Background: Romance scholarship

Research into the romance genre has enjoyed a complex and divisive relationship. Indeed academic scholarship did not begin until the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and emerged in response to the growing body and popularity of romance fiction in the

1970s and 1980s. Many of these pioneering forays into romance scholarship examined romance fiction as a discursive construct that reflected social perceptions and expectations of women, with the focus also considering the female readers of romance fiction as part of the social script. The romance heroine and hero were considered in the light of this paradigm. In this way, considerations of the genre have arguably always involved an intimate relationship between its conventions and its community of readers. Early studies of romance fiction through the 1970s and 1980s examined the genre from feminist perspectives that discussed the ways in which romance as a genre endorsed the patriarchal constructs of gender. In this approach, female readers were regarded as complicit in the textual politics of the romance and were criticised for their betrayal of ‘real’ women. Germaine Greer (1970) argued that romance fiction repressed women and allowed them to cherish the chains of their bondage. Snitow’s (1979) study suggested romance was pornography for females. Modleski (1982) viewed romance through an interpretive lens of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, which suggested romance fiction warped reality and reinforced female subservience within an ongoing patriarchal context. To Modleski, romance novels were tranquilisers and romance readers were addicts who, “constantly increase the dosage of the drug to alleviate problems aggravated by the drug itself” (p. 57). Radway’s (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Fiction* investigated the nature of the relationship of audience and text. According to these initial studies, readers of romance chose the genre to ‘escape’ the adversities of their real lives, a perspective that perpetuated the non-agency of women readers and women characters alike. These studies focused on women, their reading habits, the patriarchy, and women escaping from life’s adversities into the fantasy. When the heroine was mentioned in the critical discourse, she was typically young, beautiful, but unaware of her beauty, possessed childish qualities, was naïve, a virgin or had very limited sexual experience. The dialogue around the heroine was often focussed on how she fitted within the ‘man’s world’ as nurse, secretary, or young career girl whose sexual desire was left to the *femme fatale* or another woman who was not the heroine. Radway identified the lack of agency that the female heroine possessed, stating that “female protagonists...cannot claim for themselves the kind of status male heroes and males texts so often claim” (p.12).

The scholarship around the construction of the female romance heroine in the genre continued to gain momentum in the 80s. Mussell (1984) noted in *Fantasy and*

*Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* that in order to be a *heroine*, a female character in a romance must pass a domestic 'test.' Only a female who conforms to a set of values and expectations, who behaves in traditional modes, and meets the trinity of traditional female socialisation roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, can be classified as a *heroine*. Mussell argued: "The domestic test identifies certain female characters as heroines and other as failures, but the definitions of failure and success shift with social priorities and cause women to fear they will be inadequate" (p. 114). She further suggested that female characters unable to realise these roles and behaviours were categorised as 'other.' These 'other' women became cast as secondary characters, as the villain, the cougar, the whore, the comic relief, and were often punished for behaving outside the typical limits of respectable feminine behaviour or feminine roles. While Mussell does not mention older romance heroines in her taxonomy of marginalised women types, older heroines too can be cast as 'other' as they are beyond the boundaries of the conventional model of the heroine. Such representations, as Brennan (2005) argues, typify "a disregard for a set of topics and areas of experience..." (p. 5) which reigns in their potential and limits them to a "range of images and behaviours as appropriate to female senescence" (p. 6).

Feminist analysis of popular romance fiction in the 1980s continued to consider the relationship between female readers, the romance heroine and women's 'roles' within society and culture. Carol Thurston (1987) analysed the evolution of the romance genre from the 1970s to the late 1980s to show (American) romance readers as representative of cultural sex-role orientation and socio-political attitudes. However, Thurston's sociological study also examined romance publishers, marketing, and distribution, the rise of the erotic romance, as well as a newly developed female persona and identity of readership that challenged existing romance scholarship. While she discusses women's roles within the genre as traditional, patriarchal and domestic, she also highlights that these constructs were reflections of values and norms of the time the novels were written. Thurston posited the heroine was situated inside the traditional maintenance of male-female relationships and that of the 'good woman,' two interpretations that fortify the "sturdiest conventions of women's fiction and romance..." (p. 44). In an effort to gauge reader perceptions of heroes and heroines, Thurston administered a survey on a heroine's temperament and sociability characteristics. Participants were asked to choose from a set of adjectives to describe a romance heroine. The study showed heroines were identified as kind, warm, faithful,

and gentle. While these characteristics endorse a conservative societal image of the 'good woman' they make no reference to the heroine's age. Indeed, none of the scholarship around romance contested or questioned the age of the romance heroine, suggesting a tacit agreement on the part of publishers, writers, critics, and, to some extent, readers that a youthful heroine was a pervasive foundational component of the genre, even if that heroine's delineation as a 'good' passive female was under critical scrutiny.

At the start of the 90s, other disciplines and fields of study, such as those in Literature, Creative Writing, and Popular Culture emerged alongside feminist and sociological approaches to investigate and analyse the romance genre and its evolving forms. This work ushered in new approaches to romance fiction, its depiction of women, its generic conventions and its marketing and publishing. Bridget Fowler (1991), a sociologist like Thurston, studied the economics of the romance publishing industry and proposed that industry marketing was responsible for perpetuating a formulaic product. However, at the same time, Fowler emphasised that traditional narratives and roles that placed heroines in dependent and subordinate positions had evolved into storylines and portrayals where the heroine was allowed to become an active rather than passive figure, a self-made woman now able to freely express her sexuality and move from being characterised as the virtuous Madonna. Fowler commented on the evolution of the female romance heroine, an evolution that clearly reflected changes within society: "No longer defined by her family identity, she has become the quintessential self-made woman... Woman is the active figure, the innovator of production..." (p.104). Fowler was also critical of feminist theories of romance fiction, that focussed solely on gender pointing out that there had been little investigation into the roles of ethnicity, class, and power relations expressed in the romance, despite Thurston (1987) arguing some years earlier that class relations had largely dissipated, at least in the USA. However, despite the focus on the changes to the depiction of the romance heroine, or the claims that other aspects of the genre had either kept pace with social changes, or the calls for more scholarly analysis of class, ethnicity and so forth, age was left out of the evolutionary process. Mature-aged female characters remained (and largely still remain) in the genre in fixed roles such as mother and grandmother, old crone or female grotesque and have been omitted from any academic discussion or examination of the genre.



Fowler was not the only researcher to stress changes in narrative content and form and the benefits of these more 'realistic' configurations to women readers. The analysis of romance fiction came from another quarter—the writers themselves. As an answer to the feminist disdain and criticism of the romance genre, best-selling romance author Jayne Ann Krentz (1992) edited and contributed to *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, a collection of essays by romance writers defending and explaining the genre. Included in that same volume was Kinsale's (1992) 'The Androgynous Reader', Barlow's (1992) 'The Androgynous Writer,' and Phillips' (1992) 'The Romance and the Empowerment of Women.' Each essay offered a noteworthy insight into how authors see readers, romance heroines, and the fantasy of romance itself, with particular emphasis placed on the importance of fostering the reader's connection to, or with the heroine. Rather than identifying with the heroine, Kinsale's essay surmises that the heroine is a placeholder for the reader, in that "the reader rides along with the character, having the same experiences, but accepting or rejecting the character's actions, words and emotions on the basis of her personal yardstick" (p. 32). In saying this, Kinsale makes no mention of age. Her views and those of others give support to the publisher-writer agreement around the dominant portrayal of younger heroines within the genre. Barlow's view of the romance heroine takes for granted that women readers of all ages respond to the 'feminine' that the young heroine embodies. Her assertion that "The romance heroine is the primary aspect of feminine consciousness, the character with whom the reader is most likely to identify" (p. 47) homogenises the female reader of romance as much as it locks her feminine consciousness into an age-specific fantasy paradigm. For Phillips, fantasy is precisely the point; fantasy is the most important element in the romance script. Women readers of the genre do not want 'reality,' rather "The romance novelist has an implicit contract with the reader who buys her book to portray life exactly as it is not" (p.58). This reinforces one of the most consistent lines of romance genre criticism, acknowledging that pleasure of the text for women lies in it offering an escape from the ordinariness of their own lives. This reprises the approach that Modleski and others pioneered, but without the criticism. Clearly the reader is constructed by the genre as Kinsale argues, and there are boundaries placed around that reader, which make the fantasy, rather than any reference to the real world, its lynchpin. One of the most telling attitudes regarding the romance fantasy and the age of the heroine came from Barlow. She focused more on the mythic journey of the heroine from Virgin to Mother, and

suggested that romance *ends* in narratives that deal with motherhood, mid-life and aging. The older woman is relegated to the safe and socially approved of spaces of social and familial duty and responsibility, well away from the heady contexts of love, sex and romance. In this formulation the woman character as older heroine, with her life experiences is more appropriately accommodated in Woman's Fiction, that is fiction that is not identified by romance publishers as romance fiction.

In an effort to attest to the literary merit of romance fiction and suggest that the relationship between romance, readers and writers is more complex and less damaging than early feminist criticism or romance had allowed, *Romantic Conventions*, edited by Kaler and Johnson-Kurek (1999), included essays by academics who were also romance novelists. The authors defended the genre, challenged feminist romance research, analysed the constructs of the genre, and explained how conventions, themes, patterns, and familiar images make up the backbone of romance. For example, several essays within the volume, including Botts' 'Cavewoman Impulses', Johnson-Kurek's 'Leading Us Into Temptation', and Heinecken's (1999) 'Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction' attend to the construction and portrayal of the romance heroine by addressing, and deconstructing, prevailing archetypes and stereotypes, such as the beautiful fairy tale heroine and sexually inexperienced heroine. While Barlow (1992) suggested romance novels act as "psychological maps—insights into the emotional landscape of women" (p. 46), Botts extended the idea, proposing that the romance allows the reader to integrate and fulfil a "deep-seated psychological urge...capable of acting out the shadow's darkest impulses; sexuality, anger, and danger" (p. 71), without reinforcing the patriarchy. Similarly, rather than view romance fiction as a means to indoctrinate women into the oppressive patriarchy, as Radway (1984) and earlier critics did, Heinecken suggested that since the 90s, romance novels show female characters have "greater social and personal power" and that romance fiction embraces "a sense of social justice" (p. 151). The social justice and values perspective has been incorporated into romance fiction and, as Heinecken pointed out, has resulted in a "lessening focus on the woman's body and a greater focus on her personality" through a "growing range of acceptable images of women" (p. 154). In other words, there has been a de-emphasis on looks and a strengthening of a heroine's personality. The comments made by these authors and critics indicate the realistic turn in romance writing over the last few decades has witnessed closer alliance between the romance heroine and 'real life' women. Although these essays indicate readers and heroines are shown to possess

greater personal power and there is a wider range of acceptable images for a female 'ideal' within romance fiction, there is nothing in these works that address women and age as an important social justice issue.

### 1.3. Recent scholarship

The start of the new millennium has garnered even more diverse, and detailed investigation of the romance genre, from the academic world and also from the readers themselves who have access to various communication and social media platforms. Regis' *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003) reviews the critical response to romance fiction and defends it against the earlier feminist accusations that it was pornography or a patriarchal construct that made women embrace the shackles of oppression. In defence of the genre, Regis offers an historical examination of the romance novel as a literary form, citing Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Richardson's *Pamela*, and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and sets them against contemporary works by Jayne Anne Krentz and Nora Roberts. In this, Regis illustrates the genre has evolved across centuries while retaining staple conventions that are essential to romance. In ways similar to Regis, Laura Vivanco (2006) asserts that there have been four basic constructs associated with romance scholarship. One is the analysis of readers, (Radway's study for example); another is a historical/social approach to examining the genre, which tells us what romance fiction—*Pride and Prejudice* for example—says about society and culture of a given time. As an example of this, Vivanco cites Regis' tracing the literary history of the romance novel. A third approach is the feminist perspective, which scrutinises romance for ways it demeans or supports women, and finally, drawing on any number of ideological, rhetorical, or discursive sources, literary criticism denigrates or appreciates the genre. The ambivalence of the approaches (that is either critical or defensive) points historically to an academic wariness when it comes to the study of romance fiction and romance scholarship. Vivanco is quick to defend the genre from such wariness and against public perception that the romance genre is a lowly form of writing. In *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance*, Vivanco (2011) advocates that Harlequin Mills & Boon novels are complex and better written than stereotypes and critics of the genre imply. She defends romance novels, analysing them through a framework of literary criticism that touches upon Northrop's (1992) high (epic and tragedy) and low (comedy and realistic) mimetic fiction. Vivanco (2007) states, "Neither the high nor the low mimetic mode is superior,

but some readers may have a strong preference for one or the other. It seems to me that criticising a romance novel written in the high mimetic mode for using shorthand is, in a sense, criticising it for not being something it was never intended to be”

(<http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com.au/2007/03/good-bad-myth-and-realism.html>).

In his analysis of the motivation romance readers have for reading romance fiction, Thomas (2008) proposes that textual analysis of romance fiction has come to a dead end. Thomas argues that previous research classified the genre as “highly conservative, based on normative views of heterosexual romance...and regarded as a means for reinforcing sex-role stereotypes of both men and women” (p. 20), indicating that the justification for this type of analysis was based on early constructs of the 1970s and 1980s romance heroine as passive, sexually inexperienced victims in a patriarchal society. This previous analysis of romance fiction is bound by the cultural epoch during which the reader and text were examined, and by the researcher’s social and ideological perspective. To further support his identification of an impasse in romance genre analysis, Thomas claims that a subservient, romance heroine has not been the norm for well over a decade. He points to the 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary romance heroine who is no longer passive, to heroines who are active, independent, financially secure and world-savvy. These heroines are sexual beings determining the parameters of their relationships and course their lives will take. Evidence of the ways in which the genre has expanded beyond the narrow confines of its forbears lies, Thomas claims, in the vast range of different niche romances expanding beyond the borders of the social-norming heterosexual romance. Readers are now offered Gay, Bi and Lesbian romance, Bondage, Domination and Submissive romance, and highly erotic, sexually explicit romance sometimes referred to as *Romantica*, and *Erotica*.

Earlier textual analysis may have reached a dead end in viewing readers and heroines as passive victims of the patriarchy, as Thomas (2012) suggests, yet more current investigation of romance fiction has evolved as the heroine and genre have grown and as authors and readers participate through associations and the internet as engaged communities and stakeholders Examination of the genre includes areas as diverse as ‘Relations Between Librarians and Romance Readers’ (Adkins, Esser & Velasquez, 2006), ‘Male Virginity in Romance Fiction’ (Allan, 2008), ‘Homoerotic Reading and Popular romance’ (Burley, 2003). Twenty-first Century investigation of the romance genre is emerging as a field that invites scholars, writers and readers to participate in its various forms and histories. *In New Approaches to Popular Romance*

*Fiction*, Frantz and Selinger (2012) discuss the complex dynamics of romance and its history, conferring with scholars, authors, websites, and romance readers to show not all academic studies approach romance fiction in the same way. Romance scholarship is global. The International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) is “dedicated to fostering and promoting the scholarly exploration of all popular representations of romantic love. IASPR is committed to building a strong community of scholars of popular romance through open, digital access to all scholarly work published by the Association, by organizing or sponsoring an annual international conference on popular romance studies, and by encouraging the teaching of popular romance at all levels of higher education” (<http://iaspr.org/about/mission/>). The work of Regis, Vivanco, Frantz, Selinger, as well as the IASPR highlight that the diversity of the romance genre has spread to a diversity of academic and critical approaches in investigating romance fiction.

Yet critical investigation of romance is not limited to academia. Newer forms of social media have thus ushered in some fresh perspectives on romance fiction expressing the views of both the readers and writers of romance. Websites, blogs, book review websites, and platforms for romance readers such as *Dear Author* (<http://dearauthor.com/>), All About Romance (<http://www.likesbooks.com/>) and *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* (<http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/>) play an important role in mediating and contributing to the various conversations and debates around the romance genre. Discussions can range from what romance fiction is and current trends in writing, to book reviews. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance Novels* by Wendell and Tan (2009), founders of the Smart Bitches community, offers an historical overview of the romance genre, addresses myths about readers and authors, discusses the construct of ‘Old Skool’ romance (also known as the stereotypical bodice ripper) and contemporary romance novels. The book supplies a detailed investigation of the romance heroine, which suggests there is room for incarnations of all kinds of heroines. Academics, authors, readers, websites, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, have joined the new inquiry into romance fiction. Discussion frames romance scholarship as an emerging field that delves deeper into the genre to challenge myths and shatter stereotypes and to give greater agency to authors and readers.

Irrespective of these more positive approaches identifying the ways in which the genre can empower women (both as subject and reader), the discussions do not contest

the normativity of the younger woman as the staple heroine. Fountain Hall (2008) indicates that, “romance fiction, through marginalisation, offers a freedom to expose the realities of social and cultural hypocrisies regarding gender oppression and overt discrimination” (p. 37). While academic examination of the genre includes a wider-reaching scope, within the various feminist debates on gender roles and romance, fiction both past and present there is little interest in or analysis of age amongst the variety of forms of the non-traditional romance heroine. In spite of feminist empowerment and belief in self-determination and independence, women and female romance readers are still bombarded from the various media with how they *should* and *should not* be or behave. Although the heroine has progressed from submissive to self-reliant and she can be non-normative in terms of sexuality, there are some norm-based reinforcements of gender roles and female stereotypes that remain in place in the genre. The early critical works remain important to this study because their analysis of the genre highlights dramatic shifts in the portrayal of the central female romantic protagonist. The heroine has transformed to accommodate the changing roles and desires of women as Thomas and others have identified. Yet what remains clear to me is that the boundaries around the age of the romance heroine remain trenchantly in place and it is also clear that the new ‘heterosexual’ feminine is in some ways not unlike the old—driven by social ideals around beauty and ‘proper’ femininity. It is these ideas about gender, femininity and the body that the literature review now turns to contextualise these claims.

#### **1.4. Femininity and age**

Simone de Beauvoir (1974) proposed that, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (p. 301). This section of the literature review considers some of the scholarship on the romance genre in its engagement with social views of femininity and age. Kehl (1988) proposes that, in fiction, the aged woman is something akin to Ralph Ellison’s invisible black man. Many women over 40 state they feel invisible within society; they are forgotten in fiction, and non-fiction as well. On Stephanie Campisi’s (2012) blog, author Isla Evans (2012) noted, “Funnily enough I was contracted to write a non-fiction book called *The Invisible Woman, and other remarkable phenomena of middle-age*, only to have the publishers have second thoughts because they didn’t think there was an audience!” (<http://www.readinasinglesitting.com/2012/09/13/interview-maggie-dana-on-the-middle-aged-female-protagonist-or-lack-thereof/>). When an older woman

appears on television, on screen or in print, it is all too common for superficial stereotypes or concepts to be applied to her. In romance fiction, she is more easily cast as a villainous evil stepmother or mother, such as Marguerite in Donovan's (2006) *The Kept Woman*, as Gloria Needleman the doddering old crone who appears throughout Susan Donovan's Dog Walker series (2009-2010) or as a man-eating cougar/oversexed floozy like fifty-something Betsy in Lewis Thompson's (2005) *Nerd Gone Wild*, rather than as a non-traditional or unconventional heroine. Western society seems to hold on to gender stereotypes as Ridgeway and Bourg (2004) assert. There is a genetic code that contains cultural rules and schemas that define what are socially accepted and expected behaviours for men and women. Prentice and Carranza (2002) maintain that gender stereotypes are prescriptive and linked to traditional roles and an unequal balance of power between men and women. The cultural regulation and organisation of social roles creates hierarchy and inequality between sexes and within each sex itself. Popular cultural representations of women, such as those often identified in romance fiction, can be viewed as conforming to such cultural norms. In this respect, a sixty-something knitting grandmother is the norm, while a sixty-something grandmother who enjoys sex is not.

Feminist theories of gender, such as those of Butler (1990) and Davis (1997), argue that gender (rather than being sexed as male or female) is something socially constructed or is a culturally appropriated prescription. The body, Butler (1993) further proposes, is an instrument for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related, while gender is an identity constructed through repeated stylised acts. The powerful, repetitive performance of these ways of being, of norming, also works through exclusion. What produces the subject, its subjugation, also regulates its power. Bartky (1988) suggests that as using make-up and dieting are practices a woman must master in pursuit of an ideal body. Women who fail to conform to this goal punish themselves and other women as well. Bartky contends this is the Marxist concept of alienation and prohibition, explaining it is a "fragmentation of the human person..." and the "...prohibition on the exercise of typically human functions" (p 34). Bartky goes further to clarify that this fragmentation is a "consequence of a form of social organization which has given to some people the power to prohibit other persons from the full exercise of capacities...necessary to a fully human existence" (p. 34). Social scripts about what constitutes proper 'feminine' behaviour promote competition between women, and perpetuate the thought that difference (in sexual behaviour or

appearance for example) is something that is fearful, ugly, or deviant. An older woman in contemporary Western society is arguably de-feminised because of the visibility and promotion of younger women in the cultural matrix. This demotion is, as Barkty argues a punitive act denying a fully human existence to older women. Older women are trapped between the expected performance of femininity and acceptable behaviour and the borders set in place for their exclusion. They are shamed and punished for ageing and shamed and punished if they defy the expectations associated with their senescence. The lives of older women become, as Butler (1993) indicates, ‘unlivable’ as well as ‘nonnarrativising’, by which she means they do not possess a life worth writing about. In romance fiction, the dearth of older romance heroines attests and contributes to this cultural elision.

Bordo (1997) argues that the power that maintains and regulates the feminine body is an ideological construction where rules have become culturally transmitted and standardised. Despite this, the body has never maintained one historical form and remains mutable; what was considered an attractive female figure in 1913 is vastly different to what is considered attractive in 2013. Ussher (1997) discusses scripts of femininity, which are ways of behaving based on archetypal representations of woman, such as the *virgin*, *mother*, and *crone*. Ussher theorises that the concept of “woman” and what makes a woman is bound within a particular social and cultural milieu. For many, femininity is tethered to a woman’s physical appearance. Appearance is a divisive factor for women in Westernised societies (Ussher, 1997; Bordo, 1997) and is predicated on a set of binary oppositions that produce a hierarchical set of values around it which remain remarkably socially durable. According to Brook (1999), dominant femininity is embodied in representations that “have a very narrow and specific range of skin and hair colour, age and body shape” (p. 55). Moreover, she argues that this hegemonic representation is not “simply a stylised version of a particular idealised femininity but actively produces a heterosexual object of desire which we are encouraged as women, to internalise as the actual embodiment of femininity” (p. 55).

According to the social script, beauty is power while being plain, fat, ugly, or old is something to fear. Romance is a genre that has built its durability around the idealised femininity of the sort to which Brook refers. This means romance communicates uneasily with the social changes that have developed to countermand such a portrayal. Moreover while we all believe that such changes have occurred and



know them through our own experiences, social contexts and cultural representations paradoxically and detrimentally uphold normative and reductive constructions of femininity. Mary Russo (1994) identifies a relationship between gender and the images of what she calls the ‘female grotesque.’ Representations of the ‘female grotesque’ that appear in Western culture are bound by “a persistence of constrained coding of the body which are associated with the grotesque: The Medusa, the crone...” (p. 14). Ageing—a normal part of life—becomes something fearful and monstrous when applied to a woman. Ageing is unliveable, and nonnarrativising, as Butler proposed. Pierce (1997) contends that ideal female qualities are forced and reinforced upon women by the media, family, schools, and peers thus drawing attention to the ways in which society continues to reward those who conform and to identify deviant ‘others’.

In *There Are Six Bodies in This Relationship: An Anthropological Approach to the Romance Genre*, Vivanco and Kramer (2010) explore the representations of the bodies of both romance hero and heroine. They assert that each romance protagonist has three bodies: a physical body, social body and political body. Vivanco and Kramer argue that these various representations are reinforced, or resisted, by gender ideologies and culture-bound principles of sexuality. The acceptance of new principles of behaviour is slow and often resistant to change, but change does occur. This change is evident in the transformation of the heroine from virgin to sexualised female. However, the current culturally appropriated norms that idealise the female body, women, and age will remain in place until resistance against the forms shift. Carroll (2007) suggests resistance to the norms of age can be destabilised in the way Butler (1993) argues that drag distorts performances of gendered identities. With drag, “gender is denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (p. 338). In other words, a sixty-year-old woman acting her age rather than acting the idealised version of her age resists the norm. In romance, indeed in all forms of fiction, the representations and narratives of older women could invite us, as Hillyer (1998) argues, to “learn to read past two opposing cultural pressures that shape old(er) women’s lives,” rather than “allow the narrative of decline to control its meaning”(p. 53). In this respect terms like ‘old crone’ (often a recurrent stereotype for older women characters in writing) can take on a more progressive meaning. Pratt (1981) for example, sees the *crone* as an “erotically independent archetype,” (p. 138) a presentation that is without a gerontophobic spin;

while Nett (1990) offers another resistant idea that suggests the *crone* is but “one manifestation of feminine being” (p. 187).

### **1.5. Women, Age portrayals, and the Media**

There is agreement among many scholars that mass media portrayals of older people have the capacity to influence the viewers’ explicit and implicit beliefs towards older people and old age (Kessler, 2004). Romance fiction that depicts older women in secondary roles or as stereotyped characters has a similar potential for influencing readers’ perceptions and beliefs about the older heroine. Despite some variance in the relegation of older women to supportive roles within romance fiction, roles for older women are often limited to grandmothers, menopausal hot flushers, villainous mothers or evil stepmothers, old crones and cougars rather than as romance heroines. Susan Donovan’s Dog Walker series offers examples of mature-aged women in stereotypical roles that fit within my analysis of romance novels, (which I discuss in Chapter 3), yet there is little research that specifically examines age representations of women in romance fiction. Byrski (2010) examines images of older women in Popular Culture in an Australian context. Her work supports the argument that mature aged-women are seldom the central character in popular Australian fiction. In addition, she also points out that the roles for women over 45 years of age are usually minor, stereotyped, negative characterisations.

Like Byrski, Brennan (2005) offers a discussion on pejorative fictional representations of older female protagonists especially with regard to sexuality and everyday life. Brennan states that, “Heavily reliant on stereotype, portraits of ageing suggest a very limited range of images and behaviours as appropriate female senescence” (p. 2). Brennan’s work shows that the typical negative stereotyping of women exists. She also indicates that the fictional representations of mature-aged women are still bound by paradigms of sexual desirability. While a man is allowed to age and remain sexually viable and active, a woman reaching the end of her fertility culturally indicates that her desirability and value as a sexual being declines, and leads to diminishment, alienation, and invisibility of women in society. This applies as well to media representations and romance fiction, and supports what Susan Sontag (1972) wrote about regarding the double standard of ageing. Sontag states, “Women become sexually ineligible much earlier than men do. A man, *even an ugly man* can remain eligible well into old age” (p. 31). Getting older enhances a man, but destroys a woman.

A woman growing older equates to a gradual sexual disqualification and devaluing. Sontag also suggests that women are imagined to have a more limited sex life than men and refers to ageing as “a movable doom...a crisis that never exhausts itself because the anxiety is never really used up” (p. 33). A woman’s sexual attractiveness is enfolded in her youth, and once her youth has waned, once her face and body bear the signs of age, her value has diminished, while men are allowed to show their age on their faces and bodies and suffer no penalty. Sontag goes further to suggest that women acquiesce in this double standard, and reinforce it by being complacent and participating in the disciplinary practices that ‘defy age’ rather than “protesting and disobeying the conventions” (p. 38) and embracing the truth their aged faces and bodies speak.

The media are also complicit in upholding stereotypes of age. Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook and Harris (1997) studied the depiction of women in 100 top grossing films from 1940 through the 1980s and found that, compared to older men, when older women appear in films they are frequently depicted as possessing negative characteristics. That is, older women are portrayed as unfriendly, unintelligent, less ‘good’ and less attractive than men of the same age. In the ‘reel’ world Bazzini et al., examined male lead characters 35 and older appear in 81% of the films, whereas female characters of the same age appeared onscreen in 19% of films. The study also proposes that the media reinforces the idea that youth offers women the most power and esteem within society. As a result, the media’s under-representation and failure to cast older women in more positive roles emphasises the notion that, for women, ageing is a black hole that leaves them feeling worthless and hopeless. Bazzini et al., note this, stating, “media images of ageing women help to explain why therapists have recently found a ‘depletion syndrome’ prevalent in older women” (p. 542) that characterises these feelings of meaninglessness and doom, explains poor diet and lack of self-care among them. Representation in forms of media signifies existence, even if in negative form, while non-representation signifies invisibility or inexistence. The failure of the media to “portray ageing female characters reinforces an unattainable cultural standard that perpetuates women’s struggle to fight ageing” (p. 542) and remain visible and viable as human beings.

Film studies since 2002 have explored what Tally (2006) refers to as ‘Middle-Aged Chick Flicks.’ These particular movies are in a similar vein to novels produced by Crusie, Ray, and Roberts, the novelists whose work I analyse in Chapter 4. These films attempt to celebrate, and are marketed to, the growing audience of baby-boomers and

other mid-life aged women who are ready to be represented in popular culture. While Stoddard discussed the history of film and the various roles of ‘mother,’ the shrewish consequences of not fulfilling the female role of married and mother, Tally’s research recognises that the roles of career woman and mother have combined and allow audiences to identify with women who are successful, maternal *and* sexual. The newfound attitude affirms the earlier roles of ‘mother’ while demonstrating that portraying a mother with a sex life does not destroy a woman the way she would have been in films from the 40s. While cinema parts for mature-aged women are typically limited to secondary roles as friend, mother, or stereotype, Jermyn (2012) has noted that in recent years there has been “a trickle of films that centre on older women protagonists who take on the romantic heroine role despite the fact their reproductive years are behind them” (p. 38), this is in spite of the fact romcoms are so focused on finding the perfect significant other. On the whole, however, mainstream cinema is usually not kind to mature-aged women.

Other examinations of films about older women, such as those of Lauren and Dozier (2002), support Bazzini’s findings and the double standard, which delivers men, not women, some reward for being older. Lauren and Dozier’s 100-film study reported that men enjoy a longer life in film than women who are required to conform to standards of beauty that place a huge emphasis on youth. Male characters “age at least into their 40s, whereas many female characters remain forever frozen in their 20s and 30s” (p. 437). Media images that stress the value of youth and beauty demean age and turn it into something to loathe and fear. This fear adds to the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of age and gender. Stereotypes are reinforced, which contributes to ongoing attitudes about women, age, and the roles they are allowed to take. The value of characters is “symbolically communicated by their absence or abundance on screen and by the quality of their portrayals” (p. 438).

While attitudes about ageing and characterisations continue to evolve in film, albeit sporadically, scholars maintain that mid-life and older women are still underrepresented and arguably misrepresented within that media. Sexuality may not be the taboo it once was for the forty-something woman on celluloid; however Weitz (2010) investigates the ways that the middle-aged female body is often displayed for laughs rather than as an object of desire. This could be a result of marketing, as the primary audience targeted by film studios has been young men. Cultural attitudes about mid-life female sexuality may also play a part—youth is the beauty manifesto of the

modern commercial age that views ageing as something ugly for women, unless, as Weitz points out, they happen to be middle-aged French women in French films. Besides never getting fat, French women of a certain age (at least in cinema) are allowed to be shown having, and enjoying, sex. Carpenter, Nathanson and Kim (2006) note that cross-cultural studies on ageing and sexism suggest older women in France lose less sexual desirability than their counterparts in the USA and Great Britain. While Sontag points out options to battle the double standard of ageing, Holmes (2006) discusses the difficulty in reconciling personal desire with social imperatives, and the particular forms that this takes for women. These forms are addressed in a study for the American Association of Retired People (Montenegro, 2003), which showed images of divorce and perceptions of older unmarried women from 'old maids' to 'emancipated feminists' have changed attitudes about ageing, dating, romance, and sex. The study also found that middle-aged people date, are interested in, and have, sex, which supports Sontag's idea of an 'imagined' limited sex life. The 2010 Sex Romance and Relationships Study of Midlife and Older Adults (Fisher, 2010) indicated that very few people believed that sex is something only for young people, with only 8% women over age 70 holding this view.

The inclusion of these examinations provides a current foundation for the ways in which this thesis explores and is a creative response to the persistence of outmoded and unrealistic portrayals of older women, where white hair and crow's feet mean a woman is excluded from the role of romantic leading lady. Fowler (1991) avers that the "anticipatory delights" (p. 99) of romance fiction define and redefine what is acceptable in the genre. In this respect, romance fiction featuring older women as heroines has the potential to take the genre into new and non-delimiting directions. For example, that a French Harlequin Romance series took account of the mature demographic of French women is perhaps an entrée into this area. Holmes (2006) notes that the romance heroine in this French series "is older than her predecessors (in her 30s or 40s) so that love arrives not as life's one great adventure, but...as a complication in an already well-furnished existence" (p. 121).

Romance fiction has been scrutinised and dismissed as an impoverished literary form by book reviewers such as Walker (2004), and called junk fiction by literary critics such as Carroll (1994). Conversely, romance fiction has also been embraced for offering powerful, life-affirming, feminist stories about women and relationships by academics such as Selinger (2007), and by bestselling romance author-scholars such as

Crusie (1997). Like romance fiction, women and age have been similarly dismissed. However, there is evidence that in the last two decades women, ageing, and romance fiction are being discussed and defined in the fields of Feminism, Gender, Popular Culture, and Psychology. These fields have examined romance through studies of gender, heroines, and stereotypes and form a foundation for my research. Crusie's assertion that women read romance to "recognize the truth and validity of their own lives" (p. 92) and Thurston's (1987) "psychological realism" (p. 56) suggest the verisimilitude at work in romance fiction. The struggles of the heroines are grounded in the everyday; there are matters of divorce, parenting, finances, deaths, matters that are emotionally sound, and frequently reflect the perceptions women have of themselves and the world around them. By using works presented in this overview, this study aims to explore the everyday that shapes women's lives and the practices that form boundaries that keep them—and writers like me—from acknowledging age as a worthy and valid representation in romance fiction.

## Chapter 2: Stereotypes, Older Women and their Representation

Social roles and age expectations for women over 40 are socially constructed based on ideological premises that position them as inferior to their younger counterparts. This tendency within our society has implications for the representational value older women have in media, and is pertinent to this study, that is to the ways in which they are represented in romance fiction. Romance texts that include older female characters typically cast them in stereotypical forms, in secondary peripheral or supportive roles; rarely are older women cast as romantic protagonists. This chapter first explores social and cultural views about women and aging, and suggests that popular fiction (which includes romance fiction) can be influential in projecting or protesting negative views. This is a cultural analysis that sets up the contemporary context in which I wrote *For Your Eyes Only*, a romance novel that features a heroine over 40. The chapter then turns to some of the established writers of romance who eschew the older woman as viable contemporary romance heroines before briefly analysing contemporary romance novels that have featured older women in stereotypical and negative ways.

### 2.1. Stereotypes and the romance heroine

Harwood (2007) defines stereotype as a “cognitive representation of a group”. She writes:

Stereotypes are often framed in terms of traits—specific characteristics that we expect members of a certain groups to possess...while some stereotypes may have a kernel of truth to them, they often have negative consequences both because they are inaccurate and because they often get applied to an individual group member regardless of that person’s individual characteristics.” (p. 51).

Negative attitudes regarding stereotypes lead to avoidance and even dislike of whole groups of people, influencing social and cultural norms regarding gender, race, class and age. In romance fiction, romance heroines, as already highlighted, have emerged in recent times as less stereotypically portrayed and more fully embodied. Many critics who have engaged with the genre suggest that while it offers “anticipatory delights”, female readers of romance fiction also connect intimately with romance heroines to validate or measure their own lives. Aspiring romance writers are advised by publishers and romance writing communities alike to create a heroine with whom readers can identify or relate to in some way; a point more fully addressed in the following chapter.

Crusie's assertion that in contemporary times women read romance to "recognize the truth and validity of their own lives" (p. 92) acknowledges that the romance genre has significantly evolved to reflect some of the reality of women's lives and strives for more verisimilitude in its narrative forms. From divorce, parenting, finances, deaths, emotional and sexual issues, the struggles of many modern romance heroines are grounded in the everyday and reflect the perceptions women have of themselves and the world around them. However, while the *youthful* modern romance heroine has evolved into a more recognisably real character, and she may no longer be held to account regarding her sexuality or the expression of her sexual desire, older women in romance fiction continue to be constructed in stereotypically negative ways.

## 2.2. Constructing femininity

Cultural representations are arguably influential in perpetuating or contesting social understandings of gender. In many forms that cultural representations assume, gender is defined in terms of dichotomous pairings that are not always equal. Bartky (1998) and Bordo (1997) point out for example that Westernised societies have a tendency to narrativise women's bodies and behaviour in dualistic and hierarchized ways—old vs young; ugly vs beautiful; feminine vs masculine. Of specific interest to this thesis is the social and cultural valorisation and eroticisation of the link between youth and beauty (this is also a highly heterosexualised image), which works to abjectify older women. The cosmetics industry and many other social practices and businesses that focus on and profit from promoting youthful feminine bodies as specifically desirable, contribute to the marginalisation of older women, fuelling fear and loathing of ageing. Bartky (1998) discusses the disciplinary regime of femininity, arguing that women have been persuaded that their bodies are defective and that aging itself is a defect, a monstrous and unnatural process rather than a natural part of life. Make-up is touted as a means to cover up flaws and imperfections; skin creams and serums promise smoother skin and less pronounced wrinkles, thus sustaining the image of youth and denying any other forms of being human. Bartky states, "The taboo on aging demands that I try to trap my body and remove it from time..." (p. 41).

Judith Butler has contributed significantly to understanding the social, physical and psychological processes which seem to endorse an 'essentialised' gender identity and contribute to normalising certain types of bodies and bodily practices. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) suggests that gender is



performative and constructed through stylised, repetitive actions, which she claims create an ontological 'core' gender. The 'congealing' of gender, Butler states, "is itself insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means..." whereby the stylised repetition of acts form "...the appearance of substance" (p. 33). Barbara Brook (1999) contends that the hegemonic representation of femininity congeals around specific characteristics favouring youth and beauty. This, she claims is not "simply a stylised version of a particular idealised femininity but actively produces a heterosexual object of desire which we are encouraged as women, to internalise as the actual embodiment of femininity" (p. 55). Ridgeway (2006) proposes that widely shared beliefs of this nature that accumulate around core gender operatives are fundamental to the organisation of status inequality. When these beliefs form, they "become part of the cultural stereotypes of the groups they evaluatively rank" (p. 304). In turn, these beliefs spread by "treating others according to the belief in subsequent encounters" (p. 313). As a result, gender types function as models of appropriate behaviour for men and women, and lead to value judgments where one is deemed admirable or shameful if one does not conform to the social script. In reality and fiction alike, if a woman acts outside the standard idealised norms of the social script she is often punished and devalued in the ways Stoddard (1983) identified in the films of the 30s and 40s—that is, as a crazed or inept mother, as a social parasite, as a castrating female, or as a cold and childless frump (Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

Stoddard (1983) examines the roles in which older women have been cast in American cinema and highlights the fact that popular media images of women and age do not exist within a vacuum. In *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film*, Stoddard asserts that representations of women and age, what a culture believes to be myths, truths, and wishful thinking (which one can translate to mean fantasy) about growing old evolve over time. Stoddard's analysis of ageing and the portrayal of older women in popular American film categorises the screen representations into a few stereotypical roles that have persisted across decades. What she illustrates is that, from the images of sainted mother, manifestations of what is good, what *should* be good, to the scatterbrained wealthy matron during the Depression, 'Mother' has been a dominant female role, a characterisation seemingly most de/valued and reified. According to Stoddard, those women who did not fulfil their role in life as saintly, asexual mothers who baked pies and raised children wound up characterised as shrews or insane like the faded actress Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. Stoddard

argued for the demythologising of the role of mother and demonstrates the relationship between film images of women ageing and the expression of social needs within American culture.

Almost thirty years after Stoddard, Jermyn (2012) establishes that little has changed in the onscreen characterisation of older women. Jermyn discusses that in Hollywood “women over 40 have the slimmest chance of being cast in any role at all, evidently to the chagrin of older women audiences” (p. 4). Historically, Jermyn notes, images of the ageing female have been produced in memorable portrayals of ‘ageing female movie stars,’ such as Norma Desmond, whose rendering embodies “the disgust ‘old women’ evoke in our culture” (p. 4). Yet Jermyn also indicates that there has been some disruption to the conventional portrayals of older women in Hollywood. Television has afforded greater space for mature-aged female characters. Recent dramas such as *Saving Grace*, *Desperate Housewives*, *The Closer*, *Damages* and *Weeds* have starred actresses over 40 in leading roles. Further to this, a number of films, *Must Love Dogs*, *Something’s Gotta Give*, *It’s Complicated*, *Last Chance Harvey*, *I Could Never Be Your Woman*, *Enough Said*—all romantic comedies starring mature-aged actresses—offer resistance to the typical depictions of the older female in cinema. Jermyn suggests that the “romantic comedy has become one of the few spaces in mainstream cinema where older women audiences might encounter an appealing representations of themselves” (p. 8). The Hollywood romcom featuring a mature-aged female protagonist has the potential to translate to the romcoms of romance fiction—the sort I write—and establish what could be perceived as a ‘safe’ way an older woman can assert agency within the genre—safe in terms of acceptable and safe in terms of potentially lucrative for publishing. Jennings (2014) states that “An increasing number of films are being made for the 50 plus market, and the trend is set to grow” (<http://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/healthandlife/yourhealth/lights-camera-action-attract-an-older-audience-to-the-silver-screen-265698.html>). Hollywood and other filmmakers have begun to cater more to this previously ignored market, with financial success in films such as *Red*, and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, which grossed close to \$140US million. No medium is more about profits than movie making. The industry follows the money. I suggest that when films and romance novels featuring older heroines (or more mature protagonists) begin to make money, more of them will be produced. However, there needs to be some form of proven track record for this to occur.

### 2.3. No home for old folks in romance

Being older is another formulation of ‘other’ that marginalises women. Civilisation as a whole produces what is described as feminine, as de Beauvoir (1974) indicated. De Beauvoir’s claim that the category of woman is socially constructed has important relevance to representational contexts in which factors including age, appearance and behaviour are considered. The mature aged woman is ‘produced’ in the symbolic order as a marginal participant in what is regarded as ‘feminine’ behaviour and appearance. A mature aged romance heroine’s life experience and lived-in body indicates she lacks the “clean slate” and other necessary youthful traits (such as being fertile) to belong in romance fiction, as Kensington Editor Esi Sogah (2012) mentions in the next chapter. The inclination towards younger romance heroines with a “clean slate” further reinforces the classification of an older heroine as ‘other’ since it implies that mature women do not, or should not, have aspirations for passion, sex, love or romance. This sort of outlook on age is not driven by profit, but rather it is influenced by ageist stereotypes. As products of social constructs that are diverse, complex, and ingrained, ageism is malleable and subject to change. Central to making that change happen is acceptance that mature-aged people do fall in love and experience the same fierce emotions and wish to have the same intimate connection to another human being.

While ageing is a formulation of ‘other’ for women, ageing is also gendered, favouring men over women. Carroll (2007) indicates that older men remain active in media representations and are portrayed with “images that promise a dynamic old age while women embody ageist stereotypes” (p. 80). Carroll also points out that for women in particular, older bodies “transgress the fragile fantasy of wholeness and invulnerability” (p. 82). For many women the embodied characteristics of age, wrinkles and grey hair are infused with particular significance, and they bear culturally sustained markers of disgust and unhappiness. Butler’s ideation of the performativity of gender and Ussher’s (1997) theories of the scripts of femininity—the ways of behaving based on archetypal representations of woman, such as the *virgin*, *mother*, and *crone*—highlight the idea that what makes a woman is bound within a particular social and cultural milieu. Ussher suggests that the conflicting scripts of what is feminine promotes competition between women and perpetuates the myth that to be different to what is regarded as normative is scary, that being overweight or older are things to fear.

There are ‘rules’ for femininity and they are, as Bordo (1997) emphasises, transmitted through standardised images, or representations. These ideal qualities are forced and reinforced upon women by the media, family, schools, and peers, as Pierce (1997) notes. Carroll (2007) argues that in “excising old from our imagination there is a tendency to split our minds/selves/spirit from our bodies...” (p. 80). This fragmentation is perpetuated through the mechanisms of bodily discipline and cultural stereotyping that we create around ageing. Kuhn (1997) proposes that conventional notions of what is essentially female feeds into the stereotypes of women. A woman’s experience of self is often centred in perceptions of her physical appearance fed by dominant views that pronounce being fat or old as desexualising, degrading, disabling, and something considered best kept hidden.

Consequently, representations of the body, of what is beautiful, what is acceptable feminine behaviour become idealised or over-idealised. Writers represent women within the context of the social and cultural codes that govern sexuality and the body both overtly and covertly. Kramer (2012) notes, an author (myself included) who wants to write a romance novel featuring a mature-aged female protagonist contravenes the mainstream culture that prefers to keep the older woman marginalised and/or invisible. Bartky (1998) points out that women judge the defects of other women regardless of the fact that the construct of the idealised woman is an image of immaturity, a fantasy itself. The imperfection of age and judgement of defects translates easily into the fantasised and idealised images of young women in romance fiction and the abjuring of mature aged heroines. Ideas regarding ‘spoiling the fantasy’ or the ‘prevalent fantasy’ of romance were noted in conversations I had with other romance authors and in interviews that appear on other websites. In an interview with Jen on Bookthingo (<http://bookthingo.com.au>), romance author Marion Lennox (2010) suggested the lack of romance fiction featuring older couples was the result of women preferring younger bodies. Lennox’s comment supports the ideology that beauty is power while fat, ‘jiggly’, or old is something to turn away from, to fear, which is a point of view also shared by Anna Campbell, a well-known historical romance author. Campbell (2011) told me she believed readers preferred to think of themselves as young and pretty, rather than old and ugly. An interview with author Moriah Jovan (2013) revealed a very distinct opinion of view for why contemporary romance lacks mature-aged heroines came to light. Jovan suggested it is “because we [readers] like our virgin heroines...” Yet there is also Cuthbert’s (2012) estimation that many readers expect a

heroine to produce that “essential symbol of love” at the conclusion of the story. Despite the fact few contemporary romance heroines are virgins (Historical romance seems to be the subgenre where heroines have hymens), not all romance novels conclude with the birth of a child or even the promise of one. A heroine’s fertility may be an important factor for some writers and readers. While, fertility may completely unimportant for other writers and readers, this is not the point I wish to stress here. What Jovan’s “Virgin heroines” and Cuthbert’s “Essential symbol of love” validate is a *youthful* femininity as the true repository of romance, of love, sex and desire. What the romance heroine cannot be is *old*. Consequently female characters who test and contest the acceptable limits of intractable scripts around femininity are frequently shown as shrews, variations of the insane women, as ‘other,’ or, as Kelh (1988) indicates, worthless, unattractive, or worst of all, invisible.

#### **2.4. Cougars, grannies and evil mamas: Stereotypes and Archetypes of older women in romance fiction**

Kehl (1988) exposes stereotypes as superficial ways of avoiding authentic responses to human experiences, and proposes that presenting older women as archetypes frames them as superhuman—that is beyond the human. Allan (2010) comments that a male virgin in a romance novel, such as Jamie Fraser in Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander* (1992), is ‘deviant’ for contravening the norms of the romance genre where the hero has typically possessed sexual experience and technique. While virgin heroes are beginning to emerge as a viable characterisation in romance fiction, virgin heroines in contemporary romance are no longer the norm; a sexually active (but not too active) woman has supplanted that particular standard. However, an older heroine who deviates from the supposed ‘normal’ expected roles would defy the current convention the way a virgin hero or heroine does now. Kelh contrasts certain notions of elderly women (they are not passionate, sexual, or attractive, are emotionally unstable, mawkish and fearful of death) with archetypes of women found in classical literature, such as Mother Nature, Hecate the goddess of the underworld, The Furies, and the monstrous Gorgons. Kehl advocates the need to see older women in literature conveyed not as subhuman (stereotypes) or super human (archetypes), but merely as *human*. Feminist literary fiction has taken on board these mythical types and reinvigorated them as powerful and important.

The romance genre by way of contrast draws on the more negative aspects of their signification and this includes many contemporary romances in which older female characters are presented as ‘supernatural,’ as jokes, and as tragic figures. Mrs Needleman, the archetypal ‘wise old crone’ Kehl suggested, is presented in Donovan’s Dog Walker Series (2009 - 2010), first appearing in *Ain’t Too Proud to Beg* (2009) and continuing through to *The Night She Got Lucky* (2010), and *Not That Kind of Girl* (2010). Eighty-four-year old Gloria is described as, “some kind of mystical matchmaker,” (p. 4) and later as a woman who was,

either crazy, putting on an act to get attention, or she had psychic powers of some kind. Maybe she was a witch. Or a Guardian Angel. Or an octogenarian Vampire Slayer. (p.84)

Gloria Needleman is superhuman, magical, mythic. While it is clear that she is not the romance heroine, her characterisation is bound as the quotation signifies, by stereotype and archetype that denies her human status.

For defying her age and refusing to dress the way her daughter thinks she should, the comic older female stereotype ‘mutton-dressed-as-lamb’ can be found in Peggy in Craig’s *Divorced, Desperate and Dating* (2008).

Lately her mother has seemed extra cheery, and her wardrobe...Fruit colors—apple red, lime green. And every time Sue saw her, the necklines got lower. It wasn’t really indecent yet, but after a few more visits she’d be down to nipple exposure. (p. 4)

Women’s aging bodies are ridiculed in this reference, with clear indication that Peggy should act her age and that the sexualised female body and the older female body are incompatible. Narain (2011) notes a fact that establishes nine out of ten women do not ‘dress their age’ until they are in their seventies. Women such as Dame Helen Mirren (67) and Jane Fonda (76), Michelle Pfeiffer (54) and Courtney Cox (49) epitomise this inclination. Narain reports teenage girls dress older to attract boys, while twenty-something women dress older when they are career focused. Women thirty and up dress younger, as Narain observes, without feeling like ‘old sheep’ in their desire to be and stay trendy. Although it is fashionable to dress ‘younger’, there is a clear limit for most non-celebrity women in terms of the age at which dressing younger simply reduces them to a non-desirable object of derision. In *Divorced, Desperate and Dating* Peggy is further characterised in stereotypical terms as the novel progresses, and her sex life is

treated as a joke because she sleeps with a middle-age man who wears tight leather pants and looks like an Elvis impersonator.

While not a 'trendy fashion-plate', Betsy Baylor, the landlady in Thompson's *Nerd Gone Wild* (2005), is also cast in a comic light, and she is seen as oversexed and regarded with distaste.

Ally gulped and tried to erase the image of Betsy and some guy getting it on in reflected glory...Seven husbands. Betsy didn't seem to take any pains with her appearance. She wore zero makeup and it looked as if she cut her gray hair herself. Both last night and today she'd worn her black stretch pants paired with an old plaid flannel shirt. Ally would never guess the woman had any dates, let alone enough exes to make up a basketball team plus subs. Maybe it was pheromones. (p. 5)

Such a description invokes the "monstrous feminine" that critics such as Barbara Creed, drawing on Julia Kristeva's notions of the abject, have examined in detail. Kristeva (1982) writes: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 4). Ally's perception of the older woman Betsy invites a reading of the latter as abject in her non-conformity to the 'rules' of femininity. Her appearance in this scene ("zero makeup", an unfashionable haircut, gray hair, "old flannel shirt") suggest a very masculinised and, of course, elderly femininity, a blurring of boundaries around the feminine and masculine. Such ambiguity, or in-between-ness as Kristeva also notes defines the abject, a point that is reinforced by the line, "Ally would never guess the woman had any dates." There is an implied absence of the markers true femininity, most notable of which are youth and beauty. The tragic incarnation of an older woman is also presented in the character of Marguerite in Donovan's *The Kept Woman* (2006). She is the evil mother: bitchy, designer-clad, cold. Marguerite is portrayed as intimidating, disapproving of her son's choice of partner, unable to even hug her own child. She is someone who believed that "money and status gave them the right to treat a stylist like a servant." She is also described as monstrous: "Marguerite Dickson Tolliver was a beast" (p. 189). While it can of course be argued that the specifics of Marguerite's character are essential to the plot and to the tensions around character relations, it is instructive that she is not afforded the same type of character development as other, younger women in the narrative.

The stereotyping of Mrs Needleman, Peggy, Betsy, and Marguerite in the novels mentioned are a convenient shorthand in keeping with the standard patterns of popular

genre fiction, such as romance. However, this shorthand also works to exclude or include, promote or demote, and when counter-stereotypical behaviour emerges, it also reveals the normalising tendencies of the stereotype. As Harwood (2007) notes, when older people (men and women) are included in activities (or roles) that are counter-stereotypical, they are identified as *exceptional*. The exceptional label serves “to discount any positive impact that the stories might have on our more general views of older people. The focus...as exceptional makes it clear that a typical older adult does not do these things, and perhaps that they should not” (p.163). The older women in the romance fiction I have mentioned often act counter to the patterns of behaviour that have been identified as acceptable for older women. In depicting this behaviour as comical or worthy of censure, these texts endorse the ‘proper’ ways for older women to act their age.

This chapter focused on the representation of contemporary older female characters in the romance genre within the context of largely negative social and cultural views around women and age and the privileging of youth and beauty. It also considered the opinions of romance writers who are not particularly willing to ‘explore new territory’ in terms of representing older women as romance heroines, conforming instead to the conventions of the genre, the safety of the familiar. Despite the fact the modern romance heroines can be flawed, I must acknowledge for some writers and for some readers as well, the imperfectness of middle age (or older) has no place in the perfect fantasy of falling in love or in the fantasy of idealised sexual encounters that appear regularly in romance fiction. However, not all writers or readers are as risk-averse and the shift into the digital age now evident in the romance publishing industry provides them with an opportunity to challenge trenchant ideas.

The chapter that follows is framed by an analysis of the romance industry. Examined therein are hegemonic writing manuals, guidebooks, and publisher guidelines that set forth a romance heroine with ‘market appeal,’ as well as limitations and prevalent attitudes that come from within the industry. Included is an examination of the troublesome definition of Women’s Fiction and the perception that it is the proper home for women of a certain age.



### **Chapter 3: Older women, Romance writing guidelines, and the Industry**

Mass media portrayals of older people have the capacity to influence the viewers' explicit and implicit beliefs towards older people and old age (Kessler, 2004). In this thesis, I argue that romance fiction, as a popular medium, is one such "powerful cultural force shaping cultural identity" (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p. 4), and this includes the shaping of readers' beliefs around age as much as those around gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. Up until very recent times, older women have not often featured (and therefore been validated) as romance heroines in the genre; rather they have been regularly cast in secondary roles, frequently in stereotyped ways, such as in the depictions discussed in the previous chapter. The persistence of such restrictive constructions is due in large part to the pressure placed on authors to conform to the stable conventions and tropes that have traditionally driven the genre and historically ensured its success. There are specific guidelines established by romance writers and publisher manuals, as well as the publishing industry, especially around the type of romance heroine that has 'market' appeal, meaning the sort of heroine that is traditionally profitable for romance publishers. Embedded within marketing strategies is the notion I observed operating in the romance industry. This view maintains that women of a certain age do not fit, or cannot fit, within the parameters of a romance, and considers Women's Fiction the natural and appropriate fit for mature-aged female protagonists. This chapter explores the hegemonic nature of the guidelines for authors of romance within the romance publishing industry, romance writing associations, romance-writing manuals, which signpost the importance placed upon the writer creating a 'relatable' heroine and the implications this has for the author. In addition, this chapter explores the issue of sexuality and fertility and how this establishes a dichotomy between older and younger women within the promise of romance.

#### **3.1. Romance Publishing Industry Facts and Figures**

Romance is a billion dollar a year industry. To give a better overview of the earning power and span of the romance industry, in this section I include data from the past decade. In 2012, romance fiction generated \$US1.438 billion in sales and comprised the largest share of the U.S. consumer market at 13.4%. By comparison, literary fiction generated \$US455 million. RWA (2010) Readership statistics highlight that 4.8 million people read at least one romance novel in 2008. It is significant to note the survey also

states that core romance readers in the USA are women aged 31 - 49. The RWA ROMStat Report (2013) survey shows that men make up 9% of romance readership while women comprise 91%.

In 2007, the RWA's Romance Literature Statistics on readership showed that 78% of romance readers are female, with 22% between the ages of 53 and 44, 18% between 45 and 54, 11% between 55 and 64, with 6% spanning 65 to 74. This means a total of 57% of romance readers are between the ages of 44 and 74. While there have been sporadic and largely unsuccessful attempts by the publishing industry to market books for this age demographic, it is the readers themselves who are increasingly vocal about their expectations for older romance heroines as viable protagonists in the genre. While Chapter 4 deals with this demographic in more detail and discusses the ways in which authors and readers alike are taking the romance industry to task, this chapter is concerned with the publishers of romance fiction. The RWA's *2010 ROMStat Report* (RWA.org) indicates the top 10 romance imprints on the lists for 2010 were: Mira (a Harlequin Mills & Boon, or HM&B, single title imprint), Grand Central Publishing, HQN (a HM&B imprint), Jove, Berkley, Avon, Pocket, Signet, St. Martin's Press, and Silhouette (also a HM&B imprint). Top-selling Harlequin (with Mills & Boon, a subsidiary of Harlequin Enterprises owned by Torstar) prides itself as one of the leading publishers of books for women, and the [harlequin.com](http://harlequin.com) and [millsandboon.co.uk](http://millsandboon.co.uk) websites list over thirty imprints of romance. Its prominent place as industry leader has positioned Harlequin Enterprises as the most recognisable purveyor of romance fiction. Bearing these facts and figures in mind, in the following sections I discuss industry writing guidelines, the industry attempts to market to a mature audience, and the limitations I faced from within romance industry as I wrote romance novels that featured older romance heroines.

### **3.2. Guidelines for writing the romance heroine**

While the modern romance heroine has evolved in contemporary romance narratives from the more static representations of earlier romances, and may be no longer held to account regarding her sexuality or the expression of her sexual desire, the older woman in romance fiction is often confined to secondary or supportive roles that are frequently constructed in unflattering and limited ways. Historically this has been the case. The difficulty in shifting the confining nature of this construction stems from very specific directives that come from within the romance industry in the form of the

guidance given to romance writers. The advice that writers create a ‘relatable’ heroine stems from organisations, workshops, books, and tip sheets that are aimed at a budding romance author’s aspirations towards successfully structuring a romance heroine. However, what is ‘relatable’ is relative and based on a perception by publishers that the romance reading community is homogenised around the same expectations and desires. This market-and-publisher driven approach has dominated the industry for many years and continues to be influential for writers entering the field. The RWA is an association “dedicated to advancing the professional interests of career-focused romance writers through networking and advocacy” (2013). The RWA defines a romance as a novel with a central love story and an optimistic, emotionally satisfying ending (2013). Within that definition of romance there is nothing overtly stated to restrict location, sex, or age of the central characters in the novel, yet, despite the diversification of romance narratives around the first two elements and indeed others such as sexuality and ethnicity, the age of the romance heroine is usually between 20 and 30 (at most 35), with older female characters relegated to secondary or supportive roles. Goris (2012) notes that romance writing handbooks, while attempting to be of assistance to aspiring romance writers, are presented as prescriptive guides that encourage writers to “take the advice as *normative* (my italics) rules rather than as descriptive suggestions” (p. 75) and that they “formulate rules and norms which play a role in shaping this reality” (p. 76). Implicit in these normative rules is representational endorsement of young romance heroines in the quest for love, sexual fulfilment and happiness in personal relationships. Other forms of print media, television, advertising and the many other sites at which this type of narrative is dominant promote the invisibility of older women and the desirability of prolonging youth at the expense of valuing and validating older age (Saucier, 2004). However intentional or unintentional this may be, publishers of romance novels participate in this erasure of older women and limit their access to the love, sex and romance script.

It is significant to note that the prominence of Harlequin Enterprises (which includes Mills & Boon), as an industry leader has an impact on the guidance given to potential authors. By no means the only romance publisher, Harlequin, Mills & Boon (HM&B) is certainly the most easily recognised brand, most influential, and has traditionally been seen as a gatekeeper of the romance genre. Its guidelines for authors provide a patent that has been highly profitable, but it is not without its critics. HM&B is often singled out for its business model. Rabine (1985), Thurston (1987) and Fowler

(1991) discuss the production, marketing and distribution of romance fiction. Rabine's criticism suggests that the particular dominance of HM&B as a brand and a highly successful business has a discouraging effect on authors who might want to vary the product. For this reason I single out Harlequin Enterprises and examine their HM&B category guidelines, which have a flow-on influence on the structure of Single Title romance fiction. As Kaler (1999) noted, and as evidenced by discussions and comments left on romance reader websites such as *smartbitchestrashybooks.com*, many readers begin reading romance fiction by way of HM&B category titles. Category romance titles are published every month and have a lower word count (around 50,000 words), a limited shelf life, and are packaged with a standard, easy to recognise cover. These novels fit into clearly delineated categories that range from, for example, HM&B's baby blue 'Sweet' (where the bedroom door closes on any sexual activity), red 'Sexy' (where the door stays wide open), and pink 'Medical' (where characters are medical professionals). Single Title romance has a longer word count, no limit on shelf life, and wide and varied covers that range from the stereotypical 'clinch' to bland covers featuring a chair sitting on a beach, which bears little, if any, connection to the story. While many readers were introduced to romance via HM&B category novels many romance authors, as Raphael (2014) notes, began their careers writing category romance for HM&B—Jennifer Crusie and Nora Roberts, for example. Similar to the writing guidebooks, romance publishers, such as HM&B, also offer guidelines to authors. The prescriptive nature of the guidebooks and advice issued to aspiring authors are, as Goris notes, reinforced by "the romance genre's own commerce driven nature" (p. 75), but is this the only concern for writers who want to test such boundaries?

Rabine (1985) contends that many Harlequin romance imprints are a corporate narrative genre where the publisher packages romance as a brand with particular configurations. This in itself stifles an author's ability to be creative within romance fiction, especially around the creation of the romantic heroine. From the 'clinch' cover to familiar plot lines, branding romance, as HM&B does with its writing guidelines for specific category imprints, has led to criteria-based pigeon-holing and restrictions on the age of the heroine. For example, the writing guidelines offered for HM&B Harlequin Presents/Extra (2011) line are unequivocal in their expectation that the romance centres on a youthful romantic female protagonist and her love for a 'masculine' male character whose age is not as clearly specified:

These entertaining romances reflect the life experiences of today's young women, within a chic, upmarket, and usually urban setting. The heroines are often your twenty-something girls-about-town but there's no compromising on the Presents Extra/Riva hero: he must be very alpha and absolutely to die for. There'll be sparks flying when these two meet—and nothing short of fireworks once they get to the bedroom!

The 2011 guidelines for Harlequin Blaze request that both the male and female protagonists be youthful and physically attractive:

Submissions should have a very contemporary feel—what it's like to be young and single today. Heroes and heroines should be in their early 20s and up. We want to see an emphasis on the physical relationship developing between the couple: fully described love scenes along with a high level of fantasy, playfulness and eroticism are needed.

Each book submitted to HM&B for these series or category lines must meet specific criteria in order to be published. Category romances, such as the Presents and Blaze lines, have established guidelines whereas Single Title romance, that is, a stand-alone romance novel, has more flexibility with regard to length, setting, and inclusion of subplots. However, reading romance fiction, category or single title, comes with an expectation of a courtship and happy—or happy for now—ending. Outside the line-specific guidelines offered by HM&B, writing tips sheets and guidebooks for budding romance authors, such as *How to Write A Romance for Dummies*, discuss the means to construct plot using familiar plotlines, for example, the 'secret baby' or 'marriage of convenience,' familiar character archetypes such as the 'spunky kid' and 'librarian;' and dialogue to fit the package of romance. Little if anything is said with regard to how old a romance heroine should be, yet it is clear from guidelines already mentioned and the many single title romance novels that are published each year, that the youthful age of the female protagonist is the rule rather than the exception. At the beginning of this study, I was an unpublished writer who stood on the outside looking in. During my experience there were times I found it frustrating that the publisher tip sheets appear to operate in tandem with the guidebooks. The advice and guidelines from organisations, guidebooks and publishers, overtly and inadvertently, have a constrictive effect on authors who want to write about older women and romance and on readers' 'relatability' to the romance heroine, especially with regard to a heroine's age.

Across what range does this 'relatability' stretch? To establish the average age of the romance heroine, I conducted a survey of readers in 2011 and again in 2013. Using social media (Twitter and Facebook) I asked romance readers to respond to the question: "How old is the heroine in the romance novel you are currently reading, or in

the last novel you read?” The data from a matched-sample of readers indicates that in 2011 the average age of a heroine was 25.45. In 2013, the average age of a heroine was 25.64. This reflects the stability of the age norm. While there are rules to follow, should and should not about how a heroine must behave, the specific age of a heroine is *never* directly stipulated, as it is in the HM&B imprints, but the idea the heroine will be under 35 is tacit.

As mentioned, Harlequin Enterprises is a world leader in publishing category romance fiction as well as Single Title romance and other books aimed at the female reader. They are open to submissions for various imprints and offer guidelines for authors interested in writing romance. Their guidance for crafting heroines outlines certain character traits. For example, the *Harlequin Presents/Mills & Boon Modern Romance* wants an alpha male hero—a powerful, somewhat ruthless, take-charge, virile man—while the heroine may be shy, vulnerable, plucky and determined to challenge the hero’s arrogant pursuit. The characterisation is similar in the *Silhouette Desire* imprint, where the heroine is “complex and flawed. She is strong-willed and smart, though capable of making mistakes when it comes to matters of the heart.” Of the twenty-nine the imprints offered by Harlequin, only one line is specific about age. The *Harlequin Presents Extra (Mills & Boon Riva)* series guidelines define the heroines for this imprint as twenty-something girls-about-town. In a similar fashion, Avon romance and Avon Impulse (the digital first imprint) offer this advice to writers:

Toss away your ideas of what Avon is all about, and read here for how to write for Avon Romance and Avon Impulse: Fabulously sexy heroes who let nothing get in the way of getting what they want—the heroine of course—and giving her everything she needs. Heroines unafraid to take chances in life...and in love. She’s smart and she’s never afraid to stand up for herself. Series Wanted!” Readers always cry out for more when you’ve given them characters to believe in...so give us more, too, and you’ll get our attention

And this from Harlequin Kiss:

Sparky, spirited heroines in control of their own destinies and with friends to help them through—these ladies are more than a match for their...Flirty, cheeky, alpha heroes, who expect their partners to be their equals...

Again, while an age range is not specified for these Avon imprints, and older heroines could fit in with the description, it remains tacit that the heroine will be under 40. Given the demographic data in the section above and, as mentioned in the literature review, it is clear that Baby-boomers and Generation-Xers make up a growing audience and market, have financial means, and display an ongoing and sustainable pattern of

purchasing behaviour. What are explanations for this tacit support in limiting the age range of heroines? Manufacturers, advertisers, and publishers have an opportunity to satisfy a growing market demand, yet few have recognised this demand and the results of attempts to consider this demographic have been uneven and largely unprofitable. The next sections explore the few attempts by romance publishing companies to introduce romances featuring older heroines, and casts the failure of these ventures in terms of the publishing distinctions made between Women's Fiction and romance Fiction.

### **3.3. Catering to the mature market: Is it romance or Women's Fiction?**

Historically there have been instances when publishers have taken risks in publishing and marketing romance fiction featuring women characters who do not quite fit the 'age' guidelines. For example, in 1981, Jove released an erotic romance line titled *Second Chance at Love*. This imprint featured widowed or divorced heroines between the ages of 26 and 40. Similarly, in 1982 Ballantine Books attempted to target an over-40 demographic of romance readers with the *Love and Life* imprint. Innovative for its time, *Love and Life* was an attempt to present an older romance heroine with life experience as the focus of the narrative. Published and displayed from July 1982 to December 1983, the *Love and Life* novels had a happy ending and were targeted at an audience who were, as Thurston (1987) notes, "...non-traditional romance consumers who do not generally buy series [category] books...many of whom purposefully avoid the romance display racks" (p. 59).

The *Love and Life* novels, as Thurston indicates "...chronicled the pivotal period in one woman's life during which she consciously emerges as an individual true to herself..." (p. 59). However, as Thurston also observed, *Love and Life* "lasted little more than a year without most of its target audience knowing the stories even existed" (p. 56). Thurston suggests that the marketing strategy used for *Love and Life* was self-destructive explaining that it was doomed to fail because, besides unappealing covers, the imprint was displayed alongside the books on the category romance racks. Thurston also proposed that the book covers and sales display led the intended audience—the non-traditional romance consumer—to believe the imprint was a category-style romance, which is not what this series was intended to be. At first, the publisher tagged the imprint with the line 'Romantic Novels for Today', then later 'Women's Stories for Today.' Proper marketing and understanding what appeals to a targeted audience, from

covers to display locations, is key to attracting readership. The tag line switch from ‘Romance Novels’ to ‘Women’s Stories’ underscores the ambiguous nature of the terms ‘Women’s Stories’ and ‘Women’s Fiction’, yet this switch also implies an historical lack of confidence in how to market a romance product dealing with less conventional heroines. There is no indication if the change of tag line was an attempt to highlight to the consumer that the imprint was non-traditional or if it had any impact on sales. The fact is the line failed to generate income.

In 2005, Harlequin developed and targeted their NEXT imprint at an older female reader. Harris Interactive (2005), on behalf of Harlequin Enterprises, conducted a nationwide survey of 787 U.S. women 35+ in conjunction with Harlequin’s NEXT line. The survey stated that women over 35 were the next power demographic, held interesting attitudes about dating, and that finding Mr Right was less important than finding themselves. The following were guidelines offered for potential NEXT authors on the eHarlequin website (2007):

These stories will be warm, entertaining and sometimes even inspiring and will feature women facing a wide variety of life stages: from that first baby at 45 to the first date after divorce or widowhood; from that first day of college—accompanied by your freshman daughter!—to dealing with three generations living in the same house. The books are complex, diverse and reflect living and loving in today’s complex, diverse world. These stories will end in a happy and satisfying manner, though not necessarily in a romantic resolution. These will be novels for which romance is a piece of the pie, rather than the whole one.

The imprint, like *Love and Life*, did not last long. NEXT was scrapped in February 2008 for lack of sales. The explanations over why these lines failed, or what doomed these imprints to not sell emphasises, again, the contentious point regarding a clear definition for Women’s Fiction, as well as writer and reader expectations for what makes a story Women’s Fiction (with a piece of the pie), and what makes it romance (the entire pie).

Publishers of romance fiction make a decision about whether a book featuring women as the key subjects will be published as Women’s Fiction or romance fiction. These terms carry different meanings in the romance publishing industry and their segregation has implications for marketing, distribution and consumption. Women’s Fiction is often used as an umbrella term to generally classify novels written largely by and for women. In the romance publishing industry it is a term that is further delineated to identify writing that publishers determine does not quite ‘fit’ enough of the



conventions of romance fiction to be published and marketed as romance. As well, Women's Fiction is a classification used by readers of romance to differentiate stories about women. AgentQuery.com, the largest and most current database of literary agents online, explains that Women's Fiction "often delves into deeper, more serious conflicts and utilizes a more poetic literary writing style."

([http://www.agentquery.com/genre\\_descriptions.aspx](http://www.agentquery.com/genre_descriptions.aspx)). This definition claims a further distinction between high-end literary texts and more popular genre such as chick lit and romance fiction. The RWA has a Women's Fiction Chapter (RWA-WF), which identifies "traditional books in Women's Fiction" as another genre separate from romance claiming that a typical Women's fiction novel is "a commercial novel about a woman on the brink of life change and personal growth. Her journey details emotional reflection and action that transforms her and her relationships with others..."

(<http://www.rwa-wf.com/about/>). Although there is some confusion around the definition as indicated above, and while this confusion is also further complicated by classifications of 'popular' as opposed to 'literary' fiction, the main distinction between romance and Women's Fiction appears to be the extent to which romance is the mainstay of plot, character, character relationships. The RAW-WF chapter tellingly states that "traditional books in the Women's Fiction genre often contain romantic elements, some contain tragic endings," but this is not the core business of romance. In this respect then, chick lit novels, as well as more high-end literary novels, multigenerational sagas featuring women, women's relationship novels, such as Kate Jacob's (2007) *The Friday Night Knitting Club* and Nancy Thayer's (2004) *Hot Flash Club* and Olivia Goldsmith's (1992) *The First Wives Club*, are situated as quite distinctive from purely romance driven novels. This delineation is an established form of classification shorthand by publishers (and romance readers), to set romance apart as a genre of its own.

For the purpose of this study, I use the definition of Women's Fiction as any story where the plot is focused on charting the female protagonist's voyage of self-discovery, rather than on a central love story with an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending. With this publishing shorthand classification in place there are, of course, many inferences that can be drawn from the failed *Love and Life* and *NEXT* attempts to publish and market romance fiction that challenges conventions around the age and experience of the female protagonist. One may well be, as Thurston points out, inadequate marketing, another is the limited appeal of a 'romance' in which 'romance is

a piece of the pie rather than the whole one'. Another is that there was simply not enough interest, even from a demographic of older women readers, which might have made such a niche market a viable one in that particular era. More recent times have witnessed the emergence of a larger and more vocal community of older romance readers who are making demands on the genre (see Chapter 4). My novel attempts to meet this older reader demand without sacrificing the centrality of the love story which classifies it as a primarily a romance.

From my perspective as a writer of romance featuring older women, publishers, and the RWA's distinction between what qualifies as romance and what qualifies as women's fiction matters. My argument is that older women do not get the same 'visiting rights' to romance that younger women do, and this has much to do with the ways in which they are socially and culturally inscribed as 'other' to 'proper femininity' (see Chapter 2). For publishers, many readers, and writers of the genre, romance fiction is as the RWA defines it: a central love story with an emotionally satisfying optimistic ending. It is the centrality of the love story that locates romance and Women's Fiction as two separately classified genres. As with Women's Fiction, Single-Title romances may be released in hard cover, trade paperback, or mass-market paperback sizes. Both genres are guided and maintained by marketing used to generate the most profit.

As Wolitzer (2012) notes, "A writer's own publisher can be part of a process of effective segregation," meaning the publisher ultimately decides if a novel will be marketed as romance or Women's Fiction and while this satisfies marketing outcomes, it nevertheless can have an inverse impact on writers as well as readers. Rabine (1985) underscores this as a Marxist construction whereby the author is alienated and loses determination of her or his work; design and manner are not determined by the consumer—the romance reader, in this case—but rather by the publisher. For example, Proctor (2008) notes that title and covers are "mostly, but not entirely out of a writer's control" (p. 19). I had no control over the covers chosen for my novels, despite being asked for ideas. In addition, I was told that *And She Was*—the original title of *For Your Eyes Only*—was not considered to marketable and would have to change. Cruise discusses similar publisher-led title changes for her romance novels on her website (<http://www.jennycrusie.com/more-stuff/titles/>), and there is anecdotal evidence within the romance writing community to support that this often occurs (A. Andrews, personal communication, December 3, 2012; A. Paton, February 14, 2013). In this sense, the author lacks control over design and production, and combined with tip sheets, writing

guidelines, and guidebooks, as well as the marketing decision that classifies a novel as romance or Women's Fiction, the publisher attempts to shape consumers tastes in order to maximise profit. In other words, what Thomas (2012) describes as the "top down model of management and marketing" (p.213), decides what consumers want. Further to this, as Rabine proposes, a creative work is moulded into a product that will ensure revenue, which in romance fiction may account for the lack of mature heroines in the genre and redirection of older female protagonists to the space of Women's Fiction.

Little has changed in the time since Thurston documented Harlequin's 1974 Annual Report:

Editors help direct the creativity of the authors with editorial guidelines which are market-oriented.

Editorial guidelines for authors to conform to certain character attributes and to maintain the fantasy of romance and youth are daunting for nascent and even established authors who want to feature more mature heroines. Interviews I conducted in the course of research for this thesis revealed the timidity around taking a chance on love for the older woman, an approach that invalidates both the older reader demographic (over 57%) and the older romance heroine.

So the question arises—is the reluctance to lose profit the only aspect that prevents mature aged women from being centre stage in romance? Financial loss is a part of the reason, but the resistance comes from another area that is embedded in the cultural views on aging explicated in Chapter 2. When asked about mature-aged romance, Megan Records, an editor with Kensington Books, a major publisher of romance fiction, stated, "It's a nice idea in theory...but blood pressure medication and *Viagra* aren't sexy" (Castell, 2007). Records' views underscore her predisposition to view older women in negative and stereotypical ways in terms of the body, sexuality and sexual desire. Records' comment presupposes those aspects would be the only ones that are pertinent to depictions of older women (and older men) and certainly not conducive to sustaining the fantasy of the central love story. Romance writers can be 'realistic' but not THAT realistic; fantasy is clearly more powerful than fact and writers are wary of taking risks that might affect their chance of success. In the next section I further explore the idea of mature women in the romance fantasy and demonstrate that the resistance to it, as Record's remark highlights, comes from within many sections of the industry and is not completely money driven.

### 3.4. Limitations and attitudes from within the industry

Many subscribe to the view that age has no place in romance fiction. I discovered this notion prevailed with several romance editors when I attended the 2012 RWA Conference where one workshop in particular was highly applicable to my study. It was titled, *Never Kill the Puppy and other Unwritten Rules*. The panellists included best-selling author Wendy-Corsi-Staub and Avon Editors, Lucia Macro and Esi Sogah. The session afforded me the opportunity to discover if authors were being alienated from creativity in the same way as older heroines are alienated from romance. The session was recorded by the RWA (and was made available for sale to RWA members). I had questions prepared for the interviews I had planned with the panellists for later, but I was able to ask one very particular question during the session and generate a response and discussion, which made the one-on-one interviews unnecessary. I wanted to know if limiting the heroine's age to a particular range, from 18 to 40, was an unwritten rule for any of the panellists; would it be something they would not publish. Macro responded:

Yes and no. I think people want to read about real people...in my book group we read a romance where the heroine was forty-five and my friend said I know I'm forty-five, I don't want to be reminded of it. I think in romance the heroine have always traditionally skewed younger, that said, if you write the most fabulous heroine we've ever seen and the heroine's sixty, I'd say we go for it.

Sogah's response was similar:

Part of it is... it's easier [to write a younger heroine], you've lived a life by the time you're forty and I feel like that, a lot of what romance novels were about were this first discovery and so if you're writing several ex-husbands and a few jobs...there's a lot of baggage.

There was agreement on the panel that being older, more experienced and having more 'baggage' was something, "That becomes Women's Fiction." Sogah continued, stating:

I think that's part of it, too, Lucia's part about the fantasy, that's your life...you'd rather read about somebody who has a clean slate, which then gets you younger [heroines] because you haven't had enough time to screw up yet.

The attitude signifies the over-forty female protagonist has no business taking centre stage in romance, except on the odd occasion. Lucia indicated she saw very few Boomer-aged second-chance love stories submitted in romance, and more in the Women's Fiction area, or as a novel with romantic elements. What I found most

interesting was that Sogah said she rarely had romance submissions featuring older heroines coming across her desk. She noted:

I rarely see that story. I would say people aren't writing it, but they might not be writing it because they think publishers don't want to see it, don't want to buy it because they don't think readers will buy it, so it could just be that vicious circle. But I do think those stories tend to head to more to the Women's Fiction side because they are....there is so much going on there, that it sort of becomes this larger story. And I...the important thing with romance is that they are so much about that relationship, that I think once you start getting into all those other things you get into when you talk about things like second chances, it becomes a story that's bigger than just that relationship, so I think that's when they tend to go more into the general fiction side of things.

There is a ubiquitous idea within the industry that heroines with life experience should be redirected to 'the general fictional side of things'— or to use the publishing classification, Women's Fiction, where romance is simply a piece of the pie, rather than the whole pie as it is for younger women. In this way, Women's Fiction becomes the 'safe area' for tales of women of a certain age, which seems to indicate publishers see Women's Fiction as a more secure path to revenue. At the same time, whether it is a "vicious circle," or a resistance to placing women of a certain age into romance, it is clear from Macro and Sogah's response that romance fiction is regarded as a particular kind of experience, but there is also the lingering inference that romance is a lesser kind of literature to Women's Fiction, which is perhaps thought of as, Sogah says, "bigger," and able to deal with the more serious matters of life. Commercial success is bound with such perceptions and expectations, which can be an obstacle to writers—myself included—who want to include older women in the genre. One editor reinforced this in her response to my specific question around this issue. In my interview with Harlequin Escape Managing Editor Kate Cuthbert (2012), I asked if the age of a romance heroine would affect the saleability of a contemporary romance novel. I appreciated her candid response:

Yes, I do. I know that there are people out there who would enjoy it—even embrace it. I also know that there are readers out there who like variety, and would enjoy the novelty of an older heroine/hero combination. These are readers who read to enjoy the story. However, an enormous portion of readers read for the familiarity, and like romances the way they are. There's a lot of negative feedback/sales drops in non-traditional romances. The sales figures between Regency Historicals, for example, vs Medieval are in the hundreds of thousands. Altering something as fundamental as the time in life that characters find true love would fall in to that category—particularly the heroine, if she can't deliver what is expected at the end of romance novels: a child, the essential symbol of

love. That being said, the only way to change is to change. But in regards to the market right now, yes, it's a sales risk.

There is much in Cuthbert's comments that underpin the aversion that publishers in particular have to tampering with the 'familiar', an attitude reinforced by Thomas and James (2006) who noted that speakers at the 2003 RWAus conference "urged attendees to conform to the conventions of the genre rather than encouraging them to explore new territory" (p. 170). To have an editor speak in terms of 'sales risk' reinforces the fact the romance industry is profit driven and highlights what I struggled against to be published. Yet, Cuthbert's statement that "A child is the essential symbol of love" highlights another issue: that of mature aged sexuality and attitudes that view it as distasteful or pathologise it, as Records did, in terms of blood pressure medication and Viagra.

Cuthbert's assertion that "a child is the essential symbol of love" also addresses the issue of mature aged female sexuality as non-viable in romance because part of the romance fantasy is the eventual union of the female and male protagonists and the overt or covert promise of a child as the ultimate emblem of their love. The symbolic child supports the socially pervasive idea that because they can no longer procreate women middle aged and older are not suitable characters for romance fiction. Also troublesome is the linkage of sex with procreation, a connection that tends to suggest that sexual pleasure eventually has only one socially legitimate purpose—the production of a child. While this view has long been contested in the 'real' world (Pinker, 1997; Gann, 2012), in fiction the birth of a child often signals many things, not the least of which is the suggestion of life's continuance, of hope for the future and so forth. In traditional romance plots, the shape of the action towards union is intimately tied to the heterosexual reproduction of the species. As Oikkonen (2013) argues, the "romance plot functions as a means to symbolic reproduction and thus as a claim to futurity (p. 125). The implication for the writer of romance experimenting with this predictable outcome by featuring an older woman who may or may not be beyond her fertile years runs the risk of disturbing generational and narrative continuity and stability. Whether the biological imperative is a genetic impulse or a social mandate, the viewpoint that fertility plays a role for some readers and editors in the romance fantasy does serve to highlight the problems in positioning a mature-aged woman as a romance heroine. Saini (2014) questions the role of fertility and menopause as something more than nature's

way of stating that older women aren't sexually attractive by stating, "The reason behind the menopause [and fertility] is no longer just a biological conundrum; it's a question of female identity"

(<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/mar/30/menopause-natures-way-older-women-sexually-attractive>). I suggest it is a question of agency as well. That said, romance fiction, as already argued in this thesis, has undergone many transformations. My novel contributes significantly to that transformation. Oikkonen compares the romance plot to genetic mutation and contends optimistically that the romance plot has proven flexible and adaptable to new conditions and environments, and yet, like genetic mutation, it is nearly impossible to forecast the direction romance will take in the future or predict what its cultural function may eventually be.

The romance I write hopefully contributes to this changing genetic pool. I know I embarked on a risk-taking venture by giving value and agency to an older, sexually active romance heroine who may or may not be fertile. In writing a romance suggesting older women are worthy of the same entitlements around love, sex and representation as younger women are, I see my fiction as also adding to the larger 'real world' cultural and social contexts in which such popular texts are received and understood. While my writing may be counterintuitive to financial success, as Thomas (2012) suggested, I see this as an opportunity to drive the market from a bottom-up perspective.

This chapter first explored how romance industry and writing organisation guidelines promote the construction of a youthful romance heroine, effectively dissuading writers from writing about an older, more mature heroine. It then considered the unsuccessful attempts by major publishing houses to test the market in terms of romances featuring older women, arguing that there were flaws in the marketing strategy. In addition, the chapter demonstrates that romance publishing is profit-focused and wary of undertaking anything that challenges its revenue. The chapter reveals through interviews conducted with various romance publishing editors, whose comments establish that there is an inherent conservatism at work in the industry that makes it less willing to take risks with publications valorising older women in the role of romance heroine. These editors consider Women's Fiction as the 'proper' home for female protagonists of a certain age. While publishing profits play a large role in limiting the role and story for older women, there is also an industry resistance to the idea of a sexually active older women who is beyond childbearing age.

The chapter that follows explores emerging interest from many readers and authors of contemporary romance in rejecting the ‘taboo of aging’ and validating, rather than vilifying, the older romance heroine. The next chapter examines what some readers want and emphasises the importance placed on reader identification with the heroine. Set within a social media context, the analysis highlights the growing intervention of reading communities with specific demands around the contemporary romance, especially with respect to the construction of an older female heroine



## Chapter 4: Identification and What Older Readers Want

This chapter deals with the changing nature of romance publishing in the digital age and the power of social media to provide platforms for consumer demand and author inventiveness and experimentation. Thomas (2012) contends that given the current diversification of publishing, it is an opportune time for writers rather than publishers to give the readers (consumers) what they want. The research conducted for this thesis reveals that there is not one type of reader of romance, nor one type of author. Rather, there are heterogeneous communities of readers. I establish through my research into romance writers' conferences and associations, romance reader blogs, and social media, evidence of growing reader demand for representation and inclusion of mature-aged romance heroine in romance novels. The chapter considers this evidence in the light of an emphasis placed on reader identification with the heroine of romance. It explores some of the ways in which social media websites and romance writer forums and conventions have enabled a small community of readers and authors to take issue with the limitations around representations of the older heroine in romance fiction. The practice-led research that is foundational to this thesis enabled my engagement with the groups and organisations mentioned above, and eventually led to publishing opportunities for my romance novels featuring older women.

### 4.1. Identification and the romance heroine

Among the books offering advice on writing the romance is *The Art of Writing Romance*, by bestselling romance author Valerie Parv (2004). Parv notes that the characterisation of heroines has transformed across decades and the beautiful but naïve young woman paired with a worldly older hero is long gone. In addition, she advises novice romance writers that in order to make readers care about characters they must resemble 'real' people. In a reading preference survey conducted by Thomas and James (2006), participants were asked to choose from a list of descriptors of key romance elements they preferred to read about. These popular preferred items were, in order: *a long conflict between the hero and heroine; occasional sexual descriptions, but with more focus on the hero and hero's feelings for each other; and interesting secondary characters*. The same survey identified the key traits of an ideal romance heroine: *intelligent, self-confident, and possessing a sense of humour* Thomas and James also establish that readers do not want extreme characterisations, preferring instead an

‘average heroine.’ Ageing is performative; it “produces that which it names” (p. 82) and can be destabilised the same way Butler (1990) proposed sex and gender can be.

From the reader survey, there is evidence that many romance readers are engaging with contemporary romances at least in part to see themselves represented. The fantasy of true love, central to the romance is nevertheless grounded in what is recognisably ‘real’ and it is this that seems to be driving reader interest and demand in more contemporary times. Modern romance heroines have more agency than their earlier counterparts and they reflect a wide range of individualised life experiences. Kent advises that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century heroine is a woman “who is able to meet the challenges life throws her way in her own inimitable style” (p. 8). This connection with the ‘real world’ and ‘real life experiences’ is a shift away from the pure fantasy, escapist levels at which earlier romances tended to operate. While writing guidelines have covertly or overtly ratified a ‘young’ heroine of romance, they also are in general agreement that a reader must be able to *identify* with a heroine. Guidebooks, such as Julie Beard’s (2000) *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Getting your Romance Published*, Leslie Wainger’s (2004) *Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies* and Alison Kent’s (2006) *Writing Erotic Romance* support the view that romance authors should create romance heroines with which readers can identify. Goris (2012) indicates that ‘identification’ plays into the reader’s self- image, the process serving to provide a relaxing, escapist fantasy, but also generated positive feelings that endorse aspects of the reader’s life. The guidebooks contain sections on how to build characters and create a heroine with whom a reader will identify, continually reminding the writer to make her ‘relatable’ or easy to connect with. As well, there are suggestions for character development and making the heroine feel ‘real’ by giving her realistic weaknesses and vulnerabilities. These manuals counsel writers to create new and different heroines and avoid using stereotypes, which, as Beard suggests are permissible for *secondary* and other minor characters because they “strike a common chord” (p. 98) and are easily identifiable—as stock characters.

Successful romance authors have also deliberated on the growing importance of reader/heroine identification and the recognition that there are many reading communities with different expectations and demands. Laura Kinsale indicates the heroine is the *placeholder* for the reader. Linda Barlow contends that the female romance reader is the primary aspect of feminine consciousness. Other authors submit that the heroine is someone the reader would want to be friends with. Crusie (1997)

states that women read romance to “recognize the truth and validity of their own lives” (p. 92) while Thurston’s (1987) notes that romance novels can offer a “psychological realism” (p. 56) to readers. All suggest that what remains valued in the romance is the verisimilitude that enables readers to engage and identify with the romance heroine. The struggles of the heroines in contemporary romance are regularly grounded in the everyday; there are matters of divorce, parenting, finances, deaths, matters that are emotionally problematic, and frequently reflect the perceptions women have of themselves and the world around them. However, with recognition of the validity of one’s life and psychological realism as the reasons so many readers choose romance fiction, the ‘reality’ of older women and romance has been, until very recently, marginal to the business of the romance narrative. It is clear however that several industry attempts (the *Love and Life* and NEXT imprints) to cater to an older, non-traditional romance reader did not sell. Further attempts to market mature-aged romance is counter to profits in a profit-driven industry, which may explain the redirection of older heroines and readers to the ‘safer,’ more lucrative arena of Women’s Fiction. For the author who wants to take risks in presenting older women as worthy participants in the romance paradigm, there are considerable obstacles to negotiate in a largely risk-averse industry. At the start of this research, I was a romance writer interested in featuring more mature heroines as the love interest in the genre. My attempts at promoting this idea, and selling it to the industry had been thwarted by its intransigent stance on the appropriate age for the female protagonist—that young woman Sogah mentioned in the previous chapter, the woman with the “clean slate” who hasn’t had time to “screw up yet”. However, during the course of my research, I had two romance novels accepted for publication by Harlequin Escape. In no way does this suggest this outcome was not a long and frustrating enterprise. In the four years it took me to be offered a publishing contract, vast changes occurred within the publishing industry. The demise of brick and mortar book stores, the ongoing rise of Amazon, and the explosion of e-books, are all indications of a shift away from traditional models of publishing, and an accompanying shift in thinking among readers, authors and publishers. The following section deals with the emergence of a community of older readers who wish to identify with older women romance heroines.

#### 4.2. Older readers of romance

There is growing evidence that older female readers would like to see themselves represented in romance fiction, and evidence too that romance authors are venturing into an area that has been historically a no-go zone. This evidence emerges out of the proliferation of websites that list romance novels featuring older heroines, which is regularly being updated by avid readers. The All About Romance (AAR) list (see Appendix A) features romance novels with heroines older than the thirty-five upper limit. Appendix A incorporates category (HM&B releases), single title contemporary, and other romance subgenres such as paranormal, historical, and romantic suspense. I chose to divide the booklist into the subheadings forty-something books, fifty-something books, and sixty-something novels: Ray's *Julie & Romeo* and Sanford's (2003) *Eleanor & Abel*, and Crusie's *Trust Me On This* (1997). The latter features mature-aged characters in a romance that runs in concert with a younger couple's story, rather than as a subplot, which is more typical for older characters. While this AAR list highlights the gap between the small number of contemporary romances published featuring older heroines and the huge volume of all other romance novels published in 2011, the list nevertheless is being tended by readers who are constantly adding to the collection—a sign that indicates an interest in seeing mature-aged couples in romance.

Social commentary on reader websites such as *All About Romance* and many others, have all discussed the invisible or forgotten demographic of romance readers—the over 40 reader—and readers demand for more age-appropriate heroines. *A Dear Author* (2009), poll asked, *Are older heroines under-represented in the romance-genre?* *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* (2007) queried readers about 'Hot Older Women' *NewAndUsedBooks.com* (2007) indicated romance readers from 35 to 79 wanted stories with heroines 40 and over, as they felt an older heroine with more life experience, and a less than perfect body, made a more enjoyable story that was easier to identify with and relate to. Karyn Witmer (2006) makes a case on *NewandUsedbooks.com* about the forgotten demographic of romance readers and the need for more age-appropriate heroines. The commentary shows a wish for older heroines with more life experience and less than perfect bodies. It becomes evident such readers look to romance to find some validation of mature age within the romance fantasy.

A posting by Lesley Dunlap (2001) at *The Romance Reader* website forum, protested against age discrimination in romance novels and the unwritten rule that stipulated heroines over 39 become frumpy and sexless. Dunlap also posed a plea to

publishers to end the institutional stereotype that romance is only for the young. Further to this, Maggie Dana's (2012) commentary *Maggie Dana on the Middle-aged Female Protagonist—Or Lack Thereof*, generated discussion on the *Read In a Single Sitting* website, and indicated readers wanted to see middle-aged or older protagonists in romance fiction. Similarly, *The Popular Romance Project* included a piece by freelance writer Gwen Osborne (2012) titled *Boomers Need Love Too*, which covers a number of the issues I examine in this study. In addition, a post by Liz on Love in the Margins *The Romance of the Older Woman* (<http://loveinthemargins.com/2013/08/25/the-romance-of-the-older-woman/>) notes that heroines over 40 are uncommon and questions why a 40 year-old heroine is a “senior citizen.” Liz also suggests that “romance land” buys into the cultural assumption that a mature aged woman can only be portrayed as “comic, pathetic or predatory,” as noted in my analysis of the stereotypes of older women in romance in Chapter 2. This website makes note of ‘Mature Romance’ post at Dear Author, as well as the AAR booklist. Romance Novels for Feminists examined the *Mid-Adult Romance* (<http://romancenovelsforfeminists.blogspot.ca/2013/08/mid-adult-romance.html>) and points out that the romance genre works on the assumption that a reader must closely identify with the protagonist, yet leaves out the mature-aged lovers of romance as well as mature-aged romance heroines. Both websites ask many of the same questions I do in this study and verify a desire mature readers have to see greater age representations of romance heroines. Comments I made on Twitter (regarding this study) and various reader websites led to a radio interview on Brisbane Australia's 612ABC Taboo Tuesday program *Evenings with Rebecca Levingston*. Levingston and I discussed my research as well as the taboo of older heroines and older female leads in television, film roles, fiction and romance novels in particular. Further interest in the topic of mature-aged romance heroines eventuated in other interviews on websites such as *The Shallowreader*, (Veros, 2013) <http://shallowreader.wordpress.com/2013/02/01/things-fluttered-appropriately-an-interview-with-sandra-antonelli>), with *Read in a Single Sitting* (Campisi, 2013) <http://www.readinasinglesitting.com/interview-sandra-antonelli-on-advocating-for-older-protagonists-in-romance-fiction/>, and invitations for a guest post on *Dear Author* (2013) <http://dearauthor.com/need-a-rec/if-you-like-misc/if-you-like-mature-romances/> as well as a piece for *The Popular Romance Project* (2013) <http://popularromanceproject.org/talking-about-romance/5476/>, where I discussed this research and posed the question: “Are mature aged women ‘too old’ for romance? This

social media response highlights that there is *not one single reader, but rather a community of romance readers with different tastes and different ideas and expectations of a romance heroine*. Social media and reader websites have offered a forum to readers (and writers) to voice their desire to see older heroines appear in romance novels that also contain the hallmarks they expect in the genre: the emotional connection and response to the story, obstacles and issues the heroine faces and satisfaction in knowing there will be a Happily Ever After.

A shift is evident in ever-increasing sales of romance e-books and new flexibility e-books offer to authors, from a larger audience, to a larger word count, to experimenting with niche markets in a way the traditional print market does not. Cuthbert (2012) notes that she was in a position to take a risk with publishing a romance with an older female protagonist, but clearly indicated that she is the exception rather than the rule:

I'm lucky, because my imprint allows me to take risks others may not. So the criteria for me is based wholly around the story: if it's good, I'll take it. It does not matter if the heroine is old, young, black, white, fat, thin, or extra-terrestrial. Other publishers don't have that luxury.

Carina Press, Harlequin's digital first imprint, however, showed some initiative in the marketing and research field in (2012) conducting a poll that asked readers what they wanted, how they would like the imprint to be different, more innovative. Responses included requests for women over 40 to be included as a demographic in stories, a desire to see more plus-sized heroines, and romances with more heroines in their forties and fifties. In 1987 Thurston suggested that the lack of romance heroines over 40 might stem from the way editors in romance publishing interpret data from romance readers and marketing departments within the publishing houses. I suggest that editors and marketing departments are unable to conceptualise how to approach and sell romance featuring an older heroine and believe, as Macro and Sogah do, that the older female protagonist belongs solely in Women's Fiction. I base this suggestion on my own experience and my endeavour to have my novel with a 40+ heroine published. When I sent the manuscripts for *A Basic Renovation* to publishers I was told my romance novels with older heroines were of high quality. I was polished, had a strong voice, excellent dialogue, and a great story, yet editors and publishers were unsure how to market me, or even if there was a market for romance with older heroines. It was never suggested that I try to market my novel as Women's Fiction, which I was happy

about, as I considered what I had written to be romance. Escape Publishing (Harlequin's Australian Digital imprint) eventually took a risk and offered to publish, *A Basic Renovation*, in November 2012, and then contracted *For Your Eyes Only*, my second novel, for publication in September 2013. In the case of heroines with a "clean slate," and heroines with more life experience, perhaps what is truly at stake here is readers who desire a heroine who serves to, as Selinger (personal communication, March 18, 2014) suggests, be a figure of possibility or an aspirational character, a sort of 'all that one can be' individual, rather than as someone with whom the reader can identify.

### **4.3. Giving consumers what they want**

Given this evidence that there is a waiting, ready-made readership for romance novels with older heroines, perhaps it is time to not consider them a sales risk, rather an opportunity to make money. Thomas (2012) suggests that traditionally it has been marketing and management expertise that decides what is in demand for consumers; this constitutes a top-down approach. He calls for a creative industries approach to marketing and casts the consumer as an actor in creative production, proposing that producers of romance fiction take a bottom-up approach towards marketing and "deliver to consumer what consumers want, rather than what the producer *thinks* consumers want" (p. 213). Jane Litte (2009) of *Dear Author* suggests something similar. She challenges publishers to "create a product that the reader suddenly believes she needs..." which establishes the value as well as the price of a book.

To some degree, publishers of romance have been savvy about increasing their profit margins, especially with the rise of the digital imprint. Romance is at the forefront of digital publishing. The evolving digital market, while still financially driven, offers a greater opportunity to authors from a higher word count, greater experimentation, building a niche community, reaching a worldwide audience, as well as a benefit to reader. As Bosman (2010) notes, publishing houses such as Random House and Harlequin have converted and digitised backlists. There is an enormous variability in the publishing industry and the ways readers purchase their books continues to evolve. As digital books increase, the large chain bookstores are on the decline. However, there has been a slight rise in independent booksellers (Doctorow, 2013) who target a specific market, for example, a specialty bookshop such as Rosemary's Romance Books in Brisbane, Australia. The smaller niche market stores

offer opportunities to authors by way of marketing and exposure in a manner online book stores, such as Amazon, do not. The independent bookshop may equate to an opportunity for better exposure for niche authors (like me), and marketing aimed at a specific target audience, such as the older female romance reader. An independent bookshop could offer author promotions, book signings and appearances, as well as print books, e-books, and print on demand options. It is feasible that one day independent bookstores will partner with genre-specific publishing houses and become the next evolutionary step for books in the electronic age. Perhaps this will result in romance fiction truly being a ‘something for everyone’ genre.

Romance writers such as Jennifer Crusie have in recent times been highly critical of the representational devaluing of the older woman in romance who is expected to “willingly relegate herself to the background, only emerging in the context of a motherly role” (<http://jprstudies.org/2012/04/getting-laid-getting-old-and-getting-fed-the-cultural-resistance-of-jennifer-crusies-romance-heroines-by-kyra-kramer/>). Romance writers have it in their power to change the ideas of how they perceive themselves, how they judge people, see older women, or reproduce the stereotype. In fact, as Stacey and Pearce (1995) have suggested, the ongoing success of romance depends on its ability to adapt. With readers’ desire for innovation and an openness to a more mature heroine, publishers may be more willing to cater to this often-overlooked demographic. Katz (1996) argues that, “elderly persons, constructed as bodily, individual, and demographic subjects, also become agents who strategically mobilize political action” (p. 26). This is a call to arms to other authors, besides me, to speak out, to rally and write romance novels about older heroines. Escapism is an important element in fiction, especially in romance fiction, yet that escapist fantasy can be as varied as the perspectives of the reader ‘identifying’ with the romance heroine. As Bly (2012) points out, “there is no one representative romance novel” (p. 61). Similarly, Thurston (1987) argues that to single out an average reader to fit the romance mould is misleading and frequently incorrect. Readers connect to a text in diverse ways and not all fantasies are alike. This is evident in the wide range of romance fantasy heroines that can be found across the genre, from the courtesan in Historical romance, the zombie-slaying vampire hunter in paranormal romance, the FBI agent in romantic suspense, to the single mother in contemporary. While it might be argued then that romance fiction is inherently conservative in its endorsement of the idealised female subject, it also has the capacity, as Thomas argues, to contest cultural norms. One can take heart from the



fact that conventions and innovations are beginning to emerge in the genre. Holmes (2006) considers Harlequin romance novels produced in France to be utopian in their representations of gendered bodies and gender roles, but also points out contemporary Harlequin-France heroines are in their thirties or forties, a more mature age than their romance forebears. Bly states that, “hegemonies negotiate and naturalize new ways of interpreting the world. They evolve” (p.69). The portrayals of a romance heroine with ‘market appeal’ can and does contest cultural norms.

This chapter has revisited guidelines for writing romance, which stresses the importance of reader identification with the romance heroine. It is on this latter point that this thesis argues the importance of recognising that there is not one reader of romance but communities of readers who are increasingly not seeing themselves being represented in the romance genre, a perception supported by the many social media websites where readers are encouraged to express their views about romance narratives. As this chapter has also revealed, established and emerging writers of romance (and I include myself here) and romance associations are responding to this demand and to the challenge of writing about an older romance heroine in an historically risk-averse publishing industry. Indeed, publishing is driven by profit and publishers will wish to produce more of whatever it is that generates them revenue. Yet with consumer demand for content, the rise of digital publishing, custom publishing and self-publishing the publishing industry is changing. Ink and paper publishing is no longer standard and neither are advances to authors. Whatever the future holds for books, in this digital age publishers must respond to rising market demands and cannot ignore the reader in favour of seeing mature-aged romance heroines, or the romance writers who are in fact venturing into this field in response. The following chapter explores the few writers who have endeavoured to write older romance heroines. As this is a practice-led project, I include myself, and my novel *For Your Eyes Only*, in the exploration.

## Chapter 5: But Does It Still Look, Feel, and Read Like Romance?

Although it is fair to say that love, romance, the obstacles to this and the expectation of a happy ever after are what principally identify the schema of the romance (in its various types—contemporary, Historical, Regency, etc.) and capture its generic characteristics, it is also true to say that there is now much more diversification in the genre and many sub-genre forms that appeal to different communities of readers—Gay and Lesbian romance, supernatural romance, BDSM to name a few. Moreover, while the publishing industry has traditionally kept to a classificatory scheme in terms of what qualifies as romance, as opposed to what qualifies as Women’s Fiction with elements of romance, there is also evidence in terms of contemporary Single Title publications that this distinction is not as stable as it might once have been. In large part, this can be attributed to the ways in which many female romance protagonists are more three-dimensional and ‘believable’ in terms of life experiences. Also, while readers are still appreciating the fantasy elements of the central love story, they are also demanding an authenticity that allows the genre to speak to them as aspirational characters or figures of possibility in realistic ways as indicated in previous chapters. It is on this basis that the thesis has argued, from a writer’s perspective, for the viable representation of older romance heroines in a genre that has and arguably still is heavily invested in the view that love is for the young only. While there have been failed attempts to publish and market contemporary romances featuring older heroines (as I discussed in Chapter 3), as noted in Appendix A there are currently only a handful of authors (and I include myself here) who are willing or able to take risks in featuring older women as main protagonists for whom love, sex and romantic relationships are validated. This chapter briefly examines the work of three such authors—Jennifer Crusie, Jeannie Ray and Nora Roberts—and argues that these authors are not only responding to reader demand for older heroines, but satisfying their own investments and interests in romance writing. In both respects they are, like me, contesting long held assumptions around women, age, love, romance and sexuality. The chapter that follows charts my own journey around the genre and this central issue.

While they are still by no means on parity in numbers with other romance heroines, over 40 female characters are featured in Crusie’s *Fast Women*, Ray’s *Julie and Romeo*, and Robert’s *Black Rose*. These novels are single title contemporary and sit in very small numbers alongside the bulk of similar novels, which conform to standards

around age. To set the context within the alliance of authors, publishers and readers, as this thesis has sought to pursue throughout, I provide some background information on each author and their reasons (where accessible) for writing a romance featuring older female heroines.

### **5.1. Sex and the Older Woman: Jennifer Crusie's older romance heroines**

As already examined, and as stated by many romance authorities, a subservient, dependent, coy romance heroine has not been the norm for well over a decade or more. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century contemporary romance heroine has evolved. No longer passive, heroines are active sexually and socially; they are independent, financially secure, world-savvy, sexual beings who determine the parameters of their relationships and course their lives will take. The romance genre has expanded beyond the borders of the socially normative heterosexual romance. Readers can choose Gay, Bi and Lesbian romance, Bondage, Domination and Submissive romance, Romantica, and sexually explicit *Fifty Shades of Grey* style Erotica, (Frantz, 2012; Therrien, 2012). Some of these romance forms play explicitly with the conventions, displaying a postmodern self-reflexivity around them. This thesis acknowledges the textual as well as representational value of these shifting boundaries and forms. However, one aspect that remains uncontested is the age of the heroine. While it varies from 'twentysomething' to 35, with the mean around 25, the constraint around age (from guidelines, writers and publishers) as well as the statements made by Macro, Sogah and Cuthbert implies that the romance contract is out of bounds for an older woman. The social reality for many older women is just the opposite, but textual representation invalidates their experiences. Brown (2011) argues that there exists a fictional ambivalence about accepting plus-sized heroines that mirrors the real incongruity plus sized women face with acceptance in society.

'Plus size' romances challenge social expectations regarding women's body sizes and weight to advance the acceptance of real women's bodies that are larger than the current slender ideal, and whose potential as romantic subjects is typically ignored in popular media. (p. 2)

Women over 40, like their fictional plus-sized counterparts, suffer the same prejudicial stigmatisation and treatment when it comes to how society views their participation in the workplace and bedroom. While being overweight and being old are both pilloried in society, in romance fiction it appears to be somewhat less of a taboo to be overweight

and have an active sex life than it is to be old, in love and sexually active. AAR produced another booklist that includes ‘curvy’ heroines and “big and tall’ heroines. This collection (Appendix B) is larger and covers more subgenres of romance than “older couples” titles listed in Appendix A. Appendix B shows there is a greater push for size acceptance in romance fiction than there is for age acceptance in the genre. Some romance writers, however, have sought to change this situation.

Jennifer Crusie is an established romance author. She has written romance texts that feature plus-sized heroines as well as older heroines. She has stated, “I loved romance, but nobody was writing the edgy, angry feminist love stories I wanted to read” (Crusie, 2003). Known for challenging established tropes, Crusie’s novels often sidestep the prejudices mentioned above. Crusie’s *Bet Me* (2004) turns the ugly duckling ‘fat-girl-loses-weight-and-finds-happily-ever-after’ on its ear. In *Bet Me*, rather than being about a heroine who slims down, it is the heroine’s full-figure and love of food that attracts the hero. However, it is noteworthy to mention that *Bet Me* was the first manuscript Crusie completed, but she was unable to sell it in 1992. Cruise describes what happened (<http://www.jennycrusie.com/books/fiction/bet-me/>):

I wrote the first version of *Bet Me* back in 1992 and sent it out everywhere. Editors were universally unenthusiastic about it, which was just inexplicable to me. Fast forward ten years and my agent, who regards an unsold manuscript the way Nature feels about vacuums, said, “Send me *Bet Me*. It can’t be that bad.” I dug out the manuscript and sent it to her, and she sold it to my genius editor, Jennifer Enderlin at St. Martin’s, who said, “Uh, you are going to rewrite this, right?” “Absolutely,” I told her. “It should take me a month or two tops.” “Great,” she said. “We’ll do it as a paperback original,” which I translated as “Let’s not call a lot of attention to this one, okay?”

I include this anecdote because the heroine in *Bet Me* is unconventional, non-traditional, and Crusie’s daring to write about a plus-sized heroine called attention to the difficulties a woman faced in not conforming to an idealised image of beauty, and called attention to an author who wished to write about such a character. The novel remained unpublished until Cruise was a more established author with a proven sales record, which speaks to the fact that Crusie had to prove and provide a reasonable level of publishing profit to be allowed the chance for *Bet Me* to go to print. An obvious comment on this would be that publishers can afford to take risks with their best-selling writers, making it more difficult for emerging writers who want to go against trends. Crusie’s earlier experiences trying to publish a non-conventional romance are testimony to this.

In 1996, Crusie wrote *Anyone But You*, about an older woman/younger man (she is 40, he is 30) romance that steers clear of the cougar characterisation. The age difference of the protagonists is central to the plot and Crusie addresses the cultural indoctrination the heroine, Nina, faces with regard to crossing the invisible line into her forties and the implications that has for her sexuality. *Fast Women* was published some eight years later (2004), and it does *not* engage as centrally with the main character's angst around her age. In fact *Fast Women* sets aside the social paradigm that age is something ugly to be pathologised where Viagra and blood pressure medication are standard, as Kensington Editor Records espoused, as well as the construct that 'age-is-something-to-fear.' Crusie is an established reputation for bending tropes and creating modern women with modern values. In *Fast Women* (2004) she establishes the heroine, Nell, as a recently divorced, too-skinny, middle-aged heroine who has lost her appetite for food and everything else. A romance that is part mystery, part thriller, part comedy, *Fast Women* borrows from various genres of fiction, which is similar to the construction of my own novel *For Your Eyes Only*. Crusie advises that "the combination of what you love in your romance reading and what you can't find in your romance reading defines the romance you want to write" (2003). What Cruise wanted to write was a romance novel with a romance heroine in the over-40 age group; something that she felt was missing in the genre. In *Fast Women* the age factor is not central to the plot, nor is it an obstacle to love, sex and romance. It features as part of what makes the main female character human but it does not impede the course of true love.

When the reader meets Nell Dysart, she is applying for a job as a secretary in a run-down detective agency. Her marriage is over, her career is non-existent and she needs the job to pay rent. She is determined to be cheerful to Gabe McKenna, even if it kills her. There is no physical description of her, nothing about her size, shape, how she is dressed, or anything that indicates her age until she mentions it.

"Why do you want to work for us?" he said and she smiled, trying to look bright and eager, plus the aforementioned cheerful and helpful, which was hard since she was middle aged and cranky. (p. 4)

In the job interview, Nell indicates that she sees her age as something potentially ruinous for her chances, despite her efforts to be to be positive: "*I'm forty-two and unemployed, she thought, but she said brightly, "I'm ready for a change."*" (p. 5). Nell's

self-image is redirected through her encounter with the hero Gabe who initially thinks she is too skinny and too pale, but “lovely in her bones.” While complex issues such as divorce, adultery and abandonment are explored in the story, the focus of the narrative is on the developing romance, on the central love story between Nell and Gabe.

Emotional connection and mutual support are central to this relationship, especially in Nell’s times of self-doubt:

“*I love you,*” Nell sat up next to him and clutched his arm. “Like *nothing* before. You let me be strong. I don’t have to pretend. I don’t feel *guilty* with you.”

“Honey, I don’t let you be anything,” he said, with laughter in his voice. “You just are.” (p. 375)

In *Anyone But You*, Nina had to come to terms with and overcome the social implications about her appearance and sexuality: the notion a woman 40 or older is no longer physically or sexually attractive. *Fast Women* also discredits this perception. Older women may be socially judged to have lost their attractiveness and are often desexualised, but Crusie addresses middle-aged sex in ways that acknowledge the erotic and the intimate as part of the everyday:

He jerked away and pinned her down again, his mouth hot on her breast, and she dissolved into the blurred tangle they made, losing her boundaries as he moved against her, feeling only heat and friction and the pressure as she twisted in his arms, loving the hot slide of his body, needing him so much that when he finally came into her, she shimmered in his arms, trying to consume him, until she finally broke, biting her lip as every nerve in her body surged. (p. 318)

This scene might suggest that Crusie is artfully obliterating the age of her heroine by using a generic lovemaking scene. Other Crusie romance novels featuring younger heroines portray sexual encounters in a similar lexicon. With this particular example, I argue that Crusie has not ignored the age and experiences of her heroine throughout the novel but in depicting the 40+ heroine and her lover in ‘familiar’ erotic terms validates the sexual experience usually appropriated by much younger female characters. Crusie’s older heroines are sexually desiring and desirable subjects; unlike their younger counterparts they come with more baggage, but the trajectory of the romance ensures that they too reap its benefits. They challenge the more negative socio-cultural norms around women and age that are prevalent in the media and in much mainstream romance fiction and they do this, to paraphrase Kramer (2012), ‘by getting old and getting laid.’

## 5.2. Too Old for Love? Jeanne Ray's *Julie and Romeo*.

*Julie and Romeo* (2000) was Jeanne Ray's first novel. Considered to be a refreshing concept to have older protagonists who fall in love, *Julie and Romeo* was an immediate *New York Times* Bestseller. Since the success of *Julie and Romeo*, Ray has written further books, one a sequel (*Julie and Romeo Get Lucky*) and four others. Ray was in her 60s when she wrote the novel about two people in their 60s falling in love. She stated that, "people were ready to read something upbeat about ageing characters, something about love and hate" (2003). In *A Conversation with Jeanne Ray* in the Readers' Guide of the 2003 NAL edition of *Julie and Romeo*, Ray was asked if she wanted to see more authors writing about 60 year old couples. Ray's reply was that she wished:

We could all see older people with fewer prejudices than we do and if it takes writing about older folks in positive ways and reading about them with open minds to teach us that, then yes, there should be more interesting and positive things written about growing old.

Ray disliked being considered 'over-the-hill' at sixty. She set out to write a novel about vibrant, attractive couple over 60 who fell in love and she succeeded. Ray, like Crusie, wrote the characters she could not find in other novels; she wrote the book she could not find, the book *she* wanted to read.

In writing *Julie and Romeo*, Ray not only contests that proposition that love and romance are for the young only, but she also experiments with the genre. The story is narrated in first person, which is an approach more typically found in Chick Lit rather than romance, and her protagonists are considerably older than Crusie's. They are in their 60s and age is in fact an important part of the romance script enabling Ray to make comments through her characters about negative social views about old age, sex and desire. Ray sets up the issue of age in a clever way; by wondering what would have happened if Romeo & Juliet's grandparents had fallen in love instead of the youngsters. In this scenario, instead of Montagues hating Capulets, the Rosemans hate the Cacciamanis. This allows Ray to make an early observation on prejudice: "A prejudice is a simplification: Every member of this group is exactly the same..." (p. 3). This remark also applies to the ways in which age in this text seeks to escape the prejudices of simplification. This is accomplished through the behaviour of the two romantic leads—Julie and Romeo—and their defiance of social and familial prejudice. Julie's daughter at one stage admonishes her mother for having a relationship with the despised

member of the Cacciamani family suggesting that she should “know better” because she is “older”:

“I want you to listen to me, Mom. I think this is a serious mistake you’re making. That’s what you told me and maybe for my age, for that time in my life, you were right,”

I was fairly stunned by her admission. I reached out and petted her hair. “I’m just so much older.” I felt so much older.

“I know,” she said without any unkindness. “That’s why you should know better.” (p. 123)

Julie’s acceptance of her daughter’s judgement not only about liking the ‘wrong man’ but being older and therefore needing to ‘act her age,’ is something that is contested in the text through the love/romance at its heart.

Julie is divorced, Romeo is a widower, and they are both florists. Julie and Romeo are aware they are older, acknowledge they have bodies, a life history and associated baggage that comes with being sixty, but it never gets in the way of them falling in love or thinking about sex. In fact, the idea that age *should* be an issue is something of an annoyance as expressed in the scene when Julie is in the magazine aisle of a CVS drug store (an American chemist chain), waiting to meet Romeo for their first date, looking at *Cosmopolitan*-type titles:

*What Your Mother Never Told You About Multiple Orgasms, How to Make Him Beg For More, Great Sex at 20, 30, and 40.* I stopped and picked that one up. What happened to *Great Sex at 60*? Were we finished? Unentitled? Too thrilled to be taking our grandchildren to swim practice to even think about sex? Too awash in our golden years to want a piece of the action? (p. 56)

Julie’s reflections in this scene countermand the prevailing view that an older woman’s sexuality and sexual desire are non-existent and therefore beyond representation. A little later, after their first date, Romeo returns to Julie’s house and tosses stones at her window and she sneaks out of the home she shares with her daughter and grandchildren. The couple’s first attempt to have sex is comical, but not in any way that portrays mature-age sex as a gag stereotype. The comic scene takes place at night, in Romeo’s flower shop, where they decide to go for a tryst instead of a hotel. They take off their clothes and hurry to the bed in the back of the store, only to be interrupted by Romeo’s son, which sends Julie running naked through the store. For Julie and Romeo the “essential part of the romance fantasy” is their desire, their pleasure, their need for intimacy, and the emotional connection they share.



He touched the champagne underwear lightly with his fingertips, he ran the palms of his hands over the cups of the bra, as if he had never seen anything so remarkable in his life. He was the one I was waiting for, even though I had many different lives with other people. (p. 151)

As in Crusie's novel, when they make love, there is also nothing that indicates one is reading about an older couple at all.

We were the roller coaster now, The Scrambler, The Zipper. Love rolled us together and tossed us into the air. We were something bigger than gravity. We stretched into it, closed our eyes, held on to each other, held tight. There was so much time that sex had a chance to be every different thing. We tumbled and devoured. I hit my head on the headboard. He pulled my feet into the air. We slowed down and memorized each other's fingers. I held his earlobe between my lips. He traced my eyelids with his tongue. We made love so deeply that I felt the very shape of my body changing. I whispered. He sang. (p. 152)

Ray presents sex with all its emotion and physical eroticism without closing the bedroom door on her older couple (the oldest couple of the three novels I survey). Both Julie and Romeo are presented as sexual and their mature sexuality is not reduced to comedy nor is it pathologised. The endorsement of the older, sexually desiring body constitutes a subversive expression within the text, which exists in tandem with the emotional connection that, in the context of the romance novel, is central. As with any romance, *Julie and Romeo* concludes with the expected happy ending and it also exercises other elements Thomas and James (2006) identified as most desired in their reader survey: conflict between the hero and heroine; occasional sexual descriptions, but with more focus on the hero and hero's feelings for each other, and interesting secondary characters. The question of age and its intersection with these characteristics is what is tested out in Ray's novel. Reviews of the novel displayed delight that the leads were older and are testament to the fact staple hallmarks of romance are in place.

Julie and Romeo may be sixty, but their story is everyone's. The uncertainty, the exhilaration, the excruciating moments—they're all here... <http://www.theromancereader.com/ray-julie.html>

Julie and Romeo are both aged sixty. It's refreshing to read a storyline wherein amour and heavy breathing aren't limited to the under-30 set. (Bravo, Ms. Ray, for reminding us of that. There was a reason my own 70 y.o. widower grandfather ran off with our 60 y.o. widow housekeeper!)  
[http://www.amazon.com/review/RG8HR4JE5BJMK/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1423314360&nodeID=283155&store=books](http://www.amazon.com/review/RG8HR4JE5BJMK/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=1423314360&nodeID=283155&store=books)

### 5.3. 'The Ravages of Time? Nora Roberts' *Black Rose*

Since she sold her first romance to Silhouette in 1981, Nora Roberts has written over 200 books. Her novels are published in 35 countries and there are 294 million of her books in print. In 2010 she was named as one of *Time Magazine's* Top 100 People Who Affect Our World. Kate Duffy, former editorial director at Kensington Books stated

“Nora is the standard that nobody's going to eclipse . . . Authors don't know how Nora does it. She is unique. She is a phenomenon. She has a gift, an extraordinary talent. It just doesn't get any better than Nora Roberts” (Gray, 2000).

She has been described as having a ‘concise, to-the-point style’ of writing that has ‘allowed her to excel as a romance novelist.’ Roberts rewrites the ‘rules’ of romance fiction (Cadwalladr, 2011). Perhaps her success can be attributed to the fact Roberts has indicated that, like Crusie, she writes the stories she wants to read, rather than the stories with the ‘formulaic plots’ and old Harlequin ‘doormat’ heroines (Cadwalladr, 2011).

In *Black Rose*, Roberts combines romance with mystery and a ghost story. This is not unusual. Crusie does the same in her work. Romance frequently integrates elements from other forms of genre fiction without straying from the romance narrative, and regardless of the inclusion of mystery and a ghost, *Black Rose* follows the trajectory of romance. The heroine, Roz, is 47. Widowed and divorced, she pays more attention to her own physical appearance than Crusie’s Nell. Roz surveys her own body, noting her ‘breasts weren’t as perky,’ that ‘sagging hadn’t gotten too bad yet,’ and that she dyed her hair to get rid of the salt-and-pepper, exercised to keep fit, and did what she could to “*try to slow the damage time insisted upon inflicting*” (p. 37). Her self-assessment is underpinned by negative views of the aging female body that see it as defective. Roz has internalised an idealised femininity as the actual embodiment of femininity—youthful, attractive, non-bject (p. 55). However, this view is dismantled in the text through the central love story that unfolds, inevitably confirming that age does matter, but in positive ways that do not diminish the romance narrative. Despite the ‘ravages of time,’ the forty-five-year-old hero, Mitch, sees her as a black rose: long, slender, exotic, “A little haughty, a lot sexy” (p. 51).

In much the same way as Crusie, and Ray, Roberts acknowledges the older, sexually desiring woman. In the sex scenes there is no desexualising of middle-aged women. As well as this and in keeping with the cognitive as well as corporeal value of

the ‘true romance’, when Roz and Mitch have sex, it’s often about an emotional connection:

“This mattered. This was important. There isn’t anyone else.”

Her heart trembled a little, made her feel young and just a little foolish. “Yes, this mattered. This was important. There isn’t anyone else.”

“Serious business, he said.” (p. 186)

In this passage Roz is aware of her age and her comment about feeling young and foolish suggests that she sees sex and romance as a young person’s prerogative. However, she also quickly dismisses this through her recognition that her relationship with Mitch is significant—“Yes, this mattered. This was important.” Roz and Mitch frequently have sex: at times it is about two people and their desire and pleasure, and in other instances the love-making validates the sexual and emotional space for, Roz, for older women.

“Since I’m in such a blissful state, I’m going to admit that’s the first time I’ve ever come four times.”

“Stick with me, kid, and it won’t be the last.” (p.221)

Not only is Roz older than the usual romance heroine, and just as sexual, she also behaves outside the norm expected for a woman of her age—which shocks one of the secondary characters. Roberts’ heroine pays no attention to decorum or to the stereotypes that suggest she has seen better days:

“I’m mad at this no-account, slimy-assed, cocksucking son-of-a-bitch who’s doing whatever he can to complicate my life.”

“You said cocksucking,” Hayley whispered. Awed. (p. 237)

One might argue that these novels are all hybrids, blends of mystery, crime and Women’s Fiction. Yet, although the heroine is in fact older, the staple elements of the romance genre remain in place alongside the crime and ghost story elements, as well as the elements of emotional baggage associated with age. In other words, the ‘formula’ is there; the reasserting of the norms and conventions of romance are present, and yet her central story is not a simply matter of substituting an older person for a younger person. These novels show that age does bring with it the ‘baggage’ of a life lived, but they also reveal that romance, love, sex are still a central desire. Roz, Nell and Julie are older female characters whose relationships and life experiences are detailed and embraced by Crusie, Ray, and Roberts, and incorporated positively within the romance

signifiers—the emotional connection between the characters, the central love story, the Happily Ever After. Arguably Cruise and Roberts were able to present more mature heroines because of their proven success as romance authors, but neither of these authors states that this was the case. Jeanne Ray admitted that she was ideologically driven in her writing about older women. To reiterate her comment:

We could all see older people with fewer prejudices than we do and if it takes writing about older folks in positive ways and reading about them with open minds to teach us that, then yes, there should be more interesting and positive things written about growing old.”

My efforts to write and publish a romance novel with an older woman heroine were ultimately rewarded but not without a long struggle. The eventual acceptance of my work is perhaps the beginning of a greater exposure and revision for the roles of older women in romance novels, as well as a further challenge to the normative tropes and assumptions within romance fiction and the industry in relation to this issue. Signs have emerged over the last five years or so to highlight there is a growing author desire to cast a more mature age heroines in romance fiction. The 2010 RWA conference in America included a session titled *Boomers In Love*, which discussed the inclusion of older women in romance fiction. From that seminar, a group of authors came together to form On PAR (on, Primed and Ready), an online community of writers interested in promoting romance fiction for women over 40. On the On PAR Facebook page, romance author Sandra Kitt (2010) suggests an older heroine, like an older woman, wants to be seen as fun, interesting, desirable, confident, accomplished, and in love, all of which are characteristics that can be applied to a romance heroine of any age.

In the next chapter I reflect upon the writing and publishing of my romance novel featuring an older romance heroine and the research around this approach that has been examined and analysed throughout the thesis. The chapter addresses the sub-questions raised by the approach taken: Are any of the features of the genre altered? Is the love story still central? Do the obstacles faced by the older heroine in her quest for love still fit with the crucial, defining feature of the romance genre? Is the true fictional place for women of a certain age Women’s Fiction (as defined by the publishers) rather than in the romance genre?

## Chapter 6: Creative Connection, Creative Practice

In order to reflect on my writing of the novel *For Your Eyes Only*, which is the focus of this chapter, it has been necessary to engage analytically with romance publishing industry, writing, and reading. The previous chapters explored this terrain and provided some insights into the obstacles and demands of the regulatory guidelines as well as the desires of authors and readers of the genre. While they highlighted evolutionary changes and shifts in the industry and the genre, and identified the increasing power of an older reading community through social media, they also established that it is not especially easy for authors who experiment with the new, especially in relation to the configuration of the romance heroine. For years, all the heroines in the romance novels I read were all older than me, and I preferred reading stories of people with greater life experience and history than my own. Then one day I was suddenly older than most of the romance heroines, which vexed me. In some way my history as a reader might explain my interest in writing older protagonists. Although the advice given to romance writers places importance on creating a character with whom the reader will identify, I cannot say, as a reader or writer, that I ‘identify’ with a heroine. I do not consider of myself as a placeholder or as one who rides along in an androgynous manner, or experience something in a vicarious fashion. However, there is something of an element of voyeurism at work, a ‘fly on the wall’ aspect to my reading, that connects me to the characters or at least puts me in the same room with them when I read and when I write. I connect to a character’s history and experiences that are different to mine. It is the backstory, the chronology of their lives I find most intriguing. As a result, my life as a reader shows a pattern where history has fed into my book choices, yet it also highlights the impact a chronology of time has had on my writing choices. I present an older romance heroine with a life history and all the associated emotional baggage within the generic framework of romance fiction, and produce a new (and I think improved and inclusive) representation of a romance heroine. In this disruptive way, I further advance the innovation of the romance genre by challenging a tacit rule limiting a heroine’s age as well as challenge the normative tendencies of the genre.

My experimentation with the genre raised from the outset a number of questions that the process of writing would inevitably address. Would the central conventions of the genre alter substantially? What kind of approach should I take? Most importantly could I sustain the centrality of the love story crucial in defining the romance genre? I

had to determine if the issues an older heroine might face in her quest for love were different to those experienced by younger heroines and if that were to be the case, would that difference diminish or enhance the central relationship? Would publishers accept it under these conditions and was there a reading community out there wanting to read it? This chapter explores the dimensions of these questions in relation to the creative writing component of this practice-led thesis. It provides a commentary on the author process, and a brief analysis of my novel as a way of addressing the questions and their outcomes. Finally, it provides a range of reader responses to my published work.

### **6.1. Leading by my practice**

Situating a mature-aged heroine in a role typically afforded to younger women was driven by my own urge to write such novel and to feature an older woman as a sexualised being in a genre that has traditionally devalued older women by relegating them to supportive, secondary or risible roles. By reading and analysing authors such as Crusie, Ray, and Roberts and the appeal of their older heroines, I was better able to analyse my own techniques for creating a romance heroine who challenges the usual stereotypical interpretations for an older woman in romance fiction. *For Your Eyes Only* emerged alongside the material I researched for the topic and explored throughout the exegesis. Joining a piece of creative writing in romance fiction with an academic exegesis may be seen as an uneasy marriage. Originally used as way to explain the meaning of Scripture, Krauth (2002) proposes the exegesis has always been used as a method to explain the relationship between written texts and culture. He suggests the need for explanation is, historically, a low-brow ‘plea’ to high culture from low culture. Since there exists a prejudicial view of romance novels as lowbrow, an exegesis offers itself well as a way to explicate meaning between the text and culture in which it exists. Barrett (2007) states that an exegesis is a way “of articulating a more profound rationale for institutional recognition and support of creative arts research” (p. 161). An exegesis has now come to be a means for creative writers to strengthen and articulate links between their work, the culture, and the academic and general audience for whom the creative piece is intended. Kroll (2004) asserts the exegesis is both a record of a ‘cultivated awareness’ and an illustration of why a creative work is significant in the academic and artistic community.

Kroll (2004) further suggests that when undertaking a creative doctorate that contains a creative piece, such as *For Your Eyes Only*, and a critical component (the exegesis), a candidate must have something of a split personality in order to produce both pieces. For me, the fragmentation of my 'self' meant I struggled to find a way to combine methodological approaches. One method was practice-led the other was grounded in a more conventional form of textual, cultural and industry analysis. I had to address the ways my experience writing a novel with a non-traditional romance heroine operated within the structures of romance fiction, the romance industry, reading communities and the wider social context in which young, not older, women are reified. While the struggle to amalgamate the creative and the critical was challenging, as the thesis progressed, I began to see some important connections. Milech and Schilo (2006) also address the intricacies of combining the two components of the creative work and the critical, suggesting that "both the written and creative component of the thesis are conceptualised as independent answers to the same research questions" (p. 6). This Research-Question Model approach, as Sally Berridge (2007) indicates in her paper *Arts-based Research and the Creative PhD* (<http://www.aawp.org.au/files/u280/Berridge.pdf>) helped me to overcome the sense of a split personality. Over the duration of the project, the exegesis and the creative work began to take shape as two different but dialogic responses to the central research question.

Practice-led research combined with the creative writing component is also, as Haseman (2006) proposes, an examination of research as process and research as outcome (in this case, a novel). Creative writing is creative and critical. There are specific skills writers must possess in order to examine their work with an analytical eye to uncover holes in the plot, ensure continuity of character traits, places, items, history and relationships. In addition, a novelist choosing to create a work within a particular genre requires a domain specific knowledge. For a romance writer this meant awareness of the romance genre framework and its conventions was essential in order to work with and against some of the central aspects. Brien (2006) submits that creative writing and creative-practice-as-research encompass several interlinked components beyond the physical act of writing. First is *reading as research*—that is reading widely to collect information. Second, Brien suggests *writing-as-research*, whereby the act of writing is tested by generating text that is read, re-read, re-written, and edited. Thirdly, Brien describes *publishing as research* and examines the publication process. For me

this included sending query letters to publishing houses, receiving rejections, requests for manuscripts, acceptance for publication, and discussing feedback from book reviewers and readers. These ‘testing’ processes are located within an individual and wider community and connected by the analytical, the critical, and creative.

My endeavour to be published tested not only the process involved in writing the creative work, but it also tested the limits of communities of writers, readers and authors of romance at work within the sphere of romance fiction publishing. By this, I mean the experiences I had with writing a romance novel featuring a mature-aged heroine disrupted the expectations of the industry, the constraints of the industry with regard to the normative tropes around the roles of older women, and the place of female protagonists within contemporary fiction. With my writing, I pushed against limits of romance fiction to discover if the threshold of the genre could be crossed, or if work like mine would continue to be considered a ‘sales risk’ in a traditionally risk averse industry. In my pre-publication testing, I first had to ascertain if my writing was not polished or professional enough. Did my status as a first time novelist without a backlist form the basis of the initial rejections? I was not a proven seller as were Crusie or Roberts. But more pertinent to my project, were the rejections solely a result of the parameters of the genre with regard to age and the constraints this placed upon my romance heroine? In the three years in which I undertook this study my first novel *A Basic Renovation* was accepted for publication and hit the e-bookshelves in February of 2013.

It is to my advantage that I was published in electronic form, for a number of reasons. Electronic books do not have a limited shelf life and do not go out of print the way paper books do. Besides allowing readers immediate access, ebooks, such as the Escape imprint (an imprint beneath the Harlequin umbrella), have a worldwide audience with no geo-restriction on the copyright, whereas many paper books are limited to sale in only a few particular regions. Print books are more expensive to produce and more expensive to distribute, which thereby creates more of a risk to the publisher. Greenfield (2014) indicates that Harlequin’s digital revenue has expanded while the company’s paperback revenue has contracted. Bestselling author Jonathan Gunson (<http://bestsellerlabs.com/no-more-books-stephen-king/>) notes that 92% of the top 100 bestselling books are ebooks, rather than traditional print books. Gunson also establishes that 86% of the top 2,500 genre fiction bestsellers in the Amazon store are ebooks. In an examination of books sales growth Publishing Technology (2014) states



that, “Ebooks rule the genre roost”

(<http://www.publishingtechnology.com/2014/02/ebook-sales-growth-where-its-really-coming-from-an-analysis-of-author-earnings/>). The RWA Statistics (2012) indicates that 44% of all romance novels purchased are in electronic form. In recognising electronic books as an area to increase profit, major publishers, such as Random House, HarperCollins and Penguin have moved to producing books in electronic format with Loveswept, Impulse, and Destiny respectively. With lower costs and less risk to a reduction in profits, as Cuthbert (2012) suggested, an ebook publisher, such as Escape, is open to taking on the financial risk of a new author, as well as the risk of an author who tests the elasticity of the romance genre. Whether I was published in print or electronic form, the publication of one book meant I had ‘foot in the door’ because when I completed *For Your Eyes Only* and pitched it to Escape, I was permitted to bypass the usual submission route and send in the entire manuscript rather than the first three chapters and a synopsis. After publication I looked to sales and reader response reviews to test the threshold and attitudes regarding the older age of the heroines of my novels.

Perry (1998) asserts the writer is also a party to creating an interpretation. Writing *For Your Eyes Only* allowed me space to explore my own desire to see a relationship played out on the page that better reflected social patterns and the culture I witness—my everyday experiences of women over 40, rather than how mature-aged are typically presented in the media as stereotypes or secondary characters. I felt I was offering another element that connected the romance to real life by placing an older female protagonist in the central role of the romance heroine to see what she would do. This thesis is then my interpretation, my attempt to shed light upon and attach value and meaning to an often-maligned genre of fiction, and even more denigrated representation of women beyond a ‘certain age.’ The following section details my interpretation of my own novel, its place within the field of romance fiction, and its credentials as a response to the research question I posed at the beginning of this study: what happened to the romance when I introduced a mature-aged heroine? Were any features of the genre altered? Was the love story still central? What obstacles did my heroine, Willa, face in the getting of love, the crucial, defining feature of romance? Is there an audience for mature or mid romance? Is Women’s Fiction the only true fictional place for mature female protagonists?

## 6.2. Ingredients in a recipe

I generally have considered myself to be a writer of romantic comedies, yet one might suggest, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, that the novel written for this thesis is a hybrid, a comedy-crime-romance novel. Huber (2013) notes something of a marketing conundrum for cross-genre fiction, which does not quite fit into any one classification. While *For Your Eyes Only* contains elements of crime and mystery, which is a similar construction to Crusie and Roberts, I nevertheless consider my work to be romance. Borrowing elements of another genre is not an uncommon thing in romance fiction and this approach was not one that I felt interfered at all in the central love quest. My novel is, essentially, the story of a widow, Willa, unexpectedly finding love again. Willa is more mature than the usual ‘skewed younger’ romance heroine and John is as well. The characters are age appropriate, meaning both of them are of a similar age, which in some ways may be an important key to combating the aversion that some have towards older heroines, as well the stereotyping that occurs with mature-aged female characters. Although I never stipulate Willa’s exact age, I do give an indication she’s not a ‘perky twenty-something’ when she meets the hero, John:

John looked up at her again. The white hair blowing loose and wild about her face had been deceptive. There was a scar on her pointed chin. A small and sharp nose sat above a mouth that was offset by dimpled laugh lines. Fine crow’s feet feathered her striking gray-green eyes, but this woman wasn’t elderly. “And you’re not a college co-ed, ma’am.” (p. 8)

Prejudicial thoughts that form in the minds of others can of course arise from something as superficial as white hair and I wanted to capture these by articulating them through the views of other characters—Willa’s mother, her sister, and stepdaughter.

Willa snorted. What was it Mom had said last Christmas? It was something like, ‘*Face it cupcake, you and your sister are past your prime. Grow old gracefully. Stop wasting your time fighting the inevitable with all this obsessive exercise. It’s a fact of life. You’re going to get old and flabby and infirm, and no one likes an old whore. You had your time like I had mine, so move over and let someone else have a chance to shine.*’ (p. 123)

In this passage, Willa’s mother, a generation older, clings to the view that old age is something unattractively inevitable. However, similar to Crusie’s Nell, getting older is not a major concern to Willa and she counters this claim. She *likes* her white hair, so does John; he finds it intriguing and arousing. The colour of her hair does play a

part in the story, but not in the age-related manner one might think. I must stress that giving Willa a trait so often associated with old age was not something I did on purpose, but later, as I analysed my work and wrote more of the narrative, I realised that particular feature was an element I wanted to play with. I wrote the first chapter of *For Your Eyes Only* eighteen months before I decided I had an interest pursuing a research degree. Willa was a fully-formed character with white hair before I grasped I had the foundations of any research questions. Nonetheless, discussing traits associated with ageing does play an important role in this particular romance fantasy, since it is a fantasy. Although I suggest a disruption to the form, I also must give sanction to the specific conventionality of the genre with regard to normative tropes regarding beauty and reassert the romance beauty norm, but at the same time I must also point out the prejudice that surrounds older women who do not conform to acceptable configurations associated with age. Whether these prejudices are stereotypes perpetuated by fears of growing older, if women are their own worst enemy, as Webley (2010) advocates, or if women are responsible for enforcing the cultural constraints of behaviour, gender roles, and the stylistic traits that are deemed *most* desirable and feminine upon each other and themselves, as Wendell & Tan (2009) surmise, the fact is women of all ages are presented with a mixed message in how to appear, behave and interact, as I noted in Chapter 2. Mature-aged women are judged even more harshly as to how they are permitted to look; they are told ‘don’t look old, don’t dress too young, don’t get fat, age gracefully, fight ageing.’ Conversely, when a middle-aged woman works hard to keep trim and fit, as Willa my protagonist does, there is potential for a backlash and comments such as, ‘who does she think she is,’ and ‘you are wasting your time,’ as well as being labelled a ‘cougar,’ as captured in the pejorative comments Willa garners from her mother. For some, this attitude transfers across into romance and further excludes the mature-aged heroine from the fantasy of being attractive at any age.

Goodall (2009) has noted that a writer has “a sophisticated awareness of generic elements by treating them as ingredients in a recipe” (p. 200). I was well aware of the ‘key romance elements’—that is I had to demonstrate I understood the stable conventions of romance, the ‘generic elements of the recipe:’ the emotional connection between the characters, the central love story, the happy ending. I had to keep in mind a conflict between the Willa and John. I needed to have occasional sexual descriptions, and focus on the lead characters’ feelings for each other. I aimed to have interesting secondary characters. I wanted Willa to possess the type of key traits identified by

readers of contemporary romance as most appealing: intelligence, self-confidence, and a sense of humour. But what I also tried to keep in mind as I wrote my novel was to present the kind of older romantic heroine I wanted to read about—women like Nell, Julie, and Roz—but is so difficult to find presently in the genre. Willa is not the normative ‘twenty-five-ish’ romance heroine so often encountered; she has life experiences, she has a background and a profession, which do feed into the relationship she forms with John. Yet, I did not want her experiences to obstruct the love story, rather abet it. I kept my focus on the complex struggles Willa has to face, such as abandonment, balancing her personal life with her clandestine professional life, restoring a friendship, and dealing with a stepdaughter who views her initially as an evil stepmother (another stereotype of the older woman that this narrative dispels).

Since the story takes place over the span of a week, I had to find a way to set up and draw out conflict over Willa’s professional life and her private desires, both emotional and physical. The backstory between Willa and her male best friend, Dominic, establishes one emotional conflict, her struggle with returning to work provides another, but the surprise attraction she feels for a man she just met delivers the most important emotional discord necessary in romance. It was tricky to draw out a believable deep emotional connection between Willa and John when working in such a short timeline with the novel. I tried to establish a relationship based on coincidence and common interest, and build a rapport. Although the development of their feelings is influenced by physical attraction, the bond Willa feels towards John begins quite simply in a more cognitive dimension:

She lifted her chin without any shame and was as honest with herself as she was with him. “You make me laugh, John. I haven’t laughed much in the last few years and I like laughing ...” (p. 134)

As the story progresses over the week, they become more familiar with one another and their feelings for one another intensify. Humour, another key element readers look for, and a notion Jermyn (2012) indicates may be pertinent to the presentation of an older romantic lead, continues to play a role for both John and Willa.

Willa watched him refill Princess Leia and return with the water. “How can you be so nice about all this? How can you be such a nice guy *all* the time?” She drank, watching him over the rim of the glass.  
 “Maybe I like finishing last.”

The liquid caught in her throat and she spit it back into the glass, coughing, gasping, and finally laughing. He made her laugh about everything. Always. Glass safely on the table top, she met his gaze. "I'm a mess," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you see what a disaster I am? I'm *The Towering Inferno* and *Earthquake* rolled into one woman."

Casually, he lifted one shoulder and let it drop. "Think of me as the Red Cross." (p. 232)

During the course of the story, the things Willa hides have nothing to do with her body or with her age. There is nothing that strips her eroticism or anything to deny her sexuality. Like Nell, Julie, and Roz, Willa is unapologetically sexual, despite her crow's feet and white hair.

Urgent, every touch, every movement was a heightened sense memory of earlier. An impatient noise vibrated in her throat, she pawed at the waist of his jeans, tried to drag them off by jerking on the back pockets. After a moment, she gave up and simply shoved her hand inside his pants and shorts. His breath hitched. He rolled sideways and gracelessly burrowed fingers into her thin cotton panties. Hot. Wet. Slick. She moaned into his mouth... (p. 234)

Blanchard (2013) refers to the pact most readers enter into when reading a romance, one that I substantially support. She states, "In most love stories the interest is less in who the couple eventually will be...but the path to their romantic entwinement. Though obstacles and infuriations spur the narrative along, it's the inevitability of the union that offers the enjoyment in such texts" (p. 20). My claim in writing and eventually publishing *For Your Eyes Only* is that it adheres to this pact; it explores the path or romantic entwinement, addresses "obstacles and infuriations," and pushes inevitably toward the union of the lovers. That it accomplished this through to publication with an older romance heroine was a wonderful moment for me, but it also had to pass the reader-reception test. Would readers appreciate it? Is there a market out there for older women readers wanting to read about older romance heroines? And what about how the book would be marketed?

As I mentioned in Chapter 3 when I discussed the *Love and Life* and NEXT imprints, the display location, marketing and understanding of the target audience is important when it comes to attracting readers. Yet at times marketing can be a grey area and often confusing to the consumer. For instance, I was informed that the publisher's intention was to market Ray's *Julie and Romeo* as Women's Fiction, yet when I first found a copy of the book it was displayed as 'new romance fiction' at an American library in the US State of New Mexico. Further to this, I purchased my copy of the

novel at Borders, where it was shelved as romance. This brings me to an important point. The cover of *Julie and Romeo* is presented as a photo of a florist shopfront, which is not the stereotypical clinch cover many have in mind when they think of romance. Women's Fiction covers tend to be rather bland, showing pots of flowers on a front porch or an empty chair on a front porch. However, contemporary romance fiction covers encompass such a broad spectrum of looks, from benign, as with the shop front on *Julie and Romeo*, the lipstick-stained coffee cup on my copy of *Fast Women* (there are several different covers for *Fast Women*), the empty table and chairs on Robyn Carr's *Virgin River*, to covers more suggestive of a stereotypical clinch, such as the couple on the front of Julie James' *A Lot Like Love*, as well as the bare-chested hero on *Ride with Me* by Ruthie Knox. The publisher may decide a book will be published as Women's Fiction, but in terms of marketing to a target audience, perhaps more, or at least some, attention should be paid to the author's intent.

How valid is author intent? What happens when an author sets out to write romance with a specific romance character and romance reader in mind as I did, or if their story was intended to be Women's Fiction and it was marketed instead as romance? There is, at times, a marketing grey area—Diana Gabaldon and her *Outlander* series, for example. Gabaldon is on record as saying she never intended her books to be romance or Women's Fiction, whereas a substantial fan base considers her work to be historical Time Travel *romance* (which is yet one more subgenre of romance fiction). With this in mind, I am aware how the industry functions. I understand the marketing choice is set forth by where the publisher considers the book will be most lucrative, but ultimately the readers will decide where the book sits, regardless of the cover or space where the book is shelved.

Despite the definition of Women's Fiction, marketing, and author intent, my novel, *Fast Women* and *Black Rose* may be perceived by some as a hybrid of styles, utilising elements of humour and crime fiction, and may also, for some, qualify in part as Women's Fiction. However, my novel was always conceived of as romance fiction in which an older woman finds love and happiness. The heroine's middle age and life experience may, in some quarters, mark her as candidate for Women's Fiction, yet my work has been marketed as romance and is perceived as romance by readers.

### 6.3. Coming of age and the ‘ten year rule’

As a romance novel featuring an ageing female romance protagonist who contravenes the norm, my work is perceived as a ‘sales risk’, my work tests whether there is a deeply entrenched limit for the genre, a threshold that women of age are unable to cross. As with the publication of my novels and the examples of Crusie, Ray and Roberts, this study proposes this threshold is being challenged and reveals mature readers have an interest in reading romance with older heroines. I have now had two publications featuring older women as central characters, and as I complete this PhD my third novel, *Driving in Neutral* has been contracted. While I was eventually successful in being published with my first novel, *A Basic Renovation*, my journey to publication for that novel to not be perceived as a ‘sales risk,’ took me nearly eight years. Kellog (2006) indicates that a “ten year rule of expert skill acquisition applies to writers and...underestimates the number of years of deliberate practice required to reach professional level of achievement” (p. 399). It is entirely possible I merely needed to ‘hone my craft’ to gain true expertise as a romance writer. However, as mentioned, publishers and agents specified that they were unsure of how to market my work, since it was not ‘Women’s Fiction’ and the heroine moved beyond the boundaries of age typically found in romance. Nevertheless during the three years in which I undertook this study *A Basic Renovation* hit the e-bookshelves in February of 2013. I am of the opinion that had *A Basic Renovation* not been published, I might still be attempting to ‘get my foot in the door’ with *For Your Eyes Only*. Yet the publication of one book meant my ‘foot was in the door’ because when I completed *For Your Eyes Only* and pitched it to Escape, I was permitted to bypass the usual submission route and send in the entire manuscript rather than the first three chapters and a synopsis. I was offered a contract in April 2013 and published in September of 2013. My foot may be in the door, but how have readers responded?

I am aware of my readership. They have expressed their opinion. I include reviews for my first novel along with the reviews of *For Your Eyes Only* as both novels were published within seven months of each other and the comments are significant. In the Dear Author, Amazon, Harlequin Junkie, Read React Review, Goodreads, and My Written Romance reviews for my both publications, *A Basic Renovation* and *For Your Eyes Only*, the reviews and subsequent comments indicate readers are happy to see older romance heroines and are ready for more:

Jayne (Dear Author Reviewer) 12 August 2013

Usually "older" means mid 30s, or 40 at the latest so it was a blast to actually have a couple in what I feel is the prime of life – ahem – who finally find The One...I hope your book is only the beginning of ones that feature characters in their middle age finding love. And not as the secondary or "aw, aren't they cute?" tertiary back ups to the younger main couple.

JoJo (comment) 12 September 2013

I really enjoyed this book. It was refreshing to read about a mature couple! Seems like the market is saturated with YA/NA books. Secondary characters are charming and I'm looking forward to the next book.

<http://dearauthor.com/book-reviews/overall-b-reviews/b-reviews/review-a-basic-renovation-by-sandra-antonelli/>

Jayne (Dear Author Reviewer): 13 September 2013

As with "Renovation," I am delighted with the ages of these main characters... They are me and I love reading about them as the hero and heroine and not as cute oldsters.

Cate (comment): 16 September 2013

Just finished this after reading your review. I loved it, it's pacy, and the dialogue is sharp and witty. It's also nice to see an older H&H.

Amy (comment) 21 September 2013

I am happy to find a H/H around my age in a good romance (not "women's fiction").

Virginia (comment): 26 September 2013

I was pleased to find that this book is smart, witty, and fun romance, not women's fiction.

Jessica (Amazon) 21 September 2013

The writer Antonelli reminds me of more than any other is Jennifer Crusie.

Danielle (Amazon) 4 September 2013

I am so heartened by the fact that Sandra is choosing write her romantic leads in this series as people who are out of the Clearasil stage, have life experience and the wear and tear that goes along with it. 40 is the new 20

Marian (Amazon) 5 September 2013 I could relate to the characters in the story -- I loved how they were "mature" but still have insecurities and emotions that range from "grown up" to slightly "less" grown up.

[http://www.amazon.com/review/R2OULDRP73N7V4/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00EAEDY6E&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=133140011&store=digital-text](http://www.amazon.com/review/R2OULDRP73N7V4/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00EAEDY6E&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=133140011&store=digital-text)

For Your Eyes Only is a good mature romance with suspense thrown in. If you loved the author's previous work, A Basic Renovation then this one is for your eyes.

<http://harlequinjunkie.com/review-for-your-eyes-only-by-sandra-antonelli/>



Thanks to intelligent writing, deft plotting, and fully realized protagonists, I really enjoyed this mature-yet-zany romance.

<http://readreactreview.com/2013/10/15/reviewing-for-your-eyes-only-at-radish-reviews/>

Willa and John bring baggage into their relationship because they're older people who've lived busy lives. This baggage is an aspect I enjoyed in the story development because there's a realism to it.

<https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/13885240-cate-ellink>

As I skate down the slope towards the latter half of my thirties, I'm finding it quite awesome to read romances where the hero and heroine are older and hold more life experience. What I particularly enjoy is when the author portrays these people as they are – regular people with needs and desires who just happen to have less of their original hair colour among the greys

<http://mywrittenromance.com/2013/11/21/review-for-your-eyes-only-by-sandra-antonelli/>

These reviews and comments are evidence that representations of the experience of love, or falling in love, are not a one-time event in youth for some romance readers who are interested in the authenticity of the romance text reflecting their own lives. I admit that the comparison to Jennifer Crusie made me a little uncomfortable. Being compared to an author so well known in romance fiction presents a hazard for readers who approach *For Your Eyes Only* with an expectation for Crusie-esque writing and wind up disappointed by something they see as *not* Crusie. Again, reading is subjective. As an example of the subjectivity, I offer the one negative review I have received thus far:

Moi: 27 September 2013

I bought this book based on the glowing reviews and because it featured a mature h/h. We're told the 40 something heroine, Willa, is super intelligent, super capable and super awesome all around...

It failed. This book was a waste of time.

[http://www.amazon.com/For-Your-Eyes-Only-ebook/dp/B00EAEDY6E/ref=pd\\_sim\\_kstore\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/For-Your-Eyes-Only-ebook/dp/B00EAEDY6E/ref=pd_sim_kstore_1)

Despite my challenge to the stable conventions of romance fiction and the publication of my work, do I rate my success by the fact I was published (under the pen name Sandra Antonelli), by how well I am received both critically and by an avid reading community, or a combination of all these things? The romance publishing industry would undoubtedly measure my success by how well my books sell and the profit it produces for them. I am rather pragmatic about publishing. I do not expect to make millions or be a bestseller, and frankly, I admit the critical success means more to me than the financial gain.

Structuring my exegesis by combining textual analysis, a case study examination, an analysis of cultural perceptions of older women, and my own creative work through creative, practice-led approach allows for closer, more reflective and critical examination of my own current and previous practice, as well as the contemporary practice of other romance authors. This thesis has identified a set of stable, normative tropes and assumptions in both romance fiction and the industry. My work challenges some of these assumptions and tropes, but also recognises that the primary goal of the romance publisher (or any publisher) is to generate a return. Kroll (2004) proposes that a student writing an exegesis must be both critic and examiner of their own work, as well as an expert in reading the cultural and theoretical medium in which their work exists. The process of integrating a critical examination of a creative work, in this case a romance novel, with recognised research methods can be daunting, but finding a way to make a contribution to knowledge can be even more imposing. Theory and practice are distinct from one another and the reflective nature of an exegesis demands a structure unlike a traditional thesis, where theory, argument, and analysis drive the study rather than allowing creativity to lead. Creative or practice-led methods offer a solution as research of this kind can be strengthened in a base that is recognisable in the academic community.

## Conclusion

This creative practice-lead thesis engaged creatively and critically with the representations of age and women in contemporary romance novels through the writing of a romance novel featuring an older romance heroine. I investigated, from a position as a romance writer, several aspects of the romance industry that establish that the romance publishing industry is profit-driven and market driven. I examined the cultural field in which representations of women and age are situated within publishing, romance writing guidelines, online romance reader sites as well. The exegesis and novel challenge a prevailing, highly stable set of tropes that exist in romance fiction and in the romance publishing industry by addressing why roles for older women in romance novels are more likely to be as secondary characters such as grandmothers, evil stepmothers or comic busybodies, rather than as romance heroines. The study points out emerging evidence of an older age reading demographic for romance texts. This demographic is increasingly demanding romances featuring older women. There are also romance authors who seek to shift the parameters of the central love story so that it is more inclusive of older women. Both of these aspects reveal that the romance genre is being called on to be more ‘true to life’ in its inclusion and portrayal of women across all age demographics, while still retaining its fantasy and escapist inflections.

The review of the literature examined existing studies and suggested that there is little investigation into the tacit bias in romance fiction that typically consigns women over the age of 40 to roles other than romantic lead. The thesis demonstrated the tenaciousness of this template through an examination of the romance industry and romance writing guidelines. It also argued that while romance might be seen largely to be escapist and fantasy driven, it has a readership that is constantly demanding that the genre speaks to the ‘real.’ My response to this demand coupled with my desire to write a novel featuring an older romance heroine, resulted in this creative practice-led thesis—the novel *For Your Eyes Only* and the accompanying exegesis.

The conferences I attended, the romance novels I read, the interviews I conducted have allowed me to show this age bias as real within the publishing industry, and to attempt to identify reasons for its existence. The fact remains more often than not, as in film, older women in romance fiction are cast in conventional stereotypical modes that often devalue them, suggest they have outlived their usefulness, beauty and desirability, or views them as subhuman. Sexuality and sexual desire for a woman of a

certain age are seen as inappropriate perhaps because having a sex life and falling in love do not fit neatly into the archetype of a 'respectable' older woman. Dominant views of femininity, with their emphasis on youth and attractiveness continue to assert their influence both in the real world and in the world of symbolic representation. However, mature-aged female readers of romance fiction value symbolic representation, which supports the theory that some form of identification or connection to the heroine takes place. The investigation and inclusion of opinion and discussion of reader polls from websites devoted to romance fiction make it plain older romance readers are interested in reading novels that feature mature-aged heroines. The polls and comments on websites such as *Smartbitchestrashybooks.com*, *All About Romance*, and others acknowledge these readers know aging is part of life, and look to romance to find a recognisable truth within the fantasy, and in recognising the validity of their own lives as Crusie suggested.

As a practice-led endeavour, this exegesis is an analysis my own work in terms of how it reflects social context and current conventions found in romance novels. In linking my writing practice with existing texts, I have identified how my writing is similar to and how it departs from the usual conventions found within the genre. To underpin the concerns of the exegesis, *For Your Eyes Only* aimed to challenge the representations of age so often found in romance novels. Willa, the heroine of *For Your Eyes Only*, is an outlier similar to Crusie's Nell, Ray's Julie, and Robert's Roz. Widowed and middle-aged, Willa is older than the twenty to early thirties norm. She has white hair; however, she is not an evil stepmother, mystical crone, or a doting grandma. She meets a man, runs into conflict, and reaches her happily-ever-after, despite her age. While it contests the stable conventions of the genre, the novel fits within the framework readers expect to find in romance, particularly in terms of love and emotional attachment. By including analysis of novels such as *Fast Women* and *Julie and Romeo*, and other successful novels that lie outside the age norm for romance heroines, I examined the foundations of certain characterisations to ascertain if they are rooted in traditional gender roles or if they are stereotypes perpetuated by fears of growing older. This study drew on relevant theories from a range of disciplinary fields to investigate fictional representations of age and the impact modern perceptions and current influences in modern culture have on romance fiction. By employing these varied resources, the exegesis addressed the viability of writing about older romance heroines and how this impacts on the genre itself and specifically the writer. I found

that while the life experience of the older woman necessarily feeds into her conceptualisation and the relationships she forms, these aspects are not incompatible with the heart of the romance and that is the love story, the obstacles to it and the happy ending. The thesis also identified a readership for romance fiction with mature-aged protagonists: that is, romance where the heroine *and* hero are older. These comments and response to my work and that of other writers such as Crusie, indicate that Women's Fiction *is not* the only acceptable fictional place for a woman of a certain age.

Trends in the genre come (hello, New Adult romance) and go (farewell vampires?), yet the stable normative tropes of romance remain in place. As Cawelti (1969) noted, conventions are the hallmarks of the genre, but the innovation is the key to the way the genre fiction adapts within the stability of the prevailing structure. Folwer (2012) discusses how the celluloid version of Ian Fleming's James Bond had become locked into a rigid formula that had turned cartoonish. The Bond movies had become plot driven, with the same structure. Folwer suggested that the Daniel Craig film 'reboot' of the much-loved hero broke out of the repeated plot mould that let the character be "a real adult, craggy, exhausted, creased, scarred, and older...a believable hero" (<http://www.christopherfowler.co.uk/blog/2012/11/22/how-skyfall-saved-bond/>). This re-established the idea that story and the character drive the narrative, rather than the *formula* James Bond had become. The fantasy hallmarks of James Bond remain, with the villains and chases, and fights, but within the fantasy the character's emotions and relationships have become arguably more genuine, believable. I mention Bond because he is familiar as a film and literary creation, a fantasy creation, and also because romance fiction can be seen as being locked into a similar, repetitive formula with regard to women and ageing. Like the Bond stories, the romance fantasy captures the reader's imagination, but as with the well-known spy series, when something about that fantasy becomes fixed the fantasy can turn formulaic, and then the plot drives the narrative rather than the character. Imagination ceases to be important and innovation is lost. The fantasy itself ceases to be a fantasy by becoming a formula—where everything has the same structure. Plug A into B and so forth. Expectations, certain hallmarks, like the happily ever after/for now, the love story, the emotionality of the leads, are one thing and there are million ways to tell that tale, but boxing characters into certain parameters, such as an age range, means their narrative remains fixed. Stacey and Pearce (1995) suggest the ongoing success of romance depends on its ability to adapt. By allowing heroines to have the baggage that comes with ageing, the 'real adult stuff',

within the expected romance hallmarks of the romance fantasy, leads to a more believable heroine—her character, rather than the plot, drives the story. Imagination comes back into play. Writing *For Your Eyes Only* has been my means to, as Bly (2012) proposes, “reformulate the formula” (p. 69).

Representing older women in romance fiction creates a more democratic and inclusive cultural space for age and might indeed lead to a less vilifying appraisal of mature-aged women in all forms of media. Jermyn (2012) submits that the Hollywood romcom offers “subjectivity, visibility and the sense of future to these older women” (p. 48). It is possible the fictional romcom may afford older women the same sense of future. If publishing houses continue to find the idea of older romance heroines difficult to navigate, despite the potential appeal of the romcom, I offer a solution. Since the literary world is seemingly ruled by a need to classify where a novel fits for marketing purposes or audience expectations, Barletta (2008) proposes a new romance subgenre called Mid-Rom, Mat-Rom, or even Mid-Adult (as coined by *Romance Novels for Feminists* <http://romancenovelsforfeminists.blogspot.ca/2013/08/mid-adult-romance.html>), which could cater to the older female romance reader. Perhaps the simple re-classification as a new subgenre would alter the premise that older women belong solely in Women’s Fiction and make romance accessible and more appealing in mainstream fiction and culture. Perhaps this is wishful thinking, but I must emphasise the complex point about age and this particular creative writing processes: *romance fiction is shaped by forces of culture, opinions, social behaviours, and creative practices*, and in this case, by a whole body of creative practice.

While ‘challenged individuals’ come in all forms, special demographics confront what romance often wrestles with or fails to address. It appears there is a threshold romance cannot often cross and several questions arise from this. How real is too real in the fantasy of romance? Do special demographics or niche markets reveal the limit of the romance genre? Is a special demographic one that includes mature-aged heroines or any other perceived ‘disability’, the “sales risk” Cuthbert mentioned? Does the sales risk automatically prohibit non-traditional lead characters from straying too far from ‘whole’ and young? Has romance reached a point that necessitates a separate genre when age or any other incarnation of a non-traditional demographic challenges the norm of the romance fantasy? The answer to these questions is *perhaps*. I say *perhaps* because the fact is the romance genre has historically transformed itself and become more inclusive of the roles and representations of women with each

decade. Romance authors have touted the diversity of a genre that has challenged and expanded socially acceptable roles for women, a genre that asserts it has something for all tastes. The acceptance of *For Your Eyes Only* for publication and Cuthbert's comment to me that the novel was "engaging, realistic..." and a "fresh look at the second chance at love romance" (personal communication, April 9, 2013) indicates there is openness for e-book formats to take on the potential sales risk of a non-traditional romance heroine if the writing is good. My "engaging" work pushes against the boundary. As a romance reader and romance author, my aim is to continue to challenge and expand the genre, to break the "vicious circle" of non-submission of mature-aged romance novels—which Sogah suggests as a potential root to the absence of these stories—and offer a broader scope of real people, real women, who are given an opportunity to participate in the fantasy of falling in love—something that is not bound by any one age.

Proctor argues that, "The public's perception of our industry comes from the titles, the covers, the prose, the way we promote ourselves, the things we write about and the way we write about them" (p. 19). My examination of my creative work, *For Your Eyes Only*, and that of other the romance writers reveals that the challenge of writing mature-aged romance heroines has been shaped by the practitioners of romance writing and romance publishing houses. My desire to challenge and cross the threshold of being a "sales risk" arises significantly out of my practice as a creative writer of romance fiction, out of my intention to create stereotype-defying female characters. Analysis of *For Your Eyes Only* indicates the novel follows the dominant topological features of romance fiction and includes elements of crime, mystery, and humour within that expected structure: the love story is still central. There is a readership for romances with mature heroines, and an indication that an older heroine has a place in romance fiction rather than a residence in Women's Fiction. At stake here is the accessibility of roles a female protagonist may take on or how she may behave in ways not normally considered traditional, representative, or appropriate for her age within the expected conventions of romance fiction. I assert that my work, and the small number of other romance novels that feature older heroines, subverts and disrupts the norms and assumptions that exists within romance fiction and within the industry. The analysis of existing texts, as well as my own work, establishes that this subversiveness, this disruptive intervention challenges the stable, normative tropes, the 'formulaic' representations of romance heroines, as well as the standards of femininity, that is, the

ideas of beauty, the notions of sexuality, and what is culturally (and symbolically) 'acceptable' for older females who want the whole pie, not just a slice.



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## Appendix A

### All About Romance Book List 2013: Contemporary romance Older Couples

#### Forty-Something

- A Basic Renovation* (2013) by Sandra Antonelli  
*Out of Control* (2002) by Suzanne Brockmann (secondary romance)  
*Breaking Point* (2005) by Suzanne Brockmann (secondary romance)  
*Hot Dish* (2006) by Connie Brockway  
*For Auld Lang Syne* (1991) by Pamela Browning  
*Eve's Wedding Knight* (1999) by Kathleen Creighton  
*I'm Your Man* (2007) by Susan Crosby  
*Anyone But You* (1996) by Jennifer Crusie  
*Fast Women* (2001) by Jennifer Crusie  
*Full Bloom* (1994) by Stacey Dennis  
*There Is a Season* (1999) by Margot Early  
*Comfort and Joy in Santa's Little Helpers* (1995) by Patricia Gardner Evans  
*Luring Lucy in Hot and Bothered* (2001) by Lori Foster  
*Fall from Grace* (2007) by Kristi Gold  
*The Star King* (2000) by Susan Grant  
*Hot Wheels and High Heels* (2007) by Jane Graves  
*Contracted: Corporate Wife* (2005) by Jessica Hart  
*Marriage Reunited* (2006) by Jessica Hart  
*Love for the Matron* (1962) by Elizabeth Houghton  
*Only Yesterday* (1989) by Syrell Rogovin Leahy  
*Cold Tea on a Hot Day* (2001) by Curtiss Ann Matlock  
*Love in a Small Town* (1997) by Curtiss Ann Matlock  
*Stitch in Snow* (1984) by Anne McCaffrey  
*Suburban Renewal* (2004) by Pamela Morsi  
*The Fourth Wall* (1979) by Barbara Paul  
*Down in New Orleans* (1996) by Heather Graham Pozzessere  
*Black Rose* (2005) by Nora Roberts  
*A Piece of Heaven* (2003) by Barbara Samuel  
*Count on Me* (2001) by Kathryn Shay  
*Promises to Keep* (2002) by Kathryn Shay

*Sweet Hush* (2003) by Deborah Smith  
*Bygones* (1992) by LaVyrle Spencer  
*The Hellion* (1989) by LaVyrle Spencer  
*Home Song* (1995) by LaVyrle Spencer  
*Nerd in Shining Armor* (2003) by Vicki Lewis Thompson (secondary romance)  
*One Fine Day* (1994) by Theresa Weir  
*Snowfall at Willow Creek* (2010) by Susan Wiggs

#### Fifty-Something

*The Long Way Home* (2010) by Jean Brashear  
*A New Lu* (2005) by Laura Castoro  
*Bachelor's Puzzle* (1992) by Ginger Chambers  
*French Twist* (1998) by Margot Dalton  
*Remember Love* (1992) by Stacey Dennis  
*Return to Love* (1993) by Martha Gross  
*Hot Blood* (1996) by Charlotte Lamb  
*Heaven, Texas* (1995) by Susan Elizabeth Phillips (secondary romance)  
*This Heart of Mine* (2001) by Susan Elizabeth Phillips (secondary romance)  
*Natural Born Charmer* (2007) By Susan Elizabeth Phillips (secondary romance)  
*Familiar Stranger* (2001) by Sharon Sala  
*The Best Medicine* (1993) by Janet Lane Walters  
*Tomorrow's Promise* (1992) by Clara Wimberly  
*The Vow* (2008) by Rebecca Winters

#### Sixty-Something

*Julie and Romeo* (2000) by Jeanne Ray  
*Eleanor and Abel* (2003) by Annette Sanford  
*Trust Me on This* (1997) by Jennifer Crusie (secondary romance)

## Appendix B

### Plus-size Heroines

This list is divided into two sections: *Curvy* and *Big & Tall*. Both categories present larger than average-sized women.

#### *Curvy:*

##### Medieval Romances

*The Bride and the Beast* (2000) by Teresa Medeiros

*The Perfect Wife* (2005) by Lynsay Sands

*Taming the Wolf* (1995) by Deborah Simmons

*Lord of Danger* (1997) by Anne Stuart

##### Regency Romances

*The Obedient Bride* (1989) by Mary Balogh

*The Sugar Rose* (1987) by Susan Carroll

*A Gypsy at Almack's* (1994) by Chloe Cheshire

*A Civil Contract* (1961) by Georgette Heyer

*The Duke's Dilemma* (1996) by Nadine Miller

*Lady Delafont's Dilemma* (2000) by Donna Simpson

##### European Historical Romances

*The Pretender* (2003) by Celeste Bradley

*Highland Ecstasy* (1993) by Mary Burkhardt

*The Accidental Bride* (1999) by Jane Feather

*The Seduction* (1997) by Laura Lee Guhrke

*Pleasure for Pleasure* (2006) by Eloisa James

*A Dangerous Love* (2000) by Sabrina Jeffries

*Seize the Fire* (1989) by Laura Kinsale

*Suddenly You* (2001) by Lisa Kleypas

*Romancing Mr. Bridgerton* (2002) by Julia Quinn

*Perfect Stranger* (1996) by Rebecca Sinclair

*No Regrets* (2007) by Michele Ann Young

American Historical/Frontier Romances

*River's Dream* (1991) by Virginia Lynn

*Runaway Hearts* (2001) by Katie Rose

Contemporary Romances

*Sweet Nothings* (2002) by Catherine Anderson

*Taylor's Temptation* (2001) by Suzanne Brockmann

*Just Desserts* (1984) by Dixie Browning

*More to Love* (2001) by Dixie Browning

*Size 12 Is Not Fat* (2006) by Meg Cabot

*His Seductive Revenge* (1998) by Susan Crosby

*Bet Me* (2004) by Jennifer Crusie

*A Whole Lot of Love* (2000) by Justine Davis

*He Loves Lucy* (2005) by Susan Donovan

*Take a Chance on Me* (2003) by Susan Donovan

*Bridget Jones's Diary* (1998) by Helen Fielding

*The Bridesmaid's Reward* (2003) by Liz Fielding

*Beguiled* (1999) by Lori Foster

*Caught in the Act* (2001) by Lori Foster

*Mr. November* (2001) by Lori Foster

*Treat Her Right* (2001) by Lori Foster

*Wanton* (1999) by Lori Foster

*Tall Tales and Wedding Veils* (2008) by Jane Graves

*Jemima J* (2000) by Jane Green

*Runaway Bay* (2002) by Lisa Hendrix

*Tall, Dark, and Cajun* (2003) by Sandra Hill

*A Whole Lot of Woman* (1985) by Anna Hudson

*The Millionaire Bachelor* (1999) by Susan Mallery

*The Wedding Ring Promise* (1998) by Susan Mallery

*The Real Deal* (2004) by Lucy Monroe

*Too Perfect* (2005) by Julie Ortolon

*Cabin Fever* (2003) by Marilyn Pappano

*Kiss or Keep* (1999) by Debra Phillips

*Slim Chance* (2003) by Jackie Rose

*Museum Piece* (1984) by Anne Stuart

*Whirlwind Courtship* (1980) by Jayne Taylor (Jayne Ann Krentz)

*What a Man's Gotta Do* (2003) by Karen Templeton

*Good in Bed* (2001) by Jennifer Weiner

*Beautiful Stranger* (2000) by Ruth Wind

#### Alternate Reality

*The Changeling Bride* (1999) by Lisa Cach

*Legend* (1996) by Jude Deveraux

*Wishes* (1989) by Jude Deveraux

*The Star Princess* (2003) by Susan Grant

*Son of the Morning* (1997) by Linda Howard

*Night Play* (2004) by Sherrilyn Kenyon

#### *Big & Tall Heroines*

#### Medieval Romances

*Earth Song* (1990) by Catherine Coulter

*Outrageous* (2001) by Christina Dodd

*The Protector* (2001) by Madeline Hunter

#### Regency Romances

*The Famous Heroine* (1996) by Mary Balogh

*Miss Carlyle's Curricle* (1999) by Karen Harbaugh

*The Grand Sophy* (1950) by Georgette Heyer

*The Toll Gate* (1954) by Georgette Heyer

#### European Historical Romances

*A Summer to Remember* (2002) by Mary Balogh

*The Courtship* (2000) by Catherine Coulter

*That Scandalous Evening* (1998) by Christina Dodd

*The Proposition* (1999) by Judith Ivory

*The Heroine's Sister* (1975) by Frances Murray

*The Rake* (1998) by Mary Jo Putney



*On a Long-ago Night* (2000) by Susan Sizemore

*For the First Time* (2003) by Kathryn Smith

American Historical/Frontier Romances

*Bitterleaf* (1983) by Candace Camp

*Traitorous Hearts* (1994) by Susan Kay Law

*I Do, I Do, I Do* (2000) by Maggie Osborne

*Land of Dreams* (1995) by Cheryl St. John

*Beckett's Birthright* (2002) by Bronwyn Williams

Contemporary Romances

*Looking for Laura* (2001) by Judith Arnold

*Taylor's Temptation* (2001) by Suzanne Brockmann

*Red Roses Mean Love* (1999) by Jacquie D'Alessandro

*Taken!* (1998) by Lori Foster

*Lola Carlyle Reveals All* (2002) by Rachel Gibson

*The Trouble with Valentine's Day* (2005) by Rachel Gibson

*Princess Charming* (1997) by Jane Heller

*Just One of the Guys* (2008) by Kristan Higgins

*Carried Away* (2002) by Donna Kauffman

*Love Song for a Raven* (1987) by Elizabeth Lowell

*The Dancing Floor* (1998) by Barbara Michaels

*A Match for Sister Maggy* (2002) by Betty Neels

*The High Price for a Good Man* (2003) by Debra Phillips

*Walking after Midnight* (1995) by Karen Robards

Alternate Reality

*A Girl's Guide to Vampires* (2003) by Katie MacAllister