

What romance novels say about society: A Valentine's Day Q & A

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Book with rose. Credit: Miguel Ugalde, sxc.hu

University of Toronto anthropologist Ivan Kalmar doesn't research romance novels himself, but he is interested in the relationship between theory and everyday life, and encourages his students to turn a critical eye on the aspects of everyday life they might take for granted. In honor of Valentine's Day, we spoke to him about romance novels.

You teach a course that includes a unit on romance novels. Can you tell us about it?

It's called Social Theory through Everyday Life. We look at how we live our lives and then we run it through the lens of social theory. We live our lives partly in romantic relationships — or we'd like to — so romance novels is one of our topics. I ask the students to read romance novels and

bring them to class.

How do romance novels relate to social theory or everyday life?

We look at this in the context of discussing the relationship between representation and real life. There is a naive idea that the media make us think in certain ways — in this case that the books make us think in certain ways. I like to look instead at how there's a [relationship](#) between how we live our lives on one hand and on the other hand how we fantasize or imagine things, and how we consume the fantasies that are produced commercially, in this case through books.

We call this transferability of discourse. You transfer the way life is in the romance novel to real life, and vice-versa.

To give you an example, the themes in romance novels are quite enduring. There is the “Beauty and the Beast” idea — a woman meets a man who's not attractive at first but eventually turns out to be very attractive. Or the “Pride and Prejudice” idea, where a woman who is not socially-privileged meets a very highly-situated man and they end up marrying each other after a lot of difficulty.

There used to be another theme that you only rarely see now. A lot of romance novels used to be about very poor women — sometimes they were driven to prostitution, like in Alexander Dumas's *Lady of the Camellias*. This was an oft-repeated theme in operas and, later, movies. A well-situated man falls in love with a prostitute and things work out and they get married. There was a recent movie, *Maid in Manhattan*, that had this theme. But in general it's not a major theme anymore. Fortunately, prostitution is not nearly as prevalent today as it was a century ago or so. So this kind of story does not really happen in real

life, nor do we care really to make sure that it happens.

The other two themes — beauty and the beast or social betterment — these actually happen, or we would like them to. Our concerns, what we would like to happen, our fantasies, this is what is found in most romance novels.

So these narratives influence our lives but also at the same time, we influence the themes of romance novels and romantic movies?

Yes. Consider that there is a social class element in romance. We can see that in Jane Eyre, even in Beauty and the Beast. Beauty and the Beast goes back to the 18th century. In these stories the woman is not as wealthy or as socially-privileged as the man. The romance novel really started in the 18th century when it began to be possible for middle class women to aspire to upper class status through marriage. Before that there were no romance novels because social mobility was difficult.

Even in our own day we have students chatting about marriage or relationships in terms of bettering your status, although people don't articulate it so openly any more.

I ask students to bring books to class. They fall into two categories. Usually the man is more powerful and wealthier than the woman — this is still the norm in these books. Sometimes it's the other way around and the woman is more powerful and wealthier than the man — but when we read those novels we can tell that they were written that way on purpose to make a feminist statement.

Romance has something to do with money and social status. That's why you can't go out on Valentine's Day to Tim Hortons. You have to spend

money to be romantic. As long as that is the case, we will see the social betterment kind of plot in movies and in books. If that changed, if we suddenly didn't have a class-based society and if people didn't think that they could better themselves through marriage, then I think this would no longer be a story in books and in movies.

But it also seems true that part of the reason we don't go to Tim Horton's on Valentine's Day is that we are accustomed to certain ideas about what romance is based on the media we consume.

Yes. It works both ways. Social class does matter to how we live. And dating is part of your social career. When you make decisions about romance and marriage you would like to think that social status is irrelevant, but for most people it's not irrelevant. It's just part of how we live.

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