

Romance Readers: Bridging the Gap Between Readers and Scholars  
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I'd like to thank Sybille for challenging us to look beyond the academy at the potential general impact of our work and at how we might share this knowledge. Her questions stimulate me to think about the history of what we have accomplished in IGEL and to consider an agenda for the future. In my opinion, IGEL has been a very dynamic organization, growing over the years and incorporating new people and new ideas. In 2000 a subsection, *Literature and Life* was created. This group incorporated many who were interested in reader response but extended the purview to consider reading activity in a broader context. For example, how gender and ethnicity affect reading, the habits of reading over a lifetime, how certain books affect national consciousness. Today I would like to propose two agenda items for the future and some very practical suggestions for working with other groups. First, I would like to look at broad based reading processes, styles of reading fiction that have been attributed to women and the role that this type of reading plays in one's life. Secondly, I would like to raise questions about our relationship with the readers we interview and how we might come to gain their trust and come to understand their lives, particularly in the context of the hiatus between academic reading and popular reading.

In the US two books that shed some light on my first point have currently achieved great popularity. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a memoir, and *The Jane Austen Book Club*, a fictional account, both describe women reading, reacting to and discussing fiction. In both cases, they show the intertwining of literature and life, by linking the novels read with the lives of the women. They show how the readers understand the novels in the context of their lives and conversely how the novels provide material for understanding their lives. Both deal with a way of reading that is passionate and intensely personal. Although the reading in *Reading Lolita* is far more scholarly, both books show readers using literature to understand changing political and personal worlds. Discussions move between the literary and personal worlds in a seamless way. Readers combine intense involvement with realistic assessment. This type of passionate and intense reading has been called "reading like a woman", which is something I will be discussing. Both books have become very popular with women's book groups who enjoy reading about women reading.

### **Recreational and Scholarly Reading**

"Reading like a woman" crosses genre boundaries. While the books mentioned above deal with reading what would be considered "highbrow" literature, this style of personal, passionate and realistic reading has also been found to be characteristic of readers of genre fiction. Moving away from linguistic or content analyses of genre fiction, many scholars are focusing increasingly on reading as experienced by regular readers. While the reading of genre literature: romance novels, mysteries, true confession magazines has been disparaged as passive, these scholars now consider the reading to be active and useful as well as passionate. This reading is viewed as not just a leisure activity but as a form of agency, of learning about the world and developing strategies for dealing with it. Much of the reading of genre literature is being reinterpreted in this light.

Contrary to being viewed as deleterious and passive because of the content and structure, today's scholars understand how pleasurable reading, whether it be genre or more highbrow, has extended women's knowledge of the world and connected them to others in ways that helped them to actively expand their lives. Furthermore, readers describe feeling empowered because they feel they can use their expertise about behavior in the interpretation and understanding of the characters in these books. I will be discussing a body of research that deals with women's reading and therefore will not be making any statements about the ways in which men read.

In a recent paper titled "Reading like a woman" Anne Berggren (2004) contrasts professional or academic ways of reading with the personal style that she and her middle class and highly educated interviewees employed. She describes her own lifelong reading style, "A passionate reader, a reader constantly immersed in novels, I've never been able to separate reading from life.....I've reread novels obsessively and longed for sequels to tell me how the characters turned out and what happened next." She further describes her reading practices as "personal, accepting, emotional, addictive". Her ways of reading and those of the women she interviewed, contrasted sharply with the more critical, cognitive approaches to novels that are encouraged in academic settings and which she employed in doctoral study. Sara Mills uses the term "authentic realism" to describe those "who read primarily for pleasure, assess the events and female characters in novels against their own experience and their sense of 'what women are really like'" (Berggren,171) However, like the literature that many women have read, this style of reading has been criticized not only by general critics, but by feminists as well who have worried about the proclivity of women readers to become over-involved emotionally and to be overly impressionable. This personal and intense reading is viewed as a primitive form of reading and it is believed that women must learn to employ more critical styles of reading in which they use more distance and analytical processes. Yet by prescribing the correct way of reading and ignoring what actually takes place, we are missing the experience of many readers.

Not only the professional women who were interviewed by Berggren, but readers of genre literature have indicated they read in this way, combining intense and passionate reading habits with realistic assessment of what they read. In a study of working class readers of *True Confession* magazines, Jane Greer, uses the term "flexible moral realism" to describe the interpretive processes of these readers. At the time that these magazines were highly popular, women were urged to resist reading them as they would be detrimental. However, Greer feels that the combination of focusing on the realistic aspects of the stories and simultaneously reading them with sympathy toward the plight of the characters, laid the groundwork for "some working-class women to resist their isolation and develop a nascent sense of community among themselves. Through common texts and shared reading strategies, working-class women could begin to feel connected to other similarly circumstanced women". (139) Her goal is to reclaim the "reading lives" of working-class women and "initiate a reevaluation of ways of reading that acknowledges the power of identifying with the characters and narrative situations that seem real". While reading is often viewed as a highly private activity, shared texts and common reading strategies can create a sense of community. These magazines provided working class women a sense of connection with other similarly circumstanced women. By helping to generate a common discourse about topics that were previously

not openly discussed (unplanned pregnancies, for example) the confessional magazines offered their readers membership in a broader community. In this reading women created not just an abstract interpretive community, but real face-to-face communities with enough social power to resist the imposition of middle-class standards” on their lives. (156).

Like other forms of popular fiction, both romance novels and their readers have been widely disparaged. Despite the negative social attitudes, romance novels continue to attract huge audiences. In a recent survey of romance readers I found that the readers come from a large social spectrum – from high school graduates to readers with graduate degrees, from homemakers to professionals. While many readers were ashamed to reveal their readership, others were defiant about it stating that they would not be deterred from pursuing their own interests by social pressure. For example one of my respondents said, “I always admit to reading them. I don’t give a hot damn what others think of me. I’m not ashamed of reading them at all. Besides, why should I? It’s nothing to be ashamed about. It’s just a book.” Readers were very clear about the ways in which this reading gave them pleasure with the top reasons being the positive conclusion, the love story and the fact that they are fun. Thirty per cent of our readers noted that they read romance novels on a daily basis.

### **Romance Readers: Idealistic Realism**

I would describe their reading as “idealistic realism”. One of the defining features of romance novels is the happy ending. This is an important part of the experience for many readers. One reader said she viewed them as promising her redemption – confirmation that she would find her ultimate reward. While most readers were more modest in their beliefs, the promise of the happy ending was an attractive feature for them. Many contrasted the problems of the world and their own lives with the ideal world of the romance novel and enjoyed the escape provided by the ideal conclusion.

Despite the often exotic stories, there is a realistic basis to romance novels. They deal with the social issues confronting women of today: divorce, stepfamilies, adoption, sexual harassment balancing career aspirations with a relationship. Readers who responded to my survey wanted heroines with whom they could identify. Not only do they eschew the extraordinary physical beauty associated with heroines of earlier romances in favor of more ordinary looking women, readers specifically noted that they did not like their heroines to be beautiful. What was most salient in their descriptions of ideal heroines was that they be women who can successfully handle life situations. The following quotation, from one of our respondents, typifies what women look for in the heroines: “Intelligent, independent, self-reliant, sense of humor, witty, strong.” The hero is also important and our readers described complex attributes that were important in their heroes. Despite what is generally believed, readers did not look for the hero to rescue the heroine. Instead, they wanted one who was able to understand and be sensitive to them.

With romances premised on a happy ending, there is an idealistic component. The reader knows when she starts the book that whatever twists and turns the plot takes, the outcome will involve the hero and heroine joined happily together. She does not have to read to find this out, she knows beforehand that it will happen. She therefore can concentrate on the way that this is achieved. Since the plots of contemporary romance

novels deal with present-day problems, the reader has the opportunity to imagine a variety of solutions to life's dilemmas. By being presented with the points of view of both heroine and hero, she can use her psychological knowledge to understand and predict the flow of events.

Contrary to the popular image of the deficient reader being lulled into a brief, soporific release from her grim life, the romance reader derives a sense of agency from her reading in a number of ways. For many, the sense of defiance in simply reading romances is positive. They see themselves as adhering to their own interests despite prevailing trends. However, for others, this is not the case and they hide their interest and are embarrassed by it. While many readers value the private space they create while reading romances, for many a sense of community is derived from this reading. They share and discuss books with friends and family. Many find broader connections by joining live and internet book groups, attending conventions etc. It is not uncommon for dedicated readers to seek to become authors and there are local and national groups that exist for these readers. Another way that the books create a sense of agency is they are often written in such a way that the reader is omniscient. She understands events from the points of view of each character and thus has a sense of power in her understanding of events. She can draw on her considerable knowledge of human behavior to react to events.

### **Relationship with Readers**

The second issue that I would like to address and pose as a topic for future IGEL consideration is how we relate with the readers we study. How can we come to know their passions, their values, the meaning of their language, especially in the cases when we represent another world? Academic readings may be very different than those of regular readers. People reading for pleasure do not view texts in the same linguistic ways that scholarly readers do. The social position of readers determines to a large extent what the texts will mean to them. While Radway's (1984/1991) work is significant for paying attention to the readers of romance novels, she has, upon reflection, questioned the accuracy of her interpretations. In her next book, *A feeling for books: The book-of-the-month-club, literary taste, and middle-class desire* she states, referring to the romance readers, "In fact, they [romance readers] structured and controlled our interviews as well and, I suspect, resisted my questions in creative ways. In fact, it occurs to me now that because I was less familiar with their linguistic patterns and habitual ways of talking, I was less able to pick up on the nature of their resistance and their manner of polite acquiescence to my volunteered interpretations." (p. 363). In order to be able to be included in the personal and peer group styles of reading, we are going to have to become part of the group, learn to interpret what readers mean and develop their trust. We are going to have to move out of labs and enter into the worlds that stimulate these readings. Therefore, one item in forming an overarching research agenda for the future of IGEL is to include more emphasis on the ways in which real people actually read and the role that reading plays in people's lives. Work has been done on this, particularly in this literature and life section. However, we could profitably expand this. When we tackle the question of how to share ideas beyond narrow academic borders, we should consider how we can become a part of groups that have different reading agendas. For example, there is a large national group called Romance Writers of America. They exist on very local levels

and then on the national level. They have regular working meetings. As someone interested in the reading of romance, membership in an organization like this would be productive as a way of both sharing ideas but also learning about this world. I want to emphasize the reciprocal relationship in which I might share my insights with them at the same time I am learning about their experiences and gaining their trust.

**Adding on: Thinking across borders**

In closing, I want to present one practical suggestion for sharing our ideas on an institutional basis. We have begun a tradition in the literature and life group of having small focused conferences on the off years. We could continue this policy and extend it by meeting with representatives of other groups dealing with similar issues but from different perspectives: Modern Language Association, feminist groups, the Popular Culture Association etc. We would be both learning and sharing ideas. Given that these bi-annual conferences may not be realistic on a regular basis, we might want to, in our regular conferences, invite symposia of representatives from these groups. In addition, we might try to have certain sessions that are of interest to the public and invite people to attend. For example, book groups are a popular and growing phenomenon in America. As Elizabeth Long showed in her 2000 IGEL paper several years ago, book groups have been an important phenomenon for several centuries. Recently they have garnered much popular appeal with Oprah and the large bookstore conglomerates sponsoring them. While scholarship on this will appeal to academics, it will also have popular appeal. Topics like this might enable us to expand beyond traditional borders.

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