

ROMANCE IS GOOD FOR YOU

HOW BOOKS IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

By Sophie Barnes

IT HAS BEEN SAID time and again by those opposed to romance novels that this entire genre is too removed from reality and that it only serves to create unrealistic expectations for its readers. After all, how can your significant other possibly compete with Mr. Darcy? In my current work-in-progress, my heroine does actually point out that all romance novels end before the drudgery of daily life has a chance to get in the way. But that's kind of the point, isn't it? People who read romance novels read them in order to get away from their household chores, the taxes that have to be paid and other less appealing aspects of their daily routines. I remember coming across a review once where a reader said that she spent enough time dealing with dirty diapers without having to read about them in her romance novels as well. And, as avid reader Reginna Kirkpatrick points out, "I just love to read, to escape. I love kick-butt heroes and heroines. I read to see how two people come together with all their baggage and still get their happily-ever-after."

During the course of writing this article, I reached out to romance readers on Facebook and was truly overwhelmed by the massive response. Deborah A. Thomas was one of the first to tell me about the positive influence romance novels have had on her life. "What I've learned is that sometimes you need to give and take chances," she said. "I also learned how to be kinder to my other half, as well as sharing. But the most important lesson learned was how to communicate more openly and honestly with all and to choose my words more carefully."

Similarly, Mary Beth Hengeli Hofbauer wrote that, "Romance novels and their stories give hope when you just can't find it in yourself."

But as responses continued to arrive in my inbox, it became clear to me that romance novels have served an even greater purpose. They have offered support in the midst of loss and despair — a slice of happiness in the face of pain and tragedy.

One of my ambassadors, Mary, who immigrated to the U.S. with her mother when she was 10 years old, had a good life until her mother decided to remarry. Her stepfather, as it turned out,



I understand the stigma that romance novels inevitably face, but I think most people underrate the power of its positive influence on people. — Mary, reader and reviewer

was an abusive man, and as a result, Mary's high-school years were a combination of stressful academics coupled with a very difficult living situation. Thankfully, Mary's life has improved since then, and she is currently attending an Ivy League university. But what helped her cope was discovering romance novels on her iPod Touch during her senior year. "I joined the reviewing community," she says, "and became friends with book lovers, reviewers and authors, who supported me during my times of need, such as when I felt such despair for living with my dysfunctional and (emotionally and verbally) abusive family that I contemplated suicide. Reading historical romance also brought me great happiness. As I read the trials and tribulations of these characters and their paths to true love, it gave me courage to see the road my story will take. I understand the stigma that romance novels inevitably face, but I think most people underrate the power of their positive influence."

Terry Moskowitz also talks about how warm and welcoming the romance community is. Her love of reading began when she was a child, growing up not only with divorcing parents, but with

a mother who was going blind. “The library became my place to disappear, a place where I could be who I wanted to be, when I wanted,” she said. “The romance community is such a support to me. I have met many authors, gone to signings, joined many street teams and just thrive in the community. There is nothing I can’t tell them.”

When Lisa Schmidt-Ringsby wrote to me about her own experience with romance novels and how they have made their way back into her life after the devastating loss of her mother in 2006, I will admit that I cried. “She [Lisa’s mother] became very ill with a flesh-eating virus. She spent those last remaining weeks of her life in a drug-induced coma,” Lisa wrote. “I had come to be with my dad and siblings by her side. Being a voracious reader and needing some kind of escape from the monitors and the bright lights, I found the Bridgerton family by Julia Quinn resting on my mother’s shelves. I read them

aloud to her and, when I was not with her, to myself. They gave us somewhere else to be, hope for happier times and a final way to connect. I had stopped reading historical romance because I was reading with my children and reading the books they were interested in to help cultivate their love of reading, which is blessedly still alive in all three and spreading to grands. But I had lost track of reading for myself. Through the tragedy of losing my mother, I am now back to historical romance, and I feel that connection with my mom when I read each story. I write my reviews like I am telling her about the story.”

In a world filled with uncertainty, where tragedy can strike at any second, I think these books help us to heal, in the sense that they give our minds something positive to focus on. This certainly holds true for Valerie Bowman, author of *The Irresistible Rogue* (St. Martin’s, ‘15). When her father died in 1984, Valerie was only 9 years old. She recalls how her mother locked herself away in her room for years, severely depressed in the time before Prozac was available. “As a result, I was a lonely kid who spent a lot of time in her own room,” she said. “I read a lot and wrote in my journal a lot, but when I got to be about 12 or 13, I went into my mom’s room and began checking out the walls of historical romance novels. She managed to leave the house every Friday night to go to the Walden Books at the mall and buy romance novels. As a result, my mom’s room was like a bookstore. I think they saved her. I know they saved me.”

As a historical romance writer, Valerie is familiar with the magical experience of visiting grand estates, attending balls and experiencing a lifestyle that can only exist in our imagina-



Any time I was lonely or depressed or unhappy, I simply cracked open the pages of one of my beloved romance novels and was swept away to another time and place. Those novels got me through some very dark days, weeks, years even.

— Valerie Bowman, author of *The Irresistible Rogue*

tions. “Once I found historical romance, I was hooked,” Valerie said. “Any time I was lonely or depressed or unhappy, I simply cracked open the pages of one of my beloved romance novels and was swept away to another time and place. Those novels got me through some very dark days, weeks, years even. Even now, if I’m feeling down, I re-read one of my favorites and it makes everything all better. That is the beauty of a beloved novel and it is also the reason I write. If I can make just one sad reader’s life a bit happier for a few hours, it makes the hours of poring over edits and tearing my hair out over plots entirely worthwhile for me. I write for one person: the person I used to be.”

And since most romance readers and writers do tend to be women, I was pleasantly surprised when Jeffery Martin Botzenhart, author of *Most Impossible* (Luminosity, ‘15) contacted me through my website. When he mentioned that his own bullying experiences had inspired him to write the character Cooper, I couldn’t help but ask about the process. He told me that “writing the part of Cooper was therapeutic. It had been a long time since I thought about that time in my life, and I believe that I was able to approach what happened with a clarity that I didn’t have in the past. After years of hiding myself away because of my bullying experience, writing has given me my voice back.”

“The writings of other romance authors have inspired my creativity and given me a sense of freedom I never really thought I would find,” he added.

Personally, I’d like to say, to those who’ve never read a romance novel before, give it a try — it just might prove to be more than you ever imagined it to be. ✧