

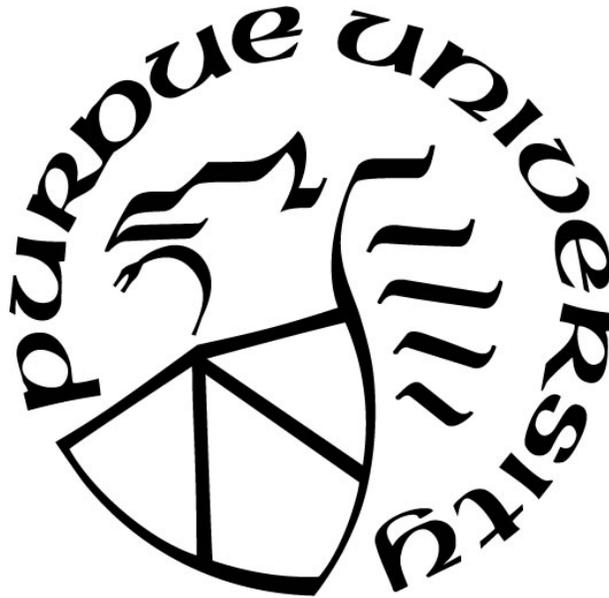
**MODERN LOVE: READING, WRITING, AND PUBLISHING
THE ROMANCE NOVEL**

by
Eileen M. Long

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**THE PURDUE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
STATEMENT OF COMMITTEE APPROVAL**

Dr. Bethany E. Lee, Chair

Department of English

Sarah E. White

Department of English

Dr. Heather V. Fielding

Director, University Honors Program – University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Approved by:

Dr. Jesse S. Cohn

*Dedicated to Craig, Sadie, Bailey, Alex, Meldrick, Fish, Jessie,
Whiskey, Bodhi, Stella, Lola, Ulysses, and Maeve.
They've all been a part of the journey.*

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ABSTRACT

There is no more polarizing literary genre than romance. It is often referred to in academic and literary circles by the disparaging moniker, “Chick Lit.” Nevertheless, the romance genre continues to be one of the most successful in popular literature today, with over 30 million avid readers and sales of \$1.44 billion annually.

This creative thesis is broken down into two parts—essay and completed manuscript. In the essay I take an autoethnographic approach by assessing the genre and how it impacts me as a writer of contemporary romance. First, I address the belief held by many feminists regarding the universal romance plot of “the happily ever after” as being an antifeminist message. I evaluate, as times have changed, romance storylines and how they have transformed to reflect shifting reader demographics that are decidedly pro-feminist, including my own work.

Within the essay I discuss my writing path and focus on the romance genre and acknowledge two authors who have influenced my work—Jennifer Crusie and Jane Austen. Citing samples of their work, I reflect on how both author’s styles have not only informed my writing, but also illustrate their decidedly pro-feminist messaging. Finally, I explore the process to publication, both through traditional and independent publishing, citing the various resources available to authors. I conclude with a tentative timeline to publication for my completed manuscript, a 75,700-word contemporary romance novel entitled “Ghost of a Chance.”

MODERN LOVE: READING, WRITING, AND PUBLISHING THE ROMANCE NOVEL

In the lexicon of the romance genre, Jane Austen stands out as one of its most popular and well-loved authors. Austen's current popularity can be assessed by the number of film adaptations produced, as well as the number of novels written by modern authors that expand on the original storylines of her work, especially *Pride and Prejudice*. The main reason for the novel's popularity lies in Elizabeth Bennet—a character that resonates with modern romance readers. Written in 1797, Austen created a character that seems to have time-traveled, crossing through hundreds of years of societal and political change to encapsulate everything that a modern, romantic, heroine should aspire to: intelligence, humor, and independence. While this essay will discuss modern romance reading, writing, and publishing, the conversation cannot happen without acknowledging Jane Austen and her massive influence on the romance genre.

My love affair with the genre began years before my introduction into the works of Austen. Instead, my initiation to all things romance started with Harlequin Romance. Just mentioning the name Harlequin conjures up visions of book covers filled with muscular men and damsels in distress wearing dresses with plunging period décolletage in a genre universally known as the bodice ripper. While these types of novels are still widely available, there has been a shift in the narrative within romance as a whole, and specifically in contemporary romance which, as a writer, is my chosen sub-genre.

To complete my creative thesis for the master's degree in English, I am presenting my completed 75,700-word contemporary romance novel, "Ghost of a Chance," which is now being submitted to literary agents and publishers for representation. In addition to the finished novel, I submit this essay which will address the shifts in romance storylines, their relationship to feminist

messaging and shifting reader demographics, my own work and the writers who influence me, and the process and research in publishing my finished novel, whether through traditional means or self-publication.

Shifts in Storylines | Breaking Down Stereotypes

The Romance Writers of America broadly defines the romance novel as “a central love story [with] an emotionally satisfying ending.”¹ Within those parameters, readers can find all manner of sub-genres: contemporary, erotic, historical, LGBTQ, BIPOC, AAPI, paranormal, fantasy, inspirational, and suspense. These sub-genres reflect how the romance industry and its readers have changed over time.

As an example of those changes, and for a bit of history, the first Harlequin Romance novel was published in 1949. The title was *The Manatee*, by Nancy Bruff. It was a racist and sexist story with the tag line, “the strange loves of a seaman.” In a blog entry by Canadian romance novelist Nicola R. White, she points out that *The Manatee* contains emotional/verbal abuse, murder, xenophobia/racism, and sexual abuse/assault. In her own words, “Conclusion: Barf. Everyone is awful.”²

Fortunately, I found my way to Harlequin Romance long after novels such as *The Manatee* were a forgotten nightmare. But even back in the early-70s when I started reading the genre, the story line of most Harlequin Romance novels went something like this: Handsome thirty-something widower who is a wealthy business magnate (or doctor, or lawyer), seeks nanny to care for his sad, disregarded children. Not that he doesn’t love his children dearly, but they so remind

¹ “About the Romance Genre,” Romance Writers of America, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx

² Nicola R. White, “Retro Reads: The First (and Worst?) Harlequin Romance,” February 7, 2017. <https://nicolarwhite.com/2017/02/07/retro-reads-the-first-and-worst-harlequin-romance/>

him of his dead wife that he has become emotionally distant. Enter the pretty, *virgin*, orphan girl—typically no older than nineteen—who accepts the job out of poverty and desperation. She, of course, wins over her young charges with her loving, albeit naïve heart, and pure intentions. After whisking her away to exotic locales, the wealthy business magnate-doctor-lawyer realizes his love for the young nanny. At the end of the novel, she falls into his arms for a relatively chaste kiss after he proposes marriage.

Not exactly a rousing representation of feminism or female agency. However, to twelve-year-old me this was powerful stuff. It offered everything that a young, heterosexual girl yearned for—romance, travel, and a safe introduction to sex—all fitting neatly within the lessons learned about feminine domesticity.

As the years progressed, I continued to read romance novels, often in a furtive manner because what right minded feminist could find enjoyment in them? It was a question I found that I often asked myself. I did not fit into the demographic of Janice Radway's groundbreaking (at the time) analysis of the romance genre, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Her description of the group she interviewed as, "women who find quiet moments to read in days devoted almost wholly to the care of others,"³ was decidedly not me. Even though I knew nothing of Radway in the mid-80s, the stigma towards the romance genre and its readers was prevalent. It was considered fluff. Escapism in its lowest form. And by 1995 it had a new derogatory title, "Chick Lit." In a scathing interview for *The Guardian*, writer Doris Lessing called chick lit "instantly forgettable" and Booker Prize winner Beryl Bainbridge referred to it as "froth."⁴

³ Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 46.

⁴ "Bainbridge Denounces Chick-Lit as 'Froth,'" *Guardian* (London, England), August 22, 2001.

But regardless of the withering criticism from the literati it didn't keep me away from romance novels and the happily ever after endings that I craved. However, something was changing in romance storylines. Perhaps I didn't recognize the narrative shift because I was making my own self-discoveries in a changing social and political landscape, along with the protagonists in those evolving storylines. The trope of the happily ever after did not alter but the storylines surrounding the female protagonists certainly did. Now there was actual sex happening between those pages, with no more cutting away after the chaste kiss. And more important, the female protagonists were gaining their own agency. While I didn't notice it at the time, those heroines were beginning to chart their own course for happiness, which included real careers (not just domestics, secretaries, or nannies), sex, and love. Fast forward to 2021 and those protagonists—female and male, straight/gay/bi, BIPOC—are showing the world that they live life on their own terms, charting their own course for success, all while seeking sexual and/or romantic relationships that meet their diverse emotional and physical needs.

But while modern romance has made way for important diverse representations, there is still the issue of the happily ever after in the heterosexual storylines which have led many feminists to still cry foul. Feminist scholars seem to be at odds when attempting to differentiate between third wave feminism and post-feminism, which complicates the issue. In Eirini Arvanitaki's article, "Postmillennial Femininities in the Popular Romance Novel," she adheres to the definition of post-feminism as "a sentiment of antifeminism within an individual framework which incorporates elements of feminism."⁵

Holding to that post-feminist definition, Arvanitaki frames her argument around three titles that signify a very narrow listing within Harlequin's 'Modern' imprint. The story lines of those

⁵ Eirini Arvanitaki, "Postmillennial Femininities in the Popular Romance Novel," *Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no.1 (2019): 21.

titles surround women who are successful (read as feminists), but ultimately rely on men to maintain or save their businesses. They trade their sexuality as a commodity to gain financially, with the final payoff being that they fall in love with their benefactor/sexual partner. It should be noted that while Harlequin continues to be at the forefront of romance publishing, they are by no means the sole arbiter of an industry with all its varied sub-genres that appeal to a broad range of readers. In addition, the titles chosen by Arvanitaki are handpicked to make her argument. She takes wholesale issue with the trope of the happily ever after based on the three novels selected, believing, “The process of disregarding feminism and the welcoming of traditional heterosexual coupling is completed with the realization of love and the prioritization of the goals of the hero over those of the heroine. Due to the asymmetrical roles taken, the heroes acquire emotional and physical/sexual control of the heroines.”⁶ In other words, after the relationship is solidified at the end of the novel, the female protagonist can ignore/discard her feminist sensibilities, which she didn’t value once she found the love of a man. Female agency reduced to playacting, neatly fitting into Arvanitaki’s chosen definition of post-feminism.

As a writer of contemporary romance, my issue with Arvanitaki’s blanket pronouncement regarding the genre is two-fold. First is her qualifier of “postmillennial,” which I equate to the current demographic of romance readers, as she wrote the article in 2019. Second is her assumption that all romance storylines follow the same arc that frames the female protagonist as in need of being saved, financially or otherwise, by a man. However, three targeted titles do not define the entirety of the genre. In addition, she doesn’t take the time to include interviews with actual romance readers. Arvanitaki’s research is based strictly off the opinions of other feminist scholars without the inclusion of those “postmillennial” readers whom she tacitly labels as antifeminist.

⁶ Arvanitaki, “Postmillennial Femininities,” 26.

The demographics outlined in the commissioned study, “The Romance Book Buyer 2017: A Study by NPD Book for Romance Writers of America” breaks down these “postmillennial” readers as follows:

- 82% female
- 18% male
- Average age: 35-39 years old
- Ethnicity: 73% White/Caucasian, 12% Black/African American, 7% Latino/Hispanic, 4% Asian/Asian American
- Sexual orientation: 86% heterosexual, 9% bisexual, pansexual, other bi+ identity, 2% gay or lesbian.

The study notes that within the genre, the expectation for the future is that younger readers of romance will be even more diverse in sexual orientation and in ethnicity, in addition to being more male.⁷ This study clearly shows the increasing diversity in readership, which signifies a need to address the genre from a broader perspective, not just from an outdated preconceived notion of bored or dissatisfied white housewives, dabbling in feminism until it no longer serves its purpose.

Regarding Arvanitaki’s assumption that romance novels follow the same story arc with the male somehow saving the female protagonist, I can firmly refute that theory. In my novel, “Ghost of a Chance,” the female protagonist, Kate Murphy, uses her intelligence and business skills to assist her best friend in making their shop successful. Her romantic interest, Pete O’Brien, has his own career, with his own support system. The story line is not about “saving” anyone, instead it is about each character’s growth to becoming a better person which happens to end in a successful

⁷ “About the Romance Genre,” Romance Writers of America

romantic coupling. It is a relationship based on understanding and compromise, not about a power play where masculine ideals dominate. If Arvanitaki would have extended her research, she would have found that stories such as mine are more prevalent than the examples she sited.

In a further dismantling of worn-out stereotypes regarding romance authors and readers, one only need look at the most recent 2020 election cycle in the United States. Stacey Abrams, one-time Georgia gubernatorial candidate and current Democratic powerhouse dedicated to the task of getting out the vote with her organization *Fair Fight*, was once a writer of romantic suspense novels. Writing under the pen name Selena Montgomery, she published eight novels between 2001 and 2009. In an interview for *The Washington Post*, Abrams commented on critics of the genre, saying, “Telling a well-crafted story is hard. Full stop. Regardless of genre, good writing is good writing. Romance is one of the oldest forms of storytelling and I’m honored to be in the company of extraordinary writers.”⁸ Abrams political activism engaged many members of the romance community (both writers and readers), who banded together to raise funds for the January 2021 runoff elections for two Georgia senate seats. The organization, *Romancing the Runoff*, raised close to \$500,000 by hosting an on-line auction with a variety of high-value prizes. The efforts of Abrams and the romance community were key components in the successful senate bids, gaining both Georgia seats for the Democrats, a scenario that was not expected in a once firmly Republican state.

Other romance organizations who worked to secure candidate Joe Biden the win in the 2020 presidential election ran phone banks in key swing states across America. As romance author Sarah MacLean, organizer of *Fated States* said, “Romance is about the fight for identity, hope, love and

⁸ Nora Krug, “How Stacey Abrams turned heartbreak into a career plan—and romance novels,” *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2018.

joy. At the end of the day, romance delivers you the win.”⁹ These modern voices show unequivocally that the romance genre is about more than the happily ever after. Its authors and readers are becoming activists for a better, more inclusive world and are clearly not ready to eschew their feminist ideals as characterized by Arvanitaki.

Path to Writing and Influences

Having spent most of my creative life as an actor, the switch in focus to writer was initially a jarring prospect. Acting is a collaborative affair, sharing ideas and the creative process with one’s peers throughout a project. But making the shift to writing, working in solitude for months at a time was, for me, a new way of working creatively. While never one for ‘how-to’ books, a colleague recommended that I pick up Anne Lamott’s best seller, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions of Writing and Life*. Lamott’s humor and practical experience regarding the process of writing were what I needed to finally sit down and try my hand at the craft. I found great solace in her wisdom regarding breaking down the story into small increments. Like most new writers, I initially worked under the assumption that the magnum opus in my head would just land on the page complete. Her chapter titled “Shitty First Drafts” removed that pressure of perfection and gave me permission to just get something on the page with her comment, “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper.”¹⁰

When I began reading romance novels, I had no interest in writing my own stories. I was content to enjoy the work of others until I found myself gravitating toward two authors that sparked

⁹ Lily Herman, “How Romance Novelists are Helping Stacey Abrams Turn Georgia Blue,” *Bustle*, (website), November 24, 2020. <https://www.bustle.com/entertainment/romancing-the-runoff-auction-is-helping-stacey-abrams-turn-georgia-blue>

¹⁰ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 25.

my voice as a writer. Those authors are Jennifer Crusie and Jane Austen. Of course, these women write from two vastly different time periods; Crusie, a *New York Times* best-selling author, writes contemporary romance while Austen, the queen of the literary canon, paints a vivid, romantic picture of life in Regency England. But what resonates for me is the women they write about have oftentimes been through the proverbial wringer when it comes to romance and life in general. Regardless of the time-period, the emotions the characters experience are universal. Their stories are not about the fairy tale, with a perfect ingenue just waiting for the hero to sweep her off her feet and away from her troubles. No, Crusie and Austen's stories are about intelligent and independent-minded women who have perhaps drawn the short straw when it comes to romance and make conscious decisions that they will pick themselves up and lead life on their terms, romance be damned. In addition, what appeals to me throughout their novels is that they create characters touched with humor and a dash of self-deprecation. Crusie and Austen's protagonists are flawed and fabulous, with the key component being that they never lose sight of who they are and the value they bring to life. They also aren't afraid to admit when they're wrong and change course to better their individual situations.

Crusie showcases her romantic comedy chops in her 2004 bestseller, *Bet Me*. In it, the thirty-three-year-old female protagonist named Minerva Dobbs is an actuary for a successful insurance company. Min, as her friends call her, has a sharp mind equal to her smart mouth, struggles with her weight, owns an incredible shoe collection, and has absolutely no belief in fairy tale romance since she's seen the statistics on marriage and divorce. Of course, all romance novels need a love interest, which Crusie writes as Calvin Morrisey, a successful and incredibly handsome entrepreneur. Calvin was raised with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. However, he is not

without his own struggles, namely overcoming dyslexia, as well as navigating family relationships that can only be described as withholding and dysfunctional.

What appeals to me as a reader and a writer is that Crusie creates female protagonists who are not cookie-cutter, romantic cartoons. And Minerva Dobbs is no shrinking violet. She has a career, supportive friends and family, and after kicking a loser boyfriend to the curb, doesn't sit around waiting for Prince Charming to rescue her. In fact, when her friends urge her to rebound with a guy (Calvin), so that she'll have a date to her sister's wedding to appease her loving-but-overbearing mother, Min bristles, then takes a pragmatic look at Calvin, and after mentally noting his good looks, "...turned away before anybody caught her slack-jawed with admiration. He was not the one, that was her DNA talking, looking for a high-class sperm donor. Every woman in the room with a working ovary probably looked at him and thought, *This one*. Well, biology was not destiny."¹¹ The character of Minerva Dobbs made me sit up and take notice because she was a different kind of romantic protagonist. After reading *Bet Me*, I came to the realization that these were the type of characters I wanted to create: funny, contemporary women who embraced their lives with all the ups and downs. They were appealing personalities in and of themselves, regardless of whether romance was involved in the storyline. Of course, romance was a key element, but it was first and foremost about the arc of individual growth in the characters. Those were the types of romance novels that I wanted to write.

In 1997 Crusie wrote the essay, "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real." This essay, while addressing the assumptions made by feminist scholars regarding the romance genre, also sums up why Crusie writes romance fiction. It also illustrates why the characters she creates resonate with modern readers. She wrote, "For the first

¹¹ Jennifer Crusie, *Bet Me* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004). 7.

time, I was reading fiction about women who had sex and then didn't eat arsenic or throw themselves under trains or swim out to the embrace of the sea, women who won on their own terms (and those terms were pretty varied) and still got the guy in the end without having to apologize or explain that they were still emancipated even though they were forming permanent pair bonds, women who moved through a world of frustration and detail and small pleasures and large friendships, a world I had authority in."¹²

Crusie's words answered the nagging question that I had been carrying around in the back of my mind all those years. How can a feminist enjoy romance novels? The answer was clear. A feminist can enjoy reading and writing romance because she owes no one an explanation or personal proof of her hard-won emancipation. Frankly, after a long day of breaking the glass ceiling, sometimes a woman just wants to relax and read about the romantic trials and tribulations of other women, all wrapped up with a satisfying happy ending. It was time to add my stories to the genre without fear of losing my feminist membership card.

It is an expansive jump in style from contemporary romance to the fiction of Regency England. But regardless of style and societal changes, Jane Austen had her finger on the pulse of the human condition. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen created a female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who acknowledged the society that she moved in, yet didn't give up on her own desires and needs related to her own happiness.

My initiation into Austen first came with the 1995 BBC mini-series adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. I was impressed by the cinematography, production values, and acting of the ensemble cast, but what I didn't expect was a storyline that followed the arc of a modern romance

¹² Jennifer Crusie, "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real," *Jennifer Crusie* (website), <https://jennycrusie.com/non-fiction/romancing-reality-the-power-of-romance-fiction-to-reinforce-and-re-vision-the-real/>

novel. I immediately invested in all of Austen's works and dove into *Pride and Prejudice* to see how faithfully the screen version followed the novel. My biggest concern was that the televised version had taken the director and screenwriter's modern sensibilities and inserted them into the original text. It was refreshing to realize that the script followed Austen's words and wonderful storyline almost to the letter with little artistic license taken. My understanding of Elizabeth Bennet as an independent, intelligent, young woman was confirmed, and to my mind she was nothing less than a Regency era feminist.

The appeal of Austen's writing lies in the small, everyday details, as well as the honest emotions felt by her characters. Whenever reading Austen, I think about the impression it must have made on the readers of her day. Did they see Elizabeth Bennet as I did? Did they cheer as Elizabeth stood up to the pompous Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Were they shocked and surprised when she sent Darcy's first prideful declaration of love to the ash-heap by telling him, "From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry."¹³

On first reading of that passage, it is clear Elizabeth's response to Darcy is a declaration of an independent young woman. But it also reads as a commentary from Austen herself on the rules of society, rank, and loyalty to family. Regardless of Darcy's ten thousand a year, Elizabeth put her sister, Jane, before any personal gain she may have made by accepting his offer. Knowing of

¹³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).188.

Austen's close relationship with her own sister, Cassandra, it isn't surprising that even in her writing, loyalty to family came first.

As a modern reader there was nothing more gratifying than Elizabeth's response to Darcy's tone-deaf proposal. As a modern writer this famous scene was in the back of my mind when writing dialogue between Kate and Pete, particularly during their first paranormal investigation in "Ghost of a Chance." Pete spends the evening dismissing Kate and her skepticism until she's had enough and tells him just what she thinks of his ghost hunting hobby, saying, "I just think this is ridiculous. There are no such things as ghosts. Frankly, I'm getting pretty pissed off being treated like *I'm* the one with the problem. You walk in here with your bag of techno-crap and expect everyone will be impressed and think this is all very scientific. Sorry, but I'm not impressed with a digital recorder and a night vision camera." Kate was on a roll. "You can waste your evening spinning ghost stories and walking around a dark building throwing questions into the air. I've got better things to do."¹⁴

Much like Elizabeth thinking only of her sister Jane, Kate was thinking about her best friend Eve, and all that was at stake in their new business. Kate's loyalty to her friend outweighed any interest that she might have in Pete. It was important for me as a writer to make it clear that my female protagonist wasn't driven by her own need to get the guy. Regardless of her attraction to Pete, Kate's friendship with Eve, as well as her own female agency, came first.

While there are a multitude of sub-genres within romance, I have found my creative outlet in writing contemporary romance, with some storylines adding a hint of the magical or paranormal. My female protagonists have hurdles to overcome but they will never be without strong voices and will certainly never give up on their dreams or ideals, especially when it comes to their careers and

¹⁴ Eileen Long, "Ghost of a Chance," In the author's possession.

relationships. The influences of both Jennifer Crusie and Jane Austen have helped me in developing my voice as a romance writer.

The Process: Editing to Publishing “Ghost of a Chance”

Most writers dream of being the *next big thing* by finding an agent ready to offer them a lucrative contract. Unfortunately, the reality is a far different matter. Obtaining an agent is a time-consuming task that can at times be demoralizing. No matter the number of query letters submitted, the ever present ‘thanks but no thanks’ response looms in the background. Using websites such as Query Tracker, a new author quickly discovers just how many queries an agent receives in a day, as well as the actual percentage that they respond to favorably. A writer may have created the next great American novel but even with the right query letter, synopsis, and most importantly, a great story, the chances of being passed over by an agent are considerable.

Having said that, the romance genre is big business with an estimated 30 million dedicated readers hungry for content. Based on 2017 statistics, both romance and erotica were ranked as number one in sales at \$1.44 billion.¹⁵ While the genre has seen a steady downturn since 2012, the current pandemic has been a boon to the industry. Romance e-book sales have risen 17%, based on January through May 2020 statistics, which isn’t surprising as the world has gone through various levels of lockdown. The overall increase in sales for the 2020 time-period equates to approximately 16.2 million books sold—60% of those titles being e-books.¹⁶

¹⁵ Erica Verrillo, “What are the most popular literary genres?” *The Writing Cooperative*, November 15, 2017. <https://writingcooperative.com/what-are-the-most-popular-literary-genres-6db5c69928cc>

¹⁶ “COVID-19 Lockdown Gives Romance a Lift, The NPD Group Says,” *NPD*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2020/covid-19-lockdown-gives-romance-a-lift--the-mpd-group-says/#.X-n2zdbwHDo.gmail>

Writing the novel is merely the first of many steps in the process to publication, as I quickly learned through my membership in the Romance Writers of America (RWA). The RWA is a valuable resource for both new and established authors. In addition to conferences, writing contests, and online forums where writers can build community, the RWA offers educational resources to assist authors in navigating the business side of the craft. They also act as advocates, vetting agents and publishers, as well as resolving legal disputes that impact their members. One of the best resources available is the RWA list of Qualifying Markets. This resource gives assurance to writers that they are not working with predatory publishers. As noted on the RWA website, “‘Predatory Publishing’ means a business model based on selling products or services to authors rather than selling books to readers.”¹⁷ Being one of the top selling genres comes with a price, namely those who want to make money off the aspirations of emerging writers, so there is value in having an updated list of qualifying markets. The RWA also acknowledges the success of the independent writing community by making valuable information available to members regarding self-publishing—from setting up a business model, marketing and advertising, and the best platforms for launching a title.

For my novel “Ghost of a Chance,” I am approaching publication through both traditional and self-publishing avenues, which is a trajectory that many current romance writers follow. My path to publishing began with a finished manuscript that had been workshopped in a classroom setting and then sent to beta readers for their feedback on story, character development, and pacing. The beta readers that I chose all possess post-secondary degrees and are avid readers of a variety

¹⁷ “Qualifying Markets,” *Romance Writers of America*, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Resources/Business_Center/Qualifying_Markets.aspx

of popular fiction genres, including romance. After reviewing their comments and making minor changes, the manuscript was sent to a professional editor for line editing and proofreading.

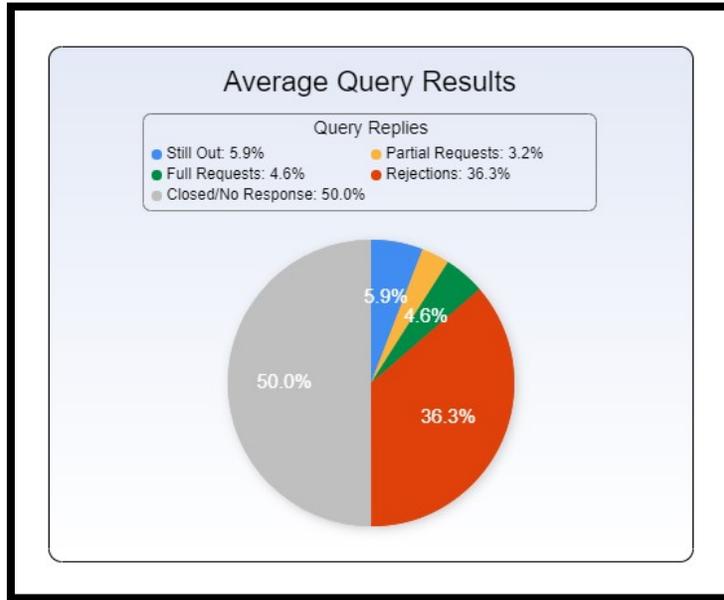
Working with an established editor who specializes in the romance genre has been helpful, not only in giving my manuscript a polished and professional finish, but also as a resource in my next steps to publishing. My editor assisted by making sure my query letter checked all the boxes of what an agent wants to know and worked with me in creating a tag line that sums up the story: “A skeptic and a ghostbuster are brought together when an apparition plays matchmaker.”

Previously, I had used tools such as the annual *Writer’s Market* text which while helpful, was not updated in real time. Fellow members of the RWA suggested using the Query Tracker website/database to better manage my outreach to agents and publishers. This site acts as a clearing house of information on the publishing business. Not only does the database currently list 1,681 agents but it also including the genres they represent. In addition, the database flags those agents who are closed to queries. Within the site, users can drill down for further information on individual agents including professional affiliations, website, and social media accounts. Since the data is in real time, writers seeking representation receive the most up-to-date information.

For an additional annual fee, there are several reports made available to writers using the premium Query Tracker site. These reports give further details such as agents genre response, feedback, and wordcount on manuscripts by genre. As an example, the pie chart below represents the cold reality of an average user’s query responses from agents: 50% of queries receive no response, with only 4.6% receiving a request for a full manuscript.¹⁸ In addition to sites such as Query Tracker, there are a host of other resources available, such as the Association of Authors’

¹⁸ “Average Query Results,” Query Tracker (website). <https://querytracker.net/reports.php>

Representatives (AAR), AgentQuery.com, and the Publisher’s Marketplace. These sites all provide information to authors seeking representation.



Query Tracker Average User Results

When researching agents, I specifically searched for those who currently represent my chosen sub-genre within romance. Modes of submission, as well as requirements for querying, varies from agent to agent. Some specify email submissions, while others use automated online query forms. The majority of agents require a query letter in addition to a portion of the manuscript ranging from the first five pages to the first three chapters. Some request a synopsis in addition to manuscript copy. Throughout my research, the advice given by authors and organizations alike is that the key to engaging an agent is the query letter. It is the first impression and the opportunity to hook the agent into asking for more. While I use a standard query letter (appendix A), I make a point of including information personalized to the specific agent if applicable, including a connection through personal interests, areas of study, and authors the agent represents that I follow.

If a synopsis is requested, I submit a document of 1-3 pages in length (appendix B). Currently, I have a list of sixty potential agents. As of this writing, I have queried twenty-nine with a total of thirteen rejections, fifteen that are out for review, and one agent who has requested additional pages for consideration. In addition, I have two publishers whose acquisition teams are currently reviewing my manuscript for possible publication. The first group of agents I queried were those who I felt would most strongly relate to my novel's storyline. Over the next several months I plan to continue querying the balance of agents that I have on my list.

One of the first rules of advice given to writers navigating their way to publication, whether traditionally or as an independent author, is to cultivate a digital following. When querying agents, the majority want to know an author's website/blog and social media platforms and how to access them. While cultivating an audience is key in self-publishing, in today's traditional publishing world it is an expectation that the author will take a key role in promoting their novel. However, I would argue that while the number of followers may be a gauge to an author's ability to gain attention, it is difficult for unpublished authors to maintain website/blog and social media platforms when there isn't a product yet to sell.

When it comes to self-publishing, there are multiple resources available for writers. Advice regarding the mechanics of prepping one's manuscript for a chosen platform, choosing the right cover art, as well as writing a back cover description, can be found on many reputable organization websites, including the RWA. The question often asked by an independent writer is, "I wrote it, now how do I distribute it?" There are a multitude of digital storefront platforms available to distribute e-books, with Amazon at the top of the pyramid. But there are other, smaller but no less important digital storefronts such as Barnes & Noble, Apple, and Kobo, and each has their own

specific requirements and policies. For the author who is looking for one resource that will format their work and distribute to a variety of storefronts then Draft2Digital is the gold standard.

Launched in 2012, Draft2Digital is a self-publishing aggregator that states, “Writing is your dream. We make publishing your reality.”¹⁹ While this may seem like a clever tag line to rope in writers desperate to get published, the site is considered the preferred method for “wide” distribution in independent publishing. Not only can writers distribute to six major sales platforms (as of this writing), including Amazon, but writers can also distribute their work to libraries using platforms such as Bibliotheca, Baker & Taylor, and OverDrive. In addition, Draft2Digital is in beta testing for distribution of paperback books to physical storefronts.

Not only is Draft2Digital addressing the needs for distribution, but they also offer professional, digital layout for manuscripts that work across all e-readers. From a personal standpoint, I used Draft2Digital to transfer my novel “Ghost of a Chance” to a MOBI file. My manuscript was originally in a Word document, and within ten seconds of uploading the file I had a fully formatted manuscript, ready for distribution.

Another reason why the Draft2Digital aggregator is so popular is that it offers a host of other benefits. Tracking of sales and royalties, setting up sales promotions, author pages for those who do not have a website presence, are just some of the services available which truly make it a one-stop-shopping service for self-published writers, especially those new to the process.

The cost of using Draft2Digital is based upon an author’s sales through the various digital storefronts. The site does not charge for formatting a book. Draft2Digital takes 10% of the book’s retail sale or 15% net royalties. The blog site, Reedsy, has an excellent example of the breakdown

¹⁹ “How It Works,” *Draft 2 Digital*, www.draft2digital.com

of costs using Draft2Digital and states, “Draft2Digital’s pricing model is reassuringly reliant on authors actually selling books.”²⁰ The example they list is as follows:

Author lists book on Draft2Digital at \$4.99 retail.

Amazon’s royalty is 30% (\$1.497)

Net royalty is \$3.493

Draft2Digital takes 15% of net royalty (\$0.524)

Author’s royalty is \$2.969

Authors always pay royalties to the digital storefront where their books are sold, and the percentage varies by vendor. Practically speaking, for authors trying to manage their own sales/business, the additional 15% of net royalties is a small price to pay for the services offered. However, it should be noted that Amazon, being the massive digital storefront that it is, does not allow books distributed through Draft2Digital the ability to take advantage of many of the Kindle promotions offered. As noted on Reedsy, many authors set up a separate account with Amazon/Kindle and run the rest of their sales through Draft2Digital. Fortunately, Draft2Digital allows authors the ability to choose where their books should be distributed.

But once the actual process of uploading a product is complete, the bigger issue comes into play for a writer—marketing. One of the most beneficial resources I’ve found is Victorine E. Lieske’s book, *Whole Book Marketing: An Indie Author’s Guide to Selling Books*. Lieske is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author who has created effective marketing strategies for independent writers. In her book, she lays out key aspects of digital marketing, including

²⁰ “Draft2Digital Review: Read this BEFORE You Publish,” *Reedsy Blog*, www.blog.reedsy.com/draft2digital-reviews/

misconceptions regarding ad buys and social media. Her focus is in selling on the Amazon website, since they are the primary seller of e-books, and offer the best financial return for authors.

The key tenet for a new author, after categorizing the work within a specific genre/sub-genre, is in finding an audience. But it isn't about an author seeking out readers, it's about getting those readers to find the author. As Lieske points out, "Your audience is actively searching for your kind of book to buy on Amazon."²¹ Before expending large amounts of money on marketing ads on Amazon or Facebook, the key issue is in knowing how to align a novel with other similar genres and authors. She breaks audiences down as cold/warm/hot. Cold readers most likely aren't interested in a genre. However, warm audiences are willing to take a chance on a new author while browsing Amazon if it is a genre that appeals to them. This illustrates why it is so important that an author define their genre accurately. Hot audiences are those who know the author's work and will purchase just by name recognition.

The resources available to independent writers are extensive. However, if the product isn't quality the readers won't be there. Lieske makes a solid point for anyone trying to publish their work, "... understand that writing and publishing are two different things. Writing is for you. Publishing is taking that thing you created for you and making it marketable."²² In order to have the best product for the market, a writer has to do the hard work of practicing their craft and acknowledging where they need polish. It also means bringing together the people who can help make that goal a reality. Critique groups, beta readers, professional editors, and genre-specific book cover artists/illustrators are all part of the equation to successful self-publishing.

²¹ Victorine E. Lieske, *Whole Book Marketing* (Scottsbluff: Victorine E. Lieske, 2020). 29.

²² Lieske, *Whole Book Marketing*. 45.

Next Steps

The timeline for moving forward with “Ghost of a Chance” is that I hope to have agent representation by April 2021, and as of this writing I do have an author signaling interest in my manuscript. If no offers for representation are received, I will continue on the path to independent publishing by June 2021. Next steps to that end include:

- Incorporate my business as an LLC (Long House Press).
- Hire a cover artist from those vetted previously.
- Write back cover description.
- Create marketing plan.
- Set manuscript into .MOBI file through Draft2Digital and check for errors.
- Set release date and distribute through Draft2Digital and Amazon.
- Track sales and determine ad buys and possible marketing giveaways to gain readers.

In addition, I will continue to write. I currently have two works-in-progress and an additional story idea that is in outline form. While the goal is to create a business and earn money through my writing, nothing compares to the satisfaction of seeing a novel from the spark of an idea to its completion and sharing it with readers; to hold a finished manuscript in my hands and acknowledge the tangible proof of a creative effort. Romance novels have been a part of my life since I was twelve years old. I never thought I’d be on the other side of the equation as a writer.

One of the most memorable pieces of advice I’ve read comes from Stephen King. In his book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, he closes with one last thought, “The rest of it—and perhaps the best of it—is a permission slip: you can, you should, and if you’re brave enough to start, you

will. Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up.”²³

Giving oneself permission is the key. It is about setting aside the excuses, self-doubt, and frustration, and instead letting in the excitement and joy of getting the words on the page, regardless of the chosen genre. I look forward to my journey as a romance writer. Because at the end of the day, everyone can use a little romance in their life.

²³ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York: Scribner, 2000). 270.

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APPENDIX A. QUERY LETTER

Dear :

A skeptic and a ghostbuster are brought together when an apparition plays matchmaker.

Kate Murphy has been tethered to her desk at a corporate bank in New York City for two years. Restless and unfulfilled from taking the safe path, a phone call from her best friend, Eve Marsden, offers an intriguing alternative; revitalize a floundering occult shop in Salem Massachusetts. But Salem holds more than a career change for Kate, when Eve informs her she has seen the ghost of a Victorian woman in their shop.

Assistant professor of Irish history, Pete O'Brien, spots Kate in a cemetery and stops in his tracks; she is the embodiment of Áine, the goddess of love, fertility, abundance, and sovereignty. To Kate, he is the hot but creepy guy who has been following her, so when Eve introduces him as the paranormal investigator who will assist them, non-believer Kate is unimpressed.

Their reluctant partnership in ghost-hunting sets in motion a story of changing perceptions, friendship, trust, and ultimately love, with a little help from an apparition named Abigale.

Ghost of a Chance is a 75,000-word contemporary romance blending east coast charm, strong friendships, and Irish history—all with a dash of the paranormal.

I have written two complete contemporary romance novels and am a member of the Romance Writers of America. My professional background is in theatre and music, and I am in the process of finishing my master's degree in English, focusing on creative writing. I write under the name Nikki Long and can be found on Instagram and Twitter, as well as at my website, www.nikkilongwrites.com. Other samples of my writing can be found at my university's pop culture website, Lit Pop. Links can be found here:

<https://medium.com/litpop/pride-prejudice-who-did-it-better-a781f2f9b5c2>

<https://medium.com/litpop/learning-from-the-master-storyteller-2a67d20cd1fc>

Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX B. SYNOPSIS

KATE MURPHY works for a major banking corporation in New York City. Throwing herself into her work after a long-distance breakup with her fiancé, Michael Francisco, she questions her career and personal decisions until she gets a call from her best friend, EVE MARSDEN, who has an occult shop in Salem, Massachusetts. Eve suggests that Kate move to Salem and help her revive her struggling business. Always cautious, Kate agrees to visit to see if she can help Eve.

Kate sees potential for Eve's shop and during her week in Salem gets familiar with the town by walking through the historic district. As she walks through the Olde Burying Point cemetery, a jogger stops in his tracks. PETE O'BRIEN, a professor of Irish history, is stunned by the sight of Kate because she looks very much like the goddess Áine, whom he is researching. When Kate notices Pete, she assumes he is a creepy voyeur (regardless of how handsome he is) and walks away. As the two go their separate ways a mist forms in a grove of trees. The apparition of a woman in Victorian dress watches, smiling, as the two hurry away. A few days later, Kate runs into Pete at the local library, and her opinion of him shifts from voyeur to stalker. She confronts him and leaves, certain that she will never see him again.

Making the move to Salem, Kate and Eve begin renovating the shop with the help of Eve's boyfriend, Jon Bradley. Things go smoothly until Eve informs Kate she's seen the ghost of a Victorian woman on the stair landing. Kate is skeptical and tries to dissuade her friend from thinking it's a ghost. Jon suggests they call a friend who is a local paranormal investigator to check out the shop, which Eve does, leaving a message. Kate, Eve, and Jon head to dinner when the investigator returns Eve's call. Excited, Eve relays the story, and the investigator agrees to meet them. Twenty minutes later, Pete arrives. As introductions are made, Kate throws the accusation that Pete is a stalker, which leaves the table laughing at her misunderstanding. Pete realizes she is not a believer in the paranormal and gives her the nickname Practical Kate. Embarrassed and angry, regardless of her physical attraction towards Pete, Kate leaves the restaurant, vowing that she has no use for a weirdo ghostbuster.

One day while alone in the shop, Kate experiences the unexplainable. Folders disappear then reappear, cold breezes brush her cheek, and finally, someone calls her name. Freaked out but still believing it is her imagination, she locks up and leaves, but on her way home she runs into Pete at the grocery store. They get in an argument about investigating ghosts. Kate's concern centers on her friend and their new business. She doesn't trust Pete or his motives. Pete is left standing in the market, frustrated by her behavior but unable to forget her.

A few weeks later, Eve arranges the ghost investigation, urging Kate to attend. Eve has seen the attraction between Kate and Pete and can't understand why Kate is against a relationship. Kate finally agrees to attend and promises to keep an open mind. On the night of the investigation during a thunderstorm, Pete arrives with a theory on who might be haunting the shop. He tells them about ABIGALE HASTINGS, a Victorian business owner who might still be tied to the building. The couples split up, with Eve and Jon on the second floor, and Kate and Pete on the third. Kate can't hide her skepticism and makes it clear she thinks it is all just a ridiculous exercise. In a moment of frustration during a massive lightning strike that takes out the power, Pete pulls Kate close and kisses her. She responds to his kiss until Eve calls from the floor below to make sure they are okay. The two separate and Kate leaves the building in a rush, telling Eve she has a headache. Seeing through Kate's headache excuse, Eve arrives at Kate's doorstep wanting to know the real reason she left. Kate tells Eve about the kiss, her parent's dysfunctional marriage and divorce, her broken engagement to Michael, and all

the reasons why she doesn't want to get involved with a paranormal investigator. After plenty of girl talk and a few glasses of whiskey, Eve convinces Kate that there is more to life than just work. Kate admits her attraction to Pete, but always practical, says she won't consider any sort of relationship until the business reopens Memorial Day weekend.

Kate decides to investigate Abigale's history. She discovers more about Abigale's family and her broken engagement due to her fiancé's death at sea. Kate heads to the Olde Burying Point to find Abigale's grave. Pushing down her skepticism and self-consciousness Kate stands at Abigale's grave and talks to her, wishing she could know more about her life. After Kate departs, Abigale materializes, touched that she has been remembered and decides that she will do what she can to bring Kate and Pete together.

Potion reopens and is a huge success with both tourists and locals alike. Eve decides to play matchmaker by sending Pete to Kate's house to drop off a flash drive that Kate needs. The two spend a few awkward moments together until, when leaving her house, Pete apologizes for kissing her. She assures him not to think anything about it, but as he leaves, he tells her he can't forget that night or the kiss.

Kate receives a phone call from her ex-fiancé Michael, who tells her he will be in Boston and asks if she can meet him. Kate agrees and takes the ferry to Boston. Sitting in a bar, Michael tells her he is getting married. Kate wishes him well and heads back to the ferry to return home. Kate begins to wonder why their relationship didn't work. Crying, she believes the failure of the relationship was her fault and that there was something wrong with her. Pete is returning home from work and sees Kate standing on the deck of the ferry. Concerned, he sits her down to talk. They continue their conversation at a restaurant, and during dinner Pete tells Kate about his mother who died when he was thirteen. He says he believes in ghosts because he's seen them, including his mother. Over the course of the evening, Pete and Kate grow closer and when he walks her home, Kate invites him in. He spends the night.

Kate and Pete start dating and during a follow up ghost investigation Abigale makes her presence known and indicates that she is talking to Kate. Stunned and excited, the skeptic in Kate fades as she becomes a believer.

Pete tells Kate he will be going to Dublin Ireland for research at Trinity College and asks if she would join him. Kate says yes. In Dublin, Kate feels her first bout of jealousy when a colleague of Pete's, Morganne Callaghan, makes it clear she is interested in him. After several whiskeys, Kate confronts Pete about Morganne. He assures Kate that they are only co-workers. In a moment of honesty brought on by whiskey, Kate tells Pete she loves him. He tells her he loves her too.

On several occasions while in Ireland, Kate feels a presence and hears a woman's voice telling Kate she is home. She believes the voice belongs to Abigale. While in Ireland, Pete receives a call from his best friend and Irish collaborator, Rob Mahoney, informing him that the chair of the history department at Trinity is going to offer him a job. Pete tells Kate about the offer but says he won't decide until October. Kate imagines everything will end just like it did with Michael Francisco—a long-distance relationship that fades away. She is devastated but puts on a brave face, knowing this is Pete's dream job.

Kate and Pete return to Salem, and in October Pete makes the decision to move to Ireland. He promises Kate that their relationship is strong and will survive the long distance. In December, Pete leaves, promising Kate they will make plans to visit each other.

After watching Kate struggle through the holidays, Eve surprises her with tickets to London for a trade show and suggests that she continue to Dublin before returning home. Excited at the prospect, Kate decides to surprise Pete. Upon her arrival to his office, Kate finds Morganne Callaghan in Pete's arms. Hurt and brokenhearted she leaves, quickly followed by Pete who tells her that Morganne was the instigator and that it's not what Kate thinks. Kate insists she knew it was a mistake to think that their relationship would survive and leaves.

Back in Salem, Kate moves through her days in a fog. Walking through town she comes to an antique shop. Thinking she might find a gift for her mother's upcoming birthday, Kate goes in. What she finds in the jewelry case is an engraved locket with a lock of hair inside of it. She discovers that it belonged to Abigale and the lock of hair was from her deceased fiancé. Kate buys the locket and returns home, feeling a connection to the long dead woman.

Kate refuses to talk to Pete. Instead, she shuts down her heart and pours herself into work, much like she did in New York. One day, alone in the office, Kate feels the presence of Abigale, whispering that Kate should go home. Confused and frustrated by the message, Kate locks up the shop and heads home. She tries to sleep but has a reoccurring dream of Ireland where Pete is standing in a garden waiting for his bride. But just before the bride appears, Kate hears someone whispering her name, and she awakes. The dream repeats several times until, exhausted, Kate gets out of bed. Deciding to check her email she is surprised to find something from Pete. In the email Pete writes that he wishes she would talk to him so they could sort out the misunderstanding. He tells her his manuscript is being published and invites her to come to Dublin for the launch reception. Closing the email, Kate sits with her head on her desk, crying. The room chills as a shimmering apparition appears. Abigale tells Kate that Pete is true to her and she should go home—to Pete. In a moment of gratitude before Abigale disappears, Kate gives her the locket that she found.

Kate decides to surprise Pete, but her flight is delayed due to bad weather. By the time she gets to the reception, the event is over. Sitting on a bench in the lobby of the building, Kate is devastated and cries for all the plans she's made that have never worked out. However, Pete finds her as he's leaving the building. Professing their love for each other, they spend the week together, and Pete asks her to marry him. She says yes.

In the epilogue, Kate is looking at an empty shop in Dublin, waiting for Eve. The two women plan to open a second *Potion* in Dublin. Eve arrives and shows Kate her engagement ring, asking if Kate will be her matron of honor. Kate agrees but tells Eve there will be an additional guest at the wedding because she is pregnant.