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Editorial: Degrees of Love and Trope Actually

In August 2024, the Degrees of Love research collective at Flinders University hosted a one-day academic symposium attached to the Romance Writers Australia (RWA) conference in Tarntanya/Adelaide. Supported by Assemblage Centre for Creative Arts and held at the Stamford Grand at Glenelg, the symposium gathered experts in popular romance scholarship to think through RWA's conference theme of romance tropes. The RWA conference itself featured a program of industry and craft workshops, with keynotes given by bestselling and high-profile international romance novelists Christina Lauren, BJ Daniels and Elana Johnson, and attended by publishers and agents from around the country. Popular romance studies is a flourishing field of research, and there are growing numbers of HDR students (both in creative writing and literary studies) working on romance and how it intersects with colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, power, disability, queerness and more. The academic symposium was an opportunity to gather established and emerging scholars of popular romance at a major industry conference, embedded in the heart of the Australian romance profession.

We asked scholars to consider RWA's "Trope Actually" theme in the context of romance fiction's fascination with tropes and the ways tropes might unlock lines of enquiry. Papers covered reparation fantasies, diasporic romance, Indigenous representation, masculinities, queer romance and "bad" romance, featuring abuse. This special issue of *TEXT* extends the conversations held in that room. When taken together, every article considers the under-explored value of examining tropes in romance fiction and the socio-cultural insights this can offer. Tropes are a commonly understood staple of romance fiction, discussed openly on BookTok and Bookstagram (book lovers' names for book-focused TikTok and Instagram reels and posts) and used to market books by publishers and authors. Tropes in romance can be character-based (cinnamon roll heroes, cowboys, billionaires, grumpy/sunshine, bad boy) or story-based (second chance, enemies-to-lovers, one bed, forced proximity) or they can involve

the setting (small town, college, office), season (Christmas, vacation), sub-genre (romantasy, cosy mystery, sports) or time period (Regency, Old West). Naming and categorising tropes has become a way for readers to find exactly what they're looking for in a romance novel every single time. In the past, this attention to the hyper-specificity of narrative structures has been a feature of academic scholarship, but now everyday romance readers are driving the mainstreaming of trope identification. The importance of tropes to the industry can be seen by RWA (with over 700 active members) theming the entire 2024 conference around them.

And of course, the prevailing trope in romance fiction is the happily ever after (HEA). The expectation of the HEA means that no matter what happens – no matter which other tropes an author uses, no matter how bad the situation might seem – a reader can always feel secure in knowing that things will be resolved by the end of the book in a way that leaves the romantic leads happy and in love. Authors enter into a contract to fulfil readerly expectations of certain narrative beats, specifically the need for closure and an optimistic ending; Catherine Roach writes that, “almost universally, [romance] authors ... view the ending as a contract they have with their readers” (2016, p. 166). The importance placed on reader expectations seems to have naturally lent itself to a focus on tropes as readers find comfort in the repetition and familiarity of story elements that allow us to enjoy the plot in a position of relative safety. Serious and often dark topics, like the climate crisis (Matthews et al.), sexual violence (Stanley) and the tragedy that follows queerness in historical fiction (Hogan) can be explored in romance narratives that adhere to this writer–reader contract. Conversely, authors who challenge or defy reader expectations can either innovate new genres (Burge et al.) or break the contract and leave readers feeling betrayed (Rouse). As a major commercial genre, with Australian sales reaching at least \$46.4 million in 2024 (Kembrey, 2024), romance writing and publishing is a sales- and business-oriented market. Romance publishing and the romance community have a particularly responsive relationship to its readership, attentive to sales trends and reader responses on social media. Therefore, if romance readers are currently fascinated with tropes in romance novels, then this is something that romance writers and scholars should also be thinking about.

In curating the symposium, we focused on platforming scholars who take an intersectional approach in their work, aiming to highlight diverse voices and scholarship. Papers included Sreepurna Datta's “The Arranged Marriage Trope in South Asian Diasporic Romance Fiction”, Melanie Saward's “Where are all the Blakfullas?”, and Justina Ashman's “Queering Romance Tropes”. We intended for this special issue to follow along the same lines; unfortunately, it is reflective of the limitations of the genre and scholarly field at large that white, heterosexual romance is overrepresented here. But the articles included in this issue engage with the subversive ways tropes can operate in romance fiction, ranging from power dynamics in intimate relationships, to gender performance, to the power of optimism to galvanise action.

Romance readers will likely be familiar with the controversy surrounding Colleen Hoover's 2016 book *It Ends With Us* and the subsequent drama of the 2024 film adaptation. Lucy Rouse's article “A Real Bad Boy” examines how Hoover utilised common romance tropes to “trick” readers into reading a novel that was about abuse but, more importantly, was not a

romance novel. Rouse strategically deconstructs Hoover's history of romance writing by illustrating the use of these common tropes in her previous novels, especially the use of the "happily ever after" and the "bad boy", demonstrating Hoover's expertise in their use. These tropes were then deployed in *It Ends With Us* to deceive readers into empathising with its hero, Ryle, initially thought to be a "bad boy" but ultimately revealed to be a domestic abuser. Rouse pairs this close analysis of *It Ends With Us* with reader responses to the book on Goodreads, exhibiting the confusion and manipulation readers felt at this twist, as well as the complicated feelings they experienced about the book's romantic hero, with some expressing that they were still "actively seeking romance's crucial happy ending" for Ryle (Rouse, 2025, p. 12). Readers felt they had been tricked by Hoover, though they still sought that happily ever after that is so fundamental to the romance genre.

Amy Burge and Jodi McAlister's article, "Bonkbuster Book Club: Reading then, reading now" illustrates how abuse and controversy have been staples of women's fiction for a long time. Wildly popular in the 1970s–1990s, but largely faded from public consciousness now, bonkbuster romances were lengthy fictional works that took romance's typical structure and tropes and exploded them into multi-character epics that often featured scandalous and taboo topics. To better understand the "genre world" of the bonkbuster (Fletcher et al., 2019), as well as the unique experience of communal reading, Burge and McAlister relay their findings from a reading group that met across 2024 to discuss Shirley Conran's *Lace* (1982), one of the touchstones of the genre. Many of their participants first encountered the novel as young women and recall how the text shaped their early understanding of sex and adulthood in both positive and negative ways. This article makes a case for the bonkbuster's place in the lineage of women's fiction, and re-reads *Lace* with contemporary eyes, in order to spark discussion about its ongoing feminist relevance, alongside the problematic aspects that have dated poorly, including examples of dominant and abusive masculinities.

Abby Guy's "liquid honey" is a creative exploration of the representation of masculinity in the cis-het male heroes of romantic fiction and romance's "cinnamon roll" hero alternative. In this creative piece and accompanying exegesis, we are shown how heroes themselves have become tropified via the repeated employment of certain physical characteristics (and an emphasis on the male body in general) to signify a "spectacular" masculinity (Radway, 1991, p. 128). In romantasy (romance fantasy) novels in particular, we frequently encounter cis-het alpha heroes who are "powerful, ruthless, strong, emotionally stoic and followers of patriarchal social scripts" (Guy, 2025, p. 6). These qualities are embodied, with romantasy writers commonly depicting heroes as large, domineering, muscular, and rugged. His physicality, along with the stereotypical (and often toxic) masculinity it represents, are positioned as desirable to heroines and readers alike. Do "cinnamon roll" heroes present an alternative and a reprieve to dominant masculinity? Guy observes that while the cinnamon roll may disrupt hegemonic masculinity with his softer, gooier demeanour, he remains physically indistinguishable from a typical alpha. "liquid honey" presents Guy's alternative to the alpha hero: a man who is soft, sincere, sentimental, and emotional, and who doesn't require ten-pack abs and tree-trunk-size arms to still be seen as a desirable male love interest.

The world of sports has been culturally established as gendered – with its stereotypical delineations of binary masculinity and femininity – and remains a site for undisguised sexism in its favouring of male athletes, heteronormativity and hegemonic ideals. Alexandra Mulvey and Hsu-Ming Teo’s article, “‘You’re a total dick sometimes, but it’s a tolerable kind of dickishness’: Hegemonic masculinity and sports romances”, utilises the growing body of heterosexual, heteronormative ice hockey and ice-skating romance novels to argue that the inherent gendering of sports is reinscribed in the popular subgenre of sports romance. Mulvey and Teo examine the heroes of hockey romances, who are characterised by their hypermasculine physiques, aptitude for violence, and sexual expertise. His qualities are often emphasised by direct contrast to the “effeminate” figure-skating man, who does not meet hegemonic expectations, unless he proves his manliness by “protecting” his female partner with aggression and violence and showcasing his virility. Mulvey and Teo argue that by adhering to “reproductive futurism” (Edelman, 2004) sports romance novels “thus ensur[e] the hero maintains and perpetuates a heteronormative ideal of hegemonic masculinity” (2025, p. 16).

In contrast to the reinforcement of gender heteronormativity in sports romance, Harrison Stewart’s “A Blissful Life” is a creative piece and accompanying exegesis that challenges and deconstructs stereotypes around gay male femininity in romance fiction. As Stewart says, “Gay male romance is packed full of references to feminine bottom twinkles and masculine gay dominant men” (Stewart, 2025, p. 7). In conversation with this reality, “A Blissful Life” platforms fluidity, flexibility and the role of love in self-determination. The creative work explores issues of hyper-visibility and queerness, gender performativity, the aesthetics of gay subcultures, and the thin line between spectacle and authenticity in the queer experience through a day-in-the-life of a model, Hendrix Anderson. After faking his death to escape a “shackled” childhood in Adelaide, Hendrix has a successful new identity as the iconic face of his rich lover’s skincare company. Hendrix’s character “is not feminine nor masculine” and so challenges and deconstructs stereotypes around gay male femininity in romance fiction by “[representing] the idea that ... gender and sexuality are fluid and ever-changing” (Stewart, p. 8). The inherent optimism of Stewart’s work intersects with the optimism embedded in the romance genre.

Moving deeper into the space of optimism in romance fiction, Amy Matthews, Alex Cothren and Rachel Hennessy confront the intersection of genre and politics in their research on the unexpected merging of climate fiction and romance. Their article, “Happily ever after in the age of climate crisis: The argument for ‘Cli-Ro’”, argues that romance’s HEA offers an optimistic alternative to dystopian fictions of the climate crisis by integrating conversations about climate into hopeful, relationship-focused stories. The article considers three case studies – Sally Rooney’s literary romance *Beautiful World, Where Are You*, Rachel Griffin’s allegorical YA fantasy romance *The Nature of Witches*, and Aya de León’s mass market romance-thriller *Side Chick Nation* – analysing the different sociocultural intersections and positionalities of each text. Matthews et al. argue that happy futures are not just for the imagination of the privileged but a basic human right, and that we have a responsibility to

imagine these for everyone. Love is an engine for action, a comfort, and the lure of the HEA trope offers optimism and hope, suggesting we do not have to face the future alone.

Aloneness has often been a trope in queer fiction and queer romance has been active in imagining happy endings for queer love, although as Payton Hogan illustrates, this is an ongoing and imperfect project. Hogan's "Beneath the Almond Tree" is a Medieval sapphic romance with magical elements, in which the unnamed female narrator discovers a woman, Alvina, who mysteriously appears one day beneath the almond tree in her garden. The story charts the two women's shared desire through moments of domestic intimacy – the sharing of a bed, the combing of hair – and the resilience of their love in overcoming the external threat of Alvina's violent husband, representative of violent patriarchy. Hogan uses the optimistic HEA to offer an alternative to sapphic historical narratives that position the queer love story as a site for heartbreak and tragedy; she observes that "[h]omosexuality often presents the story's conflict in queer historical texts – the wedge keeping lovers apart, often the obstacle to romantic fulfilment" (Hogan, 2025, p. 8). Building on Linda Garber's notion of lesbian historical fiction as a "speculative" (2021, p. 3) reclamation of history, Hogan argues that we are able to use the HEA in sapphic historical romance to expand our imagination of the lives of queer women in the past, to include the possibility of a realised love and a desire that is joyful and enduring, rather than tragic and fleeting.

In "Reimagining happily ever after in Rix Weaver's New Holland colonial romances", Lauren O'Mahony and Kathryn Trees discuss how tropes and structures of romance fiction can complicate and interact with the storytelling of historical fiction. They tease out the relationship between romance fiction, which demands an ending, specifically an optimistic one, and historical fiction, which is continuous and resists conclusion. To do this, they use Rix Weaver's trilogy as a case study, reading it through an "epinovel lens" as "romantic historical fiction" (Teo & Fresno-Calleia, 2025) and analysing "the endings and closures given to their heroines" (O'Mahony & Trees, 2025, p. 1). This article shows us how romance fiction tropes may be implemented across genres and how they can affect the experience of reading a text. In the context of the New Holland trilogy, for example, these tropes can provide readers with familiarity, satisfaction, and solace while they engage with the "the background of early colonisation in Western Australia in the 1830s and the economic, social and cultural conventions affecting women at the time" (p. 12). The authors suggest that multiple endings embody the way endings are complicated when history is ongoing and contested.

Even in a contemporary HEA, the issue of closure is complicated, as romance narratives are often grappling with ongoing patriarchal violence and oppression. Kathleen Stanley's contemporary romance "Alden House" is reparative romance writing in praxis. Stanley's "story of rape, recovery and hope" (Stanley, 2025, p. 8) embodies Catherine Roach's notion of "reparative" romance that offers women the "imagined healing" (2010, p. 11) of happily ever after. The short story follows Emily, who is navigating her traumatic past of sexual violence and her growing feelings for her employer, Nico. By incorporating the optimistic HEA of contemporary romance with the heroine's journey of recovery from sexual abuse, "Alden House" provides a "space of imagination in which to negotiate the conundrum of living in

patriarchal rape culture as a heterosexual woman” (McCann et al., 2020, p. 417). The accompanying exegesis outlines the romance’s long history of engaging with issues of consent, rape and sexual violence, contextualising the challenges Stanley faces in writing contemporary romance in the wake of the overturning of *Roe vs Wade* and the 2024 re-election of Donald Trump. Stanley notes how some rape narratives in romance both reflect and are in conversation with broader cultural discourses around sexual violence and women’s rights, and she makes an argument for the necessity of this continued reparative practice of reading and writing romance in the face of ongoing patriarchal rape culture.

The final article in this special issue is a useful statistical overview of romance reading in the Australian context. In “Reading the romance in Australia: The preferences and practices of romance readers from ARRA survey data”, Lauren O’Mahony and Yolandi Botha investigate the reading practices and habits of a selection of Australian romance readers through their analysis of the Australian Romance Readers Association (ARRA) annual survey over seven years, from 2009 to 2023. O’Mahony and Botha gesture towards how this data can be useful to romance writers in terms of understanding their readers – including how they read, where they read, how subgenre influences their book choices, where they discover books and where they buy books. Their analysis shows that the ARRA survey respondents are “highly committed, frequent, and engaged” readers, who are “articulate about their reading choices” (O’Mahony & Botha, 2025, p. 18) and preferred subgenres. As romance is such a commercial and popular genre, this understanding of market and readership is valuable for the romance community. As the genre continues to evolve and expand, research into romance readership is a first step in gaining insight into what could be driving this dedicated readership and the trends (such as popular romance subgenres and tropes) that appeal to them.

Romance is an active site of cultural conversation, and this collection of articles and stories illustrates that readers, writers and scholars are engaging with the genre in nuanced and complex ways. Whether it’s integrating numerical data into a primarily qualitative field (O’Mahony & Botha) or demonstrating the innovative (Matthews et al.; Burge & McAlister; O’Mahony & Trees), cathartic (Stanley), subversive (Stewart; Hogan), re-inscriptive (Guy; Mulvey & Teo) and challenging (Rouse) powers of romance structures and tropes, the scholarship in this special issue demonstrates the dynamism of current creative writing research in the field of popular romance. It has been rewarding to see the papers delivered at the 2024 symposium evolve. We want to offer our special thanks to the scholars who took part in the symposium but are not featured here: Justina Ashman, Sreepurna Datta, Bee Jamieson, Melanie Saward and Rebecca Stokes. These academics and practitioners inspire us to keep unlocking new perspectives on popular romance. RWA’s 2024 academic symposium was at capacity, with standing room only, suggesting a hunger for events where researchers and practitioners can come together in the context of genre specialisation. We particularly want to highlight the work being done by HDRs in this field, as romance scholarship and creative writing scholarship intersect in creative ways to produce new knowledge. The practice of commercial fiction has been an under-examined field in creative writing scholarship, particularly when it comes to romance, and it’s exciting to see the genre receive sustained attention from such intersectional perspectives. As a collective, the Degrees of Love romance research collective at Flinders

University is keen to continue connective work, opening conversations about romance writing between the academy, industry and artists, and we feel this special issue is an important spotlight to cast on creative writing's role in popular romance studies.

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