TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

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A real bad boy: How Colleen Hoover's It Ends with Us *exploits romance tropes*

Abstract:
Colleen Hoover has taken the romance genre by storm after her meteoritic rise to fame on TikTok. However, her most popular "romance" novel, *It Ends with Us*, is not a romance, but a novel about abuse. In this paper, I analyse how Hoover exploits romance tropes and the safety-net of the "happily ever after" to entice readers, only to blindside them when the hero, Ryle, is branded a domestic abuser. I use a reception and reader-focussed lens to elaborate this claim through close analysis of *It Ends with Us* and its social media reviews, exploring how Hoover uses romance tropes to present Ryle as a "bad boy" instead of an abuser. By deconstructing Hoover's history with the romance genre, I argue that the immense affective success of *It Ends with Us* relies on Hoover's expert knowledge of romance tropes and her willingness to experiment with genre. By analysing examples of the text's reception, I explore how the rich history of tropes within the romance genre can be manipulated to maximise affective responses to fiction. I relate this understanding to the textual, social, and economic tensions informing contemporary genre fiction publishing.

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Keywords:
Colleen Hoover, reception, romance tropes, social media

Introduction

In an increasingly digital literary sphere, the reading experience is incessantly mediated, from conception to reception. As highlighted by reception theorist Ika Willis, "the system" of reading "itself", particularly the interaction between "text and reader", is always "mediated by contextual factors which enable and structure that encounter in the first place" (Willis, 2017, p. 5). This mediation is becoming more complex as digital media and online, social reading practices become widespread. Authors, readers, and the text are closer than ever, feeding off each other in an endless cycle of impact and mediation. Authors become mediated by an industry which desperately wants to engage readers through social media advertising. Readers mediate future publishing and readership by leaving public reviews on platforms like the Amazon-owned reviewing site Goodreads. Mediation has always been a part of reading practice. However, pre-digital reading and receptive practices are amplified by digital integration. This amplification changes the way scholars and readers understand the creation, circulation, and consumption of literature, and makes visible when an author is trying to experiment with elements of the "system".

One element that digital media has amplified is genre. Genres like romance orient the reader's expectations and allow them to understand what the reading experience for a certain text should look like. In a digital reading landscape, all aspects of this understanding of genre are more visible. With the accessibility of platforms like Instagram or TikTok, short reviews of fiction can be distributed and consumed with ease. For tech-savvy readers, the pool of recommendations has become very large. Pre-digital reading practice has always accounted for recommendation culture, with pivotal, genre-specific studies like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* highlighting the importance of recommendation in genre reading communities (Radway, 1984). Considering that this already prominent culture has grown in the digital age, genre is more important than ever, as readers use it to determine what texts align with their personal preferences.

Romance has always been a high-volume genre with legacy publisher Mills & Boon alone publishing "over 700 new titles yearly" (Mills & Boon UK). Romance, and the demand for contemporary romance fiction, is still growing rapidly. Neilsen BookScan reported that Australian romance sales had "more than double[d]" in 2024, compared to "pre-pandemic 2019", resulting in an "average annual growth rate of 49 per cent for three years" (Kembrey, 2024). Sales have also doubled in the US and the UK (Tivnan, 2025). Due to the sheer size of the romance genre, romance readers must rely on their personal taste to narrow down their book selection. Romance tropes assist readers in making these decisions. Romance tropes are repeated plot lines, character types, and narrative situations across the corpus of a genre. These similarities work to create sub-genres through repetition, like the "bad boy" romance: a trope-based subgenre that stars a controversial, hypermasculine love interest. This overarching trope can include cold billionaires, brooding cowboys, and mafia bosses. Tropes assist romance writers in fulfilling the requirements of what makes a "romance", namely, the genre's token "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA), as each repeated plotline indicates to the seasoned romance reader that they are one step closer to this happy ending. Tropes also

allow authors to experiment with the genre. The required happy ending, commonly seen by critics as "depressingly predictable", forms a safety net, allowing authors to take risks in their characterisation and plot (Fuchs, 2004, p. 130). Readers know that however bad the narrative gets, whether the hero gets violent or engages in criminal activity, the narrative will always have a happy ending, where the protagonists will be romantically together. Tropes therefore give scholars key insight into the complexities and flexibilities of the romance genre's formula.

With these genre-based expectations, questions arise as to what happens when a romance text breaks the happy ending rule. Colleen Hoover's 2016 release, *It Ends with Us*, a novel that was marketed and shelved in most libraries and bookstores as a romance, shocks readers with a twist in its 14th chapter: its supposed hero, Ryle, is abusive. *It Ends with Us* leans into its romantic façade with its pink, floral cover and blurb that refers to itself as a "too good to be true romance", luring unsuspecting readers into an affective trap. While some fans have tried to warn readers about its deceptive categorisation on social media sites like Goodreads and TikTok, others attempt to hide the novel's twist by speaking cryptically about the abuse, using purposely vague terms like "the part", as if the novel's true plotline is a shared secret between its fans. Hoover knew how to characterise Ryle in a way that would lure unsuspecting romance readers with novels like her 2014 release, *Ugly Love*, featuring bad boy heroes. With this considered, Hoover demonstrates how tropes can be exploited, undermined, and experimented with in an evolving digital literary sphere.

It is important to outline why I use terms like "exploited", "tricked", and "deceptive" in this article to describe Hoover's utilisation of a plot twist, a common literary device. I argue that Hoover was aware that *It Ends with Us* would read as a romance novel. I believe this to be true due to her history of writing romances. Hoover notoriously dislikes being "confined to one genre" as an author, writing in her Goodreads biography that "If you put me in a box, I'll claw my way out" (Hoover). However, many of Hoover's releases prior to *It Ends with Us* were new adult romances, with Hoover publishing 11 novels and novellas within this category between 2012 and 2016. By 2016, Hoover knew how to craft a desirable love interest. *It Ends with Us* is a story based on Hoover's mother's experience with domestic violence. Hoover aims to make readers understand how difficult it is for victims of domestic violence to leave their relationships, detailing in the novel's epigraph that she "wanted to write" the novel for "the people who didn't understand" (Hoover, 2016, p. 369). Hoover even claims that she "was one of those people" and as she was writing Ryle she fell "in love with him in those first, several chapters, just as Lily had fallen in love with him. Just as my mother fell in love with my father" (p. 369). Although scholars can never be certain about an author's intention, it is clear through Hoover's epigraph that she intended to place the reader in Lily's shoes.

While I argue that Hoover intentionally exploited the conventions and tropes of the romance genre to trick audiences into rooting for Ryle, Hoover is not solely responsible for her novel being marketed as romance. Even pre-digital models of literary reception, including frameworks like Darnton's communications circuit (1982) and Bourdieu's literary field studies (1992), proposed that the text cannot exist without the support of multiple systems, actors, and networks. *It Ends with Us* and its appearance as a romance relies on publishers, graphic

designers, reviewers, booksellers, and (most importantly) fans. However, Hoover demonstrates the generic complexity of the romance formula to affectively impact these very same fans. This engagement with tropes bolsters the novel's paratextual romance branding and maximises emotional impact when the novel's twist is revealed.

It is important to note that while this article was being written in the late months of 2024, the identity of *It Ends with Us* was shifting due to a public relations feud between the stars of the novel's 2024 film adaptation, Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni. While the intricacies of this feud are outside of the scope of this article, the feud has simultaneously destabilised and reinforced the novel's relationship with the romance genre. Lively was publicly lambasted for calling on fans to "grab [their] friends" and "wear [their] florals" in what the press titled a "car-crash promotional tour" (Mahdawi, 2024). Lively's marketing strategy was described as "wildly inappropriate" when promoting "a film about abuse" (Mahdawi, 2024). In trying to continue the novel's romance branding, Lively was extensively criticised – reinforcing that Hoover's intentional manipulation of the genre holds affective weight and was "deceptive". Furthermore, while these paratextual events have raised public awareness that the novel is not a romance, I posit that Hoover's manipulation of romantic tropes persists. While new readers may not be as shocked by the novel's twist – Hoover's expert manipulation of tropes still uses romance's familiar structure to lure readers into caring about the characters. As I will discuss later in this article, when early readers (2016–2017) learned of Ryle's abusive nature, they still felt positive affect towards him. The fact that these readers, who were less likely to be "spoiled" by the paratextual media landscape of the novel, were still forgiving of Ryle demonstrates the strength of Hoover's romantic characterisation.

This article uses sourced social media reviews to analyse reception alongside close textual analysis of *It Ends with Us*. While Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are very active sites for book recommendation, with TikTok's "#BookTok" alone garnering a staggering 14 billion views (Simon & Schuster, n.d.), this article primarily uses Goodreads to gather affective and receptive data [1]. Goodreads has been a central hub for reception and reviewing since its inception in 2006. As Hoover's novel was initially published in 2016, roughly three years before BookTok began to garner popularity, Goodreads provides an opportunity to understand how readers felt about Hoover's characterisation before paratextual pressures like BookTok spoilers, or the chaos surrounding the film's release, impacted their reception. Therefore, in using Goodreads as a lens, we can understand the different ways that the text has been received over its lifespan.

By examining Hoover's use of tropes in the novel, alongside the rich and heavily documented social media reception of *It Ends with Us*, we can understand how Hoover was successful in tricking readers into thinking that the novel was a romance. Further to this method of close textual and receptive analysis, I will be drawing upon my own autoethnographic experience as a romance reader and scholar to make assumptions about the affective position of the reader, based on the formulaic nature of the genre. Using *It Ends with Us* as a case study, this analysis will suggest that while genre still plays a pivotal role in orienting readerly expectations, authors

are willing to play with convention to maximise audience response, gaining valuable, emotional real estate in an overly saturated literary market.

Romance and the Bad Boy

Due to the safety net of the happy ending, the romance genre has never been afraid of a controversial love interest. With this considered, while Ryle demonstrates violent tendencies from his very first scene where he kicks a patio chair "repeatedly, over and over" (Hoover, 2016, p. 6), he is still perceived by the audience as being alluring because of his risk. As highlighted by Jayne Ann Krentz in her seminal anthology *Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women*, "in a romance, the hero must play two roles. He is not only the hero, but also the villain" (Krentz, 1992, p. 109). For Krentz, the conflict of romance is built from the tension between the hero and the heroine. Romance tropes assist in creating this tension.

In the romance novel, scenarios which would be horrific if real, such as rape, sex trafficking, or gang crime are neutralised by the fact that the perpetrator, criminal, or rapist reforms by the novel's conclusion. This affordance of the genre allows romance readers to explore taboo fantasies in a safe space. Tropes enable these ethically grey spaces to exist, making romance a complex and multifaceted genre, unable to be understood easily by those who are not romance readers. Krentz argues that conflicts in romance, particularly those that rest on a significant power dynamic, result in readerly "thrill and satisfaction", declaring that "the romance heroine must face a man who is a genuine challenge" (p. 109). More recently, Catherine Roach writes that romance novels do "deep psychic work" in allowing women to engage in "safe and imaginative" fantasy, working through the "contradictory position of the heterosexual woman within rape culture" (Roach, 2016, p. 181). Roach expands that "If the name of the game is patriarchy, then a reparative reading of gender relations is one in which the domineering or uncaring patriarch becomes the good man" (p. 182). With these understandings considered, Hoover uses the romance genre to experiment with affect. The seasoned romance reader knows that while the violent, domineering, or "alpha" hero poses "risk", he does not pose true threat, as the threat must be neutralised to achieve the genre's critical happy ending. *It Ends with Us* does not follow this formula. The reader is led to believe that the "threat" of Ryle's violence will be neutralised by the end of the novel, but it is not. Approaching this twist, Hoover attempts to make readers care about Ryle through engaging affect. In *The Particulars of Rapture,* Charles Altieri argues that by analysing the aesthetic properties of fiction and their capacity to "move" us, we can further understand how art can act as a catalyst for sentimentality (2003). When Hoover builds Ryle's character to be likeable and even sexy, readers respond to these stimuli, allowing themselves to feel "aesthetic" responses such as "pride and joy and bravery", or even love and jealousy, and making "us care about who we are and what we do" (Altieri, 2003, pp. 5–7). Therefore, Hoover plays with tropes and affect to draw readers into investing into Ryle's character in hopes of maximising affective response when the novel's twist is revealed.

Tropes are also informed by external pressures placed upon the text by the "system" of "reading itself" (Willis, 2017, p. 5). Romance, as a genre, exists in its own publishing ecosystem which

Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins refer to as a "genre world" (Driscoll et. al, 2022, p. 1). Building on Howard Becker's theory of the art world, the genre worlds model sees fiction as a collaborative process, where the work "is not an object in stasis" (p. 1). Rather, the work is a constantly evolving entity influenced by "the people who receive, respond to, or critique it" (p. 1). They suggest that genre fiction should be analysed through the lens of its "connected social, industrial, and textual practices" using this

> tripartite focus to work through nuanced facets of the production and circulation of genre fiction, including its relationship to digital technologies, its transnational and transmedia migrations, its involvement in global fan cultures and local communities, and its evolving textual features. (Driscoll et. al, 2022, p. 1)

The shelving of *It Ends with Us* in the romance section was not based solely on the content between its covers. Hoover's writing practice has been informed by the industrial, social, and textual concerns of her genre world. In an interview with *Today*, Hoover talks about the decision made to age up her protagonists in the 2024 film adaptation of the novel. Hoover justifies this decision: "back when I wrote *It Ends with Us*, the new adult (genre) was very popular. You were writing college-age characters. That's what I was contracted to do. I made Lily very young" (Hoover in Portée, 2023). This admission that Hoover was writing what "was very popular" at the time demonstrates the corporate mediation of the author in an increasingly trend-based literary landscape. The genre worlds model accounts for these pressures, detailing that "the multifarious collective activities that go into the creation, circulation, and appreciation of genre texts" impact the final product, particularly its "industrial paradigms, and affective communities" (Driscoll et. al, 2022, p. 2). Hoover has traversed the industrial pressures of the romance genre and managed to manipulate it to her own will. With this considered, *It Ends with Us* works as a useful case study for understanding how texts both impact, and are impacted by, genre.

Scholarly understandings of genre fiction are constantly changing, as the genre is not a static classification, but shifts as society does. While I argue that Hoover's use of generic conventions is an exploitation of a set formula, it is also important to note that how authors utilise and impact genre is always changing. Therefore, while Hoover does exploit tropes to maximise audience affect, she is also participating in a long history of generic experimentation. In his work on genre, John Frow argues that genre does not just comprise "stylistic devices", but rather that genres create "effects" or reflections of life. Frow furthers that these effects are not "fixed and stable, since texts – even the simplest and most formulaic – do not 'belong' to genres but are uses of them" (Frow, 2006, p. 2). In the light of Frow's argument, Hoover is not simply writing a romance according to established formulas but contributing to a constantly evolving "economy of genres" (p. 2). Frow further argues that while genre is a "conventional and highly organised" set of "constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning", the structure of genre is what produces meaning by "shap[ing] and guid[ing]" (p. 10). For Frow, "generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place", but this structure is self-fulfilling (p. 10). To use a genre is both to be shaped and to shape: the "acts and structures work upon and modify each other" (p. 10). Hoover pushes the

boundaries of the romance genre to shape it and challenge it, but she also takes the tropes and structures which shape the genre and subverts them.

Hoover's History

The reader's belief that Ryle will reform is based not only on the "formulaic" nature of the romance genre, but also by familiarity with Hoover's oeuvre. In 2015, Colleen Hoover's biography on Facebook consisted of one sentence: "#1 NYT bestselling author of books that will destroy you, then put you back together" (Hoover, 2015). This description indicates that Hoover had established her signature formula of heartbreaking romances before the publication of *It Ends with Us*. From Hoover's first novel, *Slammed* (2012), readers have been taught that relationships require negotiation. Layken and Will negotiate the immorality and power dynamic of their teacher-student relationship. With only a three-year age gap and Layken's expedited maturity after the death of her father, the pair (and in turn, the readers) can justify the ethically grey elements of their relationship. Hoover's third novel, *Hopeless* (2013), asks readers to look past the hero, Holder's, violent tendencies, with the most notable of these tendencies being that Holder was placed in a juvenile correction facility for committing a homophobic hate crime. Furthermore, *Maybe Someday* (2014) sees the relationship of the primary couple, Sydney and Ridge, form when Ridge is already in a committed relationship. While these examples do demonstrate the ethical slippage of what defines a desirable relationship in Hoover's novels, Hoover's *Ugly Love* (2014), amplifies this challenge.

Ugly Love follows Miles and Tate's turbulent relationship. Miles is a cold and damaged hero. Tate learns of Miles's past alongside the reader. This past includes a passionate, teenage love affair with his stepsibling, Rachel. Rachel becomes pregnant and the pair choose to keep the baby, but it later dies in a car accident. *Ugly Love* explores Krentz's observation that the romantic lead must play both hero and villain from its very first scene (1992). Tate, when moving into her brother, Corbin's, apartment, finds a drunk man collapsed on the floor of the doorway. While manoeuvring the man, Tate's ankle is gripped "so tightly" that she is "pretty sure it might bruise" (Hoover, 2014, p. 14). After Tate gets inside, she calls Corbin for help, who calls his neighbour, Miles. It is revealed that Miles is, quite literally, both the hero and the threat: he is the man in the hallway. Miles's dichotomous characterisation continues throughout the novel. His appearance is described as "if two different creators were at war when he was envisioned", and he, as a figure, swaps rapidly between romantic hero and icy villain (p. 40). As Miles consistently tells Tate that he is "not fine" with her being in his presence, readers are reminded of his redeeming factors such as his "sultry voice", "firm" jaw, or his eyes, "as clear blue as the waters of the Caribbean" (p. 55, 33, 74, 35). Readers are encouraged to look past Miles's physical and verbal aggression using tropes and descriptions that foreshadow future intimacy. Miles's villainy is continued in Tate and Miles's first kiss. Tate describes the encounter through sustained reference to death. She says:

> I feel like I'm about to die, and there isn't a damn thing in that first-aid kit that could save me. He tightens his grip on my neck . . . and then he kills me. Or he kisses me. I can't tell which, since I'm pretty sure they would feel the same. His lips against mine feel like everything (p. 86).

Not only is the intriguing coldness of Miles's character explored through the blurring of pleasure and pain in the juxtaposing "kiss" and "kill", but this characterisation is furthered through the "tightening" of the grip on Tate's neck (p. 86). In this example, readers understand how violence and risk become blurred within the "safety net" of romance fiction. Although Tate is arguably in an endangered position with Miles's hand tightening around her throat, the romantic spark between the pair has been established, therefore making Miles's violence sexy and not threatening. The similarity between Miles and Ryle is visible. Both characters are described as cold, bad boys, yet one reforms, and one does not. In this way, Ryle's characterisation can be seen to be deceptive, as within Hoover's oeuvre, characters like Ryle have been able to be "fixed" by the novel's resolution.

Tropes in *It Ends with Us*

The groundwork laid in Hoover's prior works allowed her to position Ryle as a desirable yet damaged romantic hero in *It Ends with Us*. The novel follows 23-year-old Lily's whirlwind relationship with Ryle, a charming neurosurgeon seven years her senior. Ryle and Lily first meet on a rooftop, where they have both come to reflect. As Lily sits on the roof's railing, Ryle barges onto the roof and kicks the furniture, described as appearing "on the verge of a breakdown" (Hoover, 2016, p. 5). His anger is neutralised by his immaculate characterisation. Lily lists his attributes: "well-manicured, smells like money, looks to be several years older than me (…) I can tell by his haircut alone that he's the kind of man people are easily impressed by, and (…) he is wearing a casual Burberry shirt, and I'm not sure I've ever been on the radar of someone who could casually afford one" (p. 8). Ryle is positioned as a traditional, patriarchal romantic hero. This characterisation is demonstrated through the class gap – Ryle "smells like money" and Lily has "never been on the radar" of someone able to afford luxury items – and the pair's age difference. Romance, as a genre, is situated in the realm of middle- and working-class fantasy, and often financial security is an attractive element of the romantic hero, as readers imagine themselves being unburdened of financial worry by a wealthy CEO, pilot, or mafia boss. Therefore, Lily's reference to Ryle as "someone of a completely different lifestyle and tax bracket" programmatically engrains Ryle as the dominant figure within their relationship (p. 9). This power dynamic does not spark alarm for attuned romance readers, but instead works to lure the reader into a sense of generic stability.

Throughout this opening scene, Ryle's violence and instability is offset by his status and authenticity. Lily and Ryle sit and discuss the reasons why they are on the roof. Ryle compliments Lily on her "honesty" before her physical appearance, leading to the birth of a motif that travels the course of the novel: the "naked truth". After expressing his distaste for how society is so "fake", the pair create a system of confession where they can say what they feel without caring about judgement by prefacing the statement with "naked truth" (p. 16). In this scene, the characters play with notions of honesty and negotiation. The fact that Ryle's first affection towards Lily manifests itself in complimenting her honesty creates an expectation of open dialogue, a healthy and desirable trait in a relationship. With this considered, the concept of honesty is used to gradually skew the reader's moral compass: Ryle

is not being abrasive when he tells Lily that he is repulsed by marriage or when he believes that raising children is not an achievement because "anyone" can do it, he is just being open and honest about his feelings (p. 22). The reader is trained to negotiate more elements of Ryle's character when Lily reveals her "naked truth". Lily admits that her father was abusive to her mother, and that she sometimes looked forward to when her father would hit her mother, because Lily would get treated better after the abuse: "I knew if he hit her, the two weeks that followed would be great" (p. 17). The pair discuss the morality of abuse. Ryle claims that "There is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things" (p.17). Lily considers this response:

> I open my mouth to respond, but his words strike me silent. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things. I guess that's true in a way. No one is exclusively bad, nor is anyone exclusively good. Some are just forced to work harder at suppressing the bad. (p. 17)

In this situation, Lily acts as a stand-in for the reader. She and the reader both hear Ryle's statement, that people are both good and bad, and believe that the premise is sound. What the reader must strategically ignore is Ryle's justification of Lily's father's abusive nature. By positioning the reader within Lily's mind as she revisits her abuse through the lens of Ryle's grey morality, Hoover suggests that within the space of *It Ends with Us*, societally "bad" actions are excusable, misunderstood, and able to be negotiated.

Ryle and Lily do not exchange details on the roof, and Lily believes she will never meet him again. Lily continues with her life, following her dream and opening a florist shop. During this process, Lily reminisces about her first love, a homeless boy named Atlas, who she has not seen since he was violently bashed by Lily's father. Lily unknowingly employs Ryle's sister, Alyssa, at the flower shop and after reuniting, Ryle and Lily decide that their sexual chemistry is too overwhelming to be civil: the pair go their separate ways again. Ryle breaks this drought for both himself, and the reader, when he knocks on "twenty-nine" doors in Lily's apartment to "beg" her to have sex with him (p. 70). Lily reflects on this moment by musing that "There's something about a neurosurgeon literally on his knees begging for sex" (p. 71). This statement demonstrates a power exchange. By contrasting Ryle's prestigious profession to his "begging", Ryle surrenders the class-centric hierarchy he had over Lily on the rooftop. After Ryle admits that he is willing to try a relationship with Lily, the pair finally have sex. At this point, the reader is about halfway through the novel, yet all introduced complications have been resolved: Lily's flower shop has had an immensely successful grand opening, Alyssa and her partner, Marshall have fallen pregnant after many failed attempts, Lily reunites with Atlas to learn that he is well and is running a successful restaurant, and at the end of chapter 13 it is announced that Lily and Ryle "make love" instead of have sex. While the experienced romance reader would be expecting the book to wind down, the reader's physicality – as they hold a half-finished book – indicates otherwise.

As previously mentioned, chapter 14 completely alters the novel's form and expected genre. In chapter 14, Lily invites Ryle to her apartment to celebrate an innovative surgery he is due to

perform in the following week and prepares a casserole in advance. The pair get so swept up in physical affection that they burn the casserole. Ryle races to the oven to save the dish, pulling it out of the oven without an oven mitt and dropping it. Lily starts "laughing" when she realises that "he didn't even think to use a potholder" (p.185). The tone radically shifts as Lily ends up "on the floor" (p. 185). Lily recounts that "Ryle's arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward. There was enough force behind it to knock me off balance" (p. 185). While Hoover is quite clear that Ryle has hit Lily, she forces the reader to mirror Lily's state of confusion by obscuring and justifying Ryle's intention: "His entire career depends on his hand, so it has to say something that he's not even worried about it. Right?" (p. 187). This ambiguity triggers a twofold manipulation of both Lily and the reader. By using Ryle's archetypically "desirable" career as a buffer, Hoover allows the reader to remain within the fantasy. This avoidance and justification of the abuse continues when the scene slowly dissolves into a scene of love – "We're both upset and kissing and confused and sad" (p.188) – then a scene of passion:

> I'm hurting so much on the inside, yet my body craves his apology in the form of his mouth and hands on me […] I need to feel his sorrow. His regret. I get both of these things in the way he kisses me. I spread my legs for him and his sorrow comes in another form. Slow, apologetic thrusts inside of me. Every time he enters me, he whispers another apology. And by some miracle, every time he pulls out of me, my anger leaves with him. (pp. 188–189)

In this scene, violence is entwined with sexuality. Lily is "hurting" on the inside, but Ryle's "apology" – his violence – changes into "another form". Ryle is converting his violence into sex. However, Hoover is also employing the same technique as Ryle on a paratextual level. As Lily's anger towards Ryle leaves through penetration, Hoover quells reader's doubts that Ryle is a violent or "bad person" through the passion and sensuality of the sex scene. Furthermore, this scene can be read as a manifestation of Lily's confession on the roof about her abusive father. Ryle and Hoover are rewarding both Lily and the reader with sex to justify Ryle's violence, to separate him from "real" abusers like Lily's father. Lily is keenly aware that Ryle has intentionally pushed her, but he handles the situation in a way that separates him from an "abuser" such as her father: "He's not like my father. He can't be. He's nothing like that uncaring bastard" (p. 188). By rewarding readers with a sex scene, pulling them back into Ryle's magnetism, Hoover positions the reader to empathise with Lily's confession that she would "look forward" to her mother being hit. Hoover continues to reward Ryle's abusive nature by ending the chapter with the pair admitting that they love each other. Here, more than anywhere else in the novel, readers understand Hoover's methods of negotiation: Ryle didn't intentionally push Lily, he is just career motivated. He is not a "bad person", he was just struggling to "suppress the bad".

Hoover allows readers to excuse Ryle's first instance of abuse by bombarding them with rewards. These rewards primarily take the form of Ryle's moves toward a committed, monogamous relationship. In chapter 18, the pair move in together, and hastily decide to have a Vegas wedding. Readers are not invited into the ceremony but are informed that they have

had six weeks of marital bliss when Lily sighs "*This is the life*" (p. 227). While the reader is led to believe that Ryle has grown, particularly when he agrees to Lily's request for financial independence before the wedding – "I told him I wanted separate checking accounts" (p. 227) – he becomes angry after finding a phone number given to Lily by Atlas. Here, the reader is presented with a pivotal decision as to whether Ryle can be "fixed". As Ryle throws Lily's phone into the wall, Lily gives the reader two options:

> I think this could go one of two ways.
> He's going to leave me.
> Or he's going to hurt me (p. 230).

The romance reader longs for Ryle to leave, to show that he has grown as a person, and that he can "suppress the bad". The reader wants to be proven wrong as much as Lily does. They have both justified and ignored Ryle's violent nature throughout the entire novel, from the very first scene. Ryle "runs a hand through his hair and walks straight for the door. He leaves" (p. 230). Lily begs Ryle to let her explain, but "he pushes [Lily] away from him" (p. 230). The reader believes that Ryle has been able to suppress his anger, and is pushing Lily away emotionally, as he was already described as "leav[ing]" the situation. However, when Lily's narration returns, she is back on the floor. Ryle tells Lily that she "fell down the stairs" and that she is "hurt" (p. 231). Both the reader and Lily simultaneously come to the realisation that Ryle has pushed her: "But I didn't fall. He pushed me. Again. That's twice." (p. 231) This directly opposes Lily's "limit" for Ryle's violence, and in this moment, the reader is forced to make the choice to stay within the fantasy of Ryle as a beautiful, yet damaged, neurosurgeon, and a trope-perfect romantic hero or to acknowledge him for what he is becoming: a domestic abuser. Ryle acknowledges his fault and asks Lily to "help" him, citing his statement on the rooftop that there were "no bad people" (p. 243). Hoover operates in shades of grey. Lily and Ryle negotiate his anger through comparisons to Lily's own history of abuse. Ryle becomes an extension of Lily's father, but Lily refuses to "become" her mother. Regardless of these elements, Hoover continues to bombard the reader with rewards. Ryle buys Lily an apartment, Lily's florist gets nominated for an award for the best new business in Boston, Alyssa has her baby – Rylee – making Ryle and Lily uncle and aunt. During these situations, Ryle and Lily do still fight, but Ryle is able to control his anger. What should have been Lily's (and the reader's) breaking point in terms of Ryle's violence becomes swept under the rug as Hoover introduces a new host of reasons to stay around.

When Ryle relapses and attempts to sexually assault Lily, Hoover makes the decision for both Lily and the reader that Ryle is no longer "negotiable", shattering the illusion that *It Ends with Us* is a conventional romance and recategorising Ryle. He is no longer the brooding, unavailable, bad boy, but an abuser. After Lily comes back from visiting Alyssa at the hospital, Ryle initiates sex:

> When his mouth is back on mine, he lifts me and sets me down on the countertop, standing between my knees (…) I'm already breathing heavily as his warm lips slide

> across mine. He takes a fistful of my hair, and he tugs gently so that I'm looking up at him. (p. 261)

Ryle's physical coercion of Lily, lifting her and pulling her hair, places him both visually – as Lily is looking up at him – and metaphorically in a position of power. Ryle progressively gets more violent. Both Lily and the reader experience confusion as to whether the situation is one of abuse or of kink. When Ryle grasps Lily's throat and kisses her passionately, she "takes it, because [she has] no idea what's going through his head" (p. 262). Throughout this scene, Ryle is described as having an erection. Ryle forces Lily to read a newspaper article as he removes items of her clothing: it is revealed in the article that Atlas's restaurant was named after Lily. The scene devolves into a fight, Ryle proceeds to bite a tattoo that Lily got to remember her lost relationship with Atlas. Now bleeding, Lily begs Ryle to "walk away", to restrain his anger and justifies his actions by claiming that "He's angry. He's hurt. And he's not Ryle" (p. 265). Ryle subverts this, by beginning to force himself on Lily, claiming that he's "not angry", but rather, that he has not "proved to [Lily] how much [he] loves [her]" (p. 265).

In this instance, Ryle becomes Lily's father, with Lily later professing that she too has become her mother by "allow[ing]" herself to get abused (p. 273). While non-consensual sex is not frowned upon within romance fiction, particularly as Lily admits that her sex life with Ryle is "wild" and "a little dangerous" (p. 262), it could be argued that the sexual assault turns Ryle into a substitute of her father. Here, Hoover triggers an exchange in romantic interest. Lily cannot continue to become her mother, nor can she continue the cycle of abuse that she witnessed in her mother (p. 273). Lily is only able to distance herself from Ryle because she can no longer deny the similarities between Ryle and her father. Lily calls Atlas after the abuse, who takes her to the hospital. As Lily is receiving stitches and being assessed for a concussion, she learns that she is pregnant with Ryle's child. Atlas comforts her through the news, and in this moment, Ryle becomes eclipsed as the love interest. The reader no longer needs to negotiate Ryle's violence, because the responsibility of the happy ending has been placed on Atlas.

Reception

Hoover uses romantic tropes to position the reader as parallel to Lily and as Lily feels betrayed for forgiving Ryle, so do the readers. The reception of *It Ends with Us* demonstrates that Hoover's bad boy characterisation lingers for experienced romance readers as they want closure for their romantic hero. Amelia [2] writes that she was left with "feelings [she didn't] quite understand", and confesses: "Call me twisted, but I still held out hope for Ryle" (Goodreads, 2016). Another reader, Marnie, writes: "I wanted to hate Ryle, but even though his actions caused the devastation in his and Lily's relationship, I felt really bad for him" (Goodreads, 2016). Reader Suzanna takes a slightly different perspective, musing that "If I had known it was going to end this way I wouldn't have felt so invested in one of the characters. I know it's never an excuse, but I thought given his childhood and maybe some therapy he could redeem himself. [In my opinion] I am glad she broke the pattern but bitter at the same time this was part of his character and that he didn't get his [happily ever after]" (Goodreads, 2016).

Not only do readers still express positive affect for Ryle, but the reception of *It Ends with Us* highlights that Hoover was successful in "tricking" audiences into believing that Ryle was the hero. This success is demonstrated through thematic mirroring between reviews and the novel. The most obvious example of this is readers expressing confusion or manipulation, as readers write that they feel "mindfucked" by the twist, actively seeking romance's crucial happy ending (Goodreads, 2016). However, these affective links with Lily also become visceral and bodily, as reviews of the novel often use metaphors of violence, reflecting the novel's abuse. Fan communities already communicate affectively and viscerally. This visceral and even bodily reaction to fiction is amplified in genres like romance, which aim to replicate the feelings of the character in the reader. Linda Williams's influential essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess: details that the "success" of certain genres like horror, pornography, or melodramas are determined by the "degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (Williams, 1991, p. 162). She expands that

> whether the spectator at the porn film actually experiences orgasm, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears—the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response. (p. 163)

I argue that romance is another genre that is evaluated in this matter. As Hoover writes in her epigraph, she "fell in love" with Ryle, she wanted readers to fall in love with him too (Hoover, 2016, p. 369). Therefore, Hoover successfully used the conventions of the romance genre to replicate Lily's emotions within the reader, maximising affective output and emotional investment in the narrative. Further, by contrasting one reader's reception of *It Ends with Us* with their review of the novel's optimistic sequel *It Starts with Us*, scholars can understand how the violence depicted within the duology's first novel is transmitted into its reception. A book blogger opens their review with "When was the last time a book just completely slayed me, cutting me so deep?" (Goodreads, 2017), highlighting the intense, affective response that the novel had on them. Compared to their description of *It Starts with Us* as "long and unnecessary", the blogger makes it clear from the beginning of their review that *It Ends with Us* had a profound impact. The blogger reflects on this in their *It Starts with Us* review: "I sobbed my way through [*It Ends with Us*] especially that ending that completely gutted me. To prep for this book, I reread the ending, and sure enough, it walloped me again" (Goodreads, 2022). The cumulative violence of "slayed" and "cutting" is enhanced when the blogger mentions that the novel "walloped" them. The violence within *It Ends with Us* is not isolated within this review but scattered throughout the novel's reception. Many refer to the novel as "raw", Anna writes that the novel will "hit you hard", and one reader even threatens to punch Colleen until she "bleeds" as payback for breaking her heart and soul (Goodreads, 2024). This contagion of language highlights how visible affect within reading communities creates a symbiotic and repetitive system that continues to reinforce itself through sustained engagement.

Conclusion

As seen through analysis of Hoover's bibliography and the textual cues within *It Ends with Us*, the use of romance tropes in this novel was not unintentional. Hoover was aiming to impact readers affectively by luring them into emotionally investing in a false hero. Scholars also see from this novel's online reception that Hoover was successful in tricking some audience members into believing that Ryle was the hero. This characterisation was informed by a multitude of corporate and social pressures. In an increasingly oversaturated and commercialised literary landscape, authors are actively looking to set themselves apart from other authors in the same genre and Hoover has, dominating book sales internationally. This success demonstrates that the emotional or "heartbreaking" angle of her fiction is working on a corporate level. In Hoover's 2022 profile with *The New York Times*, Hoover was cited as selling "8.6 million copies" of her novels that year, "more than the bible" (Alter, 2022).

The heartbreaking reputation of *It Ends with Us* hinges on Hoover's knowledge of, and simultaneous exploitation of, romantic tropes. This textual manipulation of genre indicates changes occurring within contemporary publishing. This use of romantic structure and signposting highlights that romance is a genre that is built upon affective response. In understanding how Hoover has manipulated genre to change the reception of her fiction, scholars can understand key changes happening within our literary sphere. These changes primarily pertain to the visibility of all aspects of the publication and reception cycle. Readers are closer to the text than ever. Authors use their social media presence to tease cover designs, to share snippets of the text, and to share their emotions on writer's block or editing. Readers also see other readers sharing their reviews or memes about the text, sometimes even before the book's official publication. In turn, authors and publishers are also seeing more of the reception than ever before. Publishing houses can be contacted with a direct message or a Goodreads review, and in a landscape where most book advertisement is digital, a bad review has more weight than ever before. While cleverly concealing a plot twist is not a new feat, Hoover's manipulation of the genre runs deeper than simply obfuscation. In using tropes to trick readers into responding profoundly, and visibly, to her texts, Hoover has used the readers' own contexts and tastes against them to maximise emotional impact, but also her work's profit and popularity.

With the increasing visibility of all aspects of the "system" of reading considered, future study will be needed to evaluate the way that digital reading practice is evolving. As Hoover has experimented with genre, visibly pushing the boundaries, there is space to investigate how digital reading practice is impacting and diversifying all aspects of literary convention and production. For example, Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* series prioritises character happiness over a pivotal plot climax, experimenting with literary convention by refusing traditional narrative structure (Oseman, 2018). Author Alex Aster crowdsourced interest on social media for her novel *Lightlark*, posting a vague synopsis on TikTok before she had even written a sentence, and pushing the boundaries of publishing practice (Aster, 2022). Finally, Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series pushed at the boundaries of fantasy and romance, leading to the rise of "romantasy" and innovating how literary studies categorises texts (Maas, 2015). These examples are all widely circulated online, but also highlight how the increasing visibility of the reading "system" is leading to experimentation with literary convention. This

line of enquiry would be productive for further study, as digital reading practice continues to expand and innovate the way literature is consumed, circulated, and created.

Notes

[1] "#BookTok" is a hashtag used to group or categorise videos posted about books and reading on TikTok. The term "BookTok" is commonly used to discuss the social reading community which thrives on the app.
[2] All names changed for privacy of Goodreads users.

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