TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

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

Macquarie University

Alexandra Mulvey and Hsu-Ming Teo

"You're a total dick sometimes, but it's a tolerable kind of dickishness": Hegemonic masculinity and sports romances [1]

Abstract:
Sports romances are one of the fastest growing segments of the romance market. This article analyses representations of hegemonic masculinity in straight ice hockey and ice-skating romances. We begin with a brief discussion of the gendering of sports and how this is reflected in bestselling sport romance novels, before moving to a consideration of how masculinity is manifested in ice hockey and ice-skating novels. We argue that, as in real life, sports in romance novels are gendered as "masculine" and "feminine", with body contact sports such as hockey being gendered the former while sports favouring grace, flexibility and artistry, such as figure skating, are perceived as feminine. In sports romance novels, hegemonic masculinity is signified by physical size, sexual prowess, various expressions of violence ranging from verbal to physical, and a "happily ever after" ending which can affirm hegemonic masculinity by subordinating female characters' own ambitions and achievements to marriage and motherhood, thus ensuring athlete heroes' "reproductive futurism".

Biographical note:
Alexandra Mulvey is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University working on a Creative Writing thesis, "From Dance to Romance: Challenging Lesbophobia on the Stage and on the Page", about representations of gender and romance in coupled sports and coupled performances. A competitive artistic roller skater, Alexandra is a six-time Australian champion and fifteen-time National medallist. Her first sports romance novel, *Roll With It*, was self-published in 2022 and is available in major bookstores. She is working on her second novel, *Ready To Roll*.

Hsu-Ming Teo is Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Macquarie University. Her publications include *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (2012); the edited book *The Popular Culture of Romantic Love in Australia* (2017); the volumes *Travel and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic Historical Fiction: Exotic Journeys, Reparative Histories?* (2025) and *Conflict and Colonialism in 21st Century Romantic*

Historical Fiction: Repairing the Past, Repurposing History (2024), both co-edited with Paloma Fresno-Calleja; *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (2020), co-edited with Jayashree Kamblé and Eric Murphy Selinger; and *Cultural History in Australia* (2003), co-edited with Richard White.

Keywords:
Romance novels, sports, athletes, ice hockey, figure-skating, gender, hegemonic masculinity

Introduction

Sports romances are one of the fastest growing subgenres in the romance market (Dauber, 2024; Kurzius, 2023; Prahl, 2024; Yasharoff, 2024), especially in the Young Adult (YA) or New Adult (NA) categories featuring, respectively, late high school and college/university or early career characters and situations. A brief survey of the sports romance tag on Amazon, Instagram or TikTok reveals that many of these novels feature ice hockey players in heteronormative stories that stereotype male athletes as hypermasculine and hypersexual. Ice hockey romances often crossover with ice skating romances in novels such as Madeline Fay's *For the Love of Skating* (2020), Rebecca Jenshak's *Broken Hearts* (2021), S.C. Kates's *Our Offseason* (2022), and Hannah Grace's BookTok sensation, *Icebreaker* (2022). By contrasting the "masculine" sport of ice hockey with the "feminine" sport of figure skating, athletic, gendered and sexualised performances can be compared across these sports.

This article analyses representations of hegemonic masculinity in heterosexual, heteronormative ice hockey and ice-skating romances. We argue that, as in real life, sports in romance novels are gendered as "masculine" and "feminine", with body contact sports such as hockey being gendered the former while sports favouring grace, flexibility and artistry, such as figure skating, are perceived as feminine. In the sports romance novels we examine, hegemonic masculinity is signified by physical size, sexual prowess, and various expressions of violence ranging from verbal to physical. Meanwhile, the "happily ever after" (HEA) ending of the romance reaffirms hegemonic masculinity by subordinating female characters' own ambitions and achievements to marriage and motherhood, thus ensuring the athlete heroes' "reproductive futurism" (Edelman, 2004) whereby his genetic material is perpetuated and the status quo maintained. Gendered stereotypes of sports and athletes are thus reinforced in these novels in ways that are damaging to both male and female athletes in real life.

Because we are focusing on hegemonic masculinity in heteronormative sports romance novels, we do not include in this article any discussion of the growing number of queer sports romances that are independently published, or appearing in LGBT+ fanfic (for example, Real Person Fiction featuring real people or celebrities in fictional stories, and Hockey Alternate Universe settings for fanfic). Moreover, femininity is discussed primarily in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Sports romance authors generally present a strong, positive, feminist-influenced view of heteronormative femininity. The heroines in the novels we discuss, whether or not they are athletes, are strong, ambitious, goal-driven, professionally successful, beautiful (which equates to being thin), heterosexually oriented and sexually confident. Nevertheless, although they insist they can take care of themselves, heroines are often depicted in situations where they need chivalrous male protection. Their romantic arcs unfold along a telos with reproductive futurism as its end point, in an HEA scenario where children and motherhood replace the heroine's athletic or professional ambitions even though the hero remains defined by his athletic identity. We argue that especially in cases where the story is dominated by overtly hypermasculine heroes – namely, the hockey romances – femininity is configured to serve the needs and purposes of hegemonic masculinity.

This article begins with a brief discussion of the gendering of sports and how this is reflected in bestselling sport romance novels. It then moves to a discussion of Raewyn Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity and how this is manifested in ice hockey and ice-skating novels. We follow sports romance authors Suzie Morrow's and Genevieve Chamblee's guidelines for identifying the sports romance. Morrow (2024) argues that "Central to sports romance is the portrayal of protagonists who are athletes, often depicted in their quest for love amidst the competitive pressures of sports". Chamblee (2021) agrees that "In a sports romance, the romance comes first, but the sports element is a vital part of a story". She suggests that in a proper sports romance, the athlete-protagonist's profession cannot be substituted for another profession without drastically changing the story. However, Chamblee (2020) notes, the sports "cannot overshadow the romance" because the novel is then a "sports story with a romantic subplot". The romance always come first.

Gender, hegemonic masculinity and the sports romance

Sports romance is inordinately heterosexual, heteronormative and characterised by conventional notions of masculinity and femininity because sport itself is a decidedly gendered activity often typified by blatant sexism in its practice and media coverage. In both amateur and professional practice, sport is marked by gender segregation (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 202). Male and female athletes often compete under different regulations and, in the case of sports such as gymnastics, in different events altogether (Adams, 2010, pp. 218–219). Certain types of sports are commonly regarded as "feminine" or "masculine", creating stereotypes that impact the participation and performance of the sports by members of a particular gender (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 202). For example, sports favouring grace, flexibility and artistry are perceived as feminine while contact sports are perceived as masculine (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 203). The gender which dominates participant numbers in a particular sport also contributes to the gender-typing of that sport (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 203). Thus, for example figure skating, which has overwhelmingly more female than male participants, is regarded as a "feminine" sport (Adams, 2010, p. 237).

Despite the considerable progress that has been made to encourage gender equality in sports, the sporting landscape remains predominantly male and heteronormative (Plaza et al., 2017, p. 212), and inherently sexist. Sexism in sports is manifested in a range of ways, such as gender pay gaps, limited access to resources to develop and fund athletic careers, uniform or clothing requirements that can be impractical or uncomfortable, or that have contributed to the sexualisation of women athletes, or the disparaging language used by commentators about women athletes (Fink, 2016; Hindman & Walker, 2020). Sports media is fundamentally sexist because it frames men's sports as the default while giving limited coverage and "secondary status" (Fink, 2015, p. 333) to women's sports, often focusing on women's appearance rather than abilities (UNESCO report, 2023). Female athletes are often referred to by commentators and sports journalists as "great women … players", while similar gender attributions are never made regarding male athletes who are assumed to be the athletic norm (Fink, 2015, p. 334). Media coverage frequently infantilises women athletes, referring to them as "girls" or "young

ladies" (Fink, 2015, p. 334). There is a lack of respectful media coverage of women's sports compared to men's sports, thus marginalising women athletes and perpetuating the stereotype that sports is a heterosexual male activity (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 203). As Patrick Burke (2013) wrote in *The New York Times*, when basketballer Brittney Griner came out as lesbian, nobody was surprised because "[i]n sports right now, there are two different stereotypes – that there are no gay male athletes, and every female athlete is a lesbian."

The gendering of sports described above is evident in the mainstream sports romance novels that became popular around the turn of the 21st century. A common theme in many sports romances is the pairing of a male athlete with a non-athletic female, reaffirming the equation of sports with masculinity. For instance, as of August 21, 2023 the highest ranked books on the Amazon Best Selling Sports Romance list [2] feature athletic heroes, while the heroines include: a single mother who does not recognise the famous athletic hero (Becka Mack's *Unravel Me* [2023]); a personal assistant to the sports hero (Stephanie Archer's *Behind the Net* [2023]); the hero's coach's daughter (Mila Kane's *Bad Intentions* [2023]); and the hero's teammate's sister (Adriana Locke's *The Proposal* [2023] and Avery Keelan's *Shutout* [2023]). Even Elle Kennedy's *The Deal* (2015), the book credited with being the first ice hockey romance (Dauber, 2024), features a nerdy, arty, music student tutoring the hockey hero so he can pass his philosophy class, graduate and join the NHL. Thus, heroines in these sports romances are relegated to support roles and the stories are focused on male athletes and the women who love them. In cases where the heroine is an athlete, the tendency is for her to participate in aesthetic sports such as figure skating, as in Jennifer Comeaux's *Crossing the Ice* (2014), Zapata's *From Lukov with Love* (2018), or Grace's *Icebreaker* (2022). In these examples, the athlete heroines are beautiful, slim, and therefore a good fit for the "feminine" sport of ice-skating (Voelker & Reel, 2020, p. 16). It is unusual for a sports romance to feature an athlete hero who is a figure skater without the heroine being one as well. As we discuss below, where male hockey players effortlessly embody stereotypical hegemonic masculinity because their sport is considered "masculine", the same is not true for male figure skaters since figure skating remains an exception to Eric Anderson's observation that sports is a "bastion of hegemonic masculinity" (2005, p. 21).

Hegemonic masculinity – a foundational concept developed by Raewyn Connell in 1987 – is a useful concept for analysing the portrayal of athletes in the media and in sports romance. Like sports itself, hegemonic masculinity is defined against subservient and conventional femininity. According to James Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity is a "specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between … masculinity and femininity" (2019, p. 86). Interestingly, hegemonic masculinity is also defined against "various subordinated masculinities" (Connell, 1987, p. 183). It is an ideal of masculinity to which men are expected to assent and aspire, even if the majority do not exhibit the qualities of hegemonic masculinity or perform it successfully. Hegemonic masculinity has been applied to the study of media representations of commercial sports (Messner, 1992), and to surveys of metaphors of war imagery in sports (Jansen & Sabo, 1994). It has also been deployed to understand "the popularity of body contact confrontational sports – which function as an endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity – and in understanding

the violence and homophobia frequently found in sporting milieus" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 883).

The hero of a mainstream romance is almost always the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, at times called the Alphaman hero in the romance industry (Kamblé, 2014, p. 96). Jayashree Kamblé argues that the Alphaman hero "appears to exhibit diametrically opposite behaviors toward the heroine; his attraction to, and rejection of, her supports the possibility that he reflects a repressed anxiety that men are not attracted to women" (p. 96). Among the many examples of this type of hero Kamblé analyses is the "macho football agent" hero in Susan Elizabeth Phillips's *Match Me If You Can* (2005), who combines "sexual interest with obnoxiousness" (Kamblé, 2014, p. 127). At the start of Phillips's sports romance, the hero wants to find a "traditional lady" for a wife and approaches the matchmaker heroine to do the job for him. As expected, he falls in love with the feisty heroine and she schools him into a more appropriate masculinity: one that still displays machismo but treats women with greater respect and care (Kamblé, 2014, pp. 127-128). Jonathan Allan, noting that many mainstream romances are principally about "female-authored masculinities", argues that hegemonic masculinity in romance novels is defined by certain characteristics. Masculinity, Allan suggests, is defined against femininity and is in fact a "relentless repudiation of the feminine" (2019, p. 11). It is denoted by success, measured in wealth, status, power, and overwhelming sexual attractiveness to women. Its emotional markers are stoicism and the repression of outward affect, especially in the face of problems or crises where, importantly, to be masculine means being calm and in control. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity in romance novels is also aggressive and not averse to high-risk behaviour, which makes ice hockey an ideal sport to feature the hegemonic Alphaman hero (Allan, 2019, p. 11).

Hegemonic masculinity and hockey heroes

Because of its physicality and frequent displays of aggressive confrontation on the ice in "puck battles", ice hockey is considered a "masculine" sport (Khonach, 2023, pp. 1014–1015) even though it is also played at professional levels by women. The overwhelming association of ice hockey with masculinity can be seen in the traits that are attributed to successful players. For instance, the popular Swiss ice hockey apparel brand Aycane declares on its blogsite: "Aggressive play in ice hockey involves asserting physical dominance, controlling puck possession, and imposing your will on the opposition. It goes beyond mere physicality and encompasses a mindset of determination, intensity, and relentlessness" ("Ruling the Rink", 2024). These are all qualities that the heroes of hockey romances display in the ice rink, but they are not the first qualities the heroine (or the reader) notices about them. Instead, the heroine (and the reader) is usually first made aware of the hegemonic masculinity of the hockey hero because of the size, strength and physical appearance – especially the defined musculature – of his body.

Physical perfection and the peak performance of the body as a machine is another indicator of hegemonic masculinity in the hockey romance. In a society that deems bodies with physical limitations and disabilities as undesirable and asexual (Sparkes et al., 2014, p. 179), the able-

bodied athlete's physique, which is both aesthetically pleasing *and* highly functional, becomes the perfect object of the romance reader's fantasy. Therefore, in mainstream sports romances, attention is given to the lavish description of male athletes' strength and their large, hard, muscular bodies, displaying what Janice Radway calls "spectacular masculinity" (qtd. in Allan, 2020, p. 19): the visible embodiment, not merely of hegemonic masculinity, but of hypermasculinity. The hero's "muscular, strong, virile" (Allan, 2020, p. 24) physique is a metonym of "men who are economically successful, racially superior, and visibly heterosexual" (Lorber, qtd. in Allan, 2020, p. 41). A prime example of this is the hockey hero Cut Ryder in Tijan's *The Not-Outcast* (2020), who is described by the heroine as "all man now" because he is tall, "built" and therefore "virile" (Tijan, 2020, pp. 37–38). The large, overpowering bodies of hockey heroes are similarly described in Kennedy's *The Deal* (2015, pp. 29–30) and Jenshak's *Broken Hearts* (2021, p. 31). In Grace's *Icebreaker*, the heroine Anastasia notices that the ice hockey hero Nate "towers over [her] by at least a foot" and has "broad shoulders, [and] thick muscles straining against the sleeves of his Henley" (Grace, 2022, p. 29). Anastasia also refers to her casual sexual partner Ryan – another hockey player – as being "six feet six inches of pure athletic perfection" (p. 4), thus reducing the ideal male athletic body to a "jock" stereotype despite the diverse range of body shapes and sizes evident in a variety of sports. In Tijan's *The Not-Outcast*, Grace's *Icebreaker* and Kates' *Our Offseason*, the size discrepancy between the large, strong hero and the small, light heroine is emphasised, particularly during sexual encounters, reinforcing the sexual dynamic between the characters as binary and heteronormative.

Dominance and aggression are traits that are manifested in the hypermasculine hockey heroes' sexual drive although, crucially, not necessarily in their behaviour. They are definitely not rapists; mutual desire and consent is always key. In fact, in Kennedy's *The Deal*, the hero's only notable episode of violence outside the rink occurs when he confronts another man who failed to intervene while the heroine was raped. Similarly, the hero in *Icebreaker* becomes violent when his girlfriend is kissed against her will. The heroes thus use violence against other men to defend women's consent and choice. However, the hero's own sexual feelings and desire for the heroine are often expressed in aggressive terms. This is important for emphasising their heterosexuality, thus reinforcing their hegemonic masculinity. Cut Ryder from Tijan's *The Not-Outcast* (2020) is the most overtly aggressive hero in the novels chosen for this study, and as a professional NHL player, he is also older than the other college-aged hockey heroes. The heroine Cheyenne recalls knowing him in high school and remembers him as "adorable" and well-loved, although she also notes that "being a hockey player he'd not want to be known as adorable" (Tijan, 2020, p. 4). This soft language paints a picture of Cut as a kind boy, but when the reader meets Cut, they discover he is now a sexually aggressive man. He employs dehumanising language, referring to women as "chick[s]" (p. 25) and using phrases such as "tapping this ass" (p. 26). The first time he sees Cheyenne, he immediately becomes possessive, infuriated that she is speaking to another man. He demands to know "What fucking guy?" (p. 29) she is talking to and is overcome with an animalistic, primal urge to claim her, thinking:

> I wanted to see her nipples. I wanted to sink three fingers inside of her as my hello, then push her back against the wall and drop my mouth to hers. That's exactly how I wanted

> to introduce myself to her. Then maybe I'd tell her my name before asking for hers. (Tijan, 2020, p. 29)

Cut's desire to sexually touch Cheyenne before even knowing her name, and with no mention of consent at this stage, is reminiscent of the aggressive romance heroes of the late 1970s and 1980s Kamblé (2014, p. 107) discusses, despite Tijan later revealing Cut's softer, nurturing side. In this scene when he first sets eyes on Cheyenne, he becomes aware that the aggressive, hyper-competitive side of his personality – usually reserved for the hockey rink – has been provoked as he watches Cheyenne speak to another man. He admits: "I was reacting from some inner emotions that I'd never tapped into before. I'd never had a reaction like this" (p. 31). His instinctive aggression is inextricably connected to his sporting practice – he is proud of the fact that "On the ice, I killed" (Tijan, 2020, p. 30) – and this aggression, in turn, is associated with his masculinity, virility and sexuality. The same mindset of "determination, intensity, and relentlessness" ("Ruling the Rink", 2024) that is brought from the rink into the bedroom is displayed in other hockey romances, where such traits are associated with the hero's superlative sexual prowess and the heroine's sexual satisfaction, so much so that Anastasia says to Nate in *Icebreaker*, "Don't be gentle. Fuck me like you hate me" (Grace, 2022, p. 131). Aggressive sex is thus equated with intensely orgasmic penetrative sex.

Violence is portrayed as a natural part of "masculine" ice hockey culture, and it is acceptable in two contexts: firstly, it is expected in the ice rink during hockey games, and secondly, it is applauded when it is perpetrated "chivalrously" in defence of the heroine. The physically large, strong athletes are clearly capable of violence, especially on the ice when engaging in "puck battles", but the audience also cheers and celebrates that violence. In Tijan's *The Not-Outcast*, the hero's diminutive, beloved and comically "scary" hockey mother, known throughout the NHL as "Killer Mama Alice," screams during his matches: "WAY TO KILL 'EM CUT! I NAMED YOU THAT FOR A REASON!" (2020, p. 83). But the aggression on ice sometimes spills off ice as well. Garrett Graham, the hockey hero of Kennedy's *The Deal*, punches another man who, many years ago, had testified against the heroine Hannah Wells when she was drugged and raped, and who now abuses her as a "slut". Garrett reacts furiously to this slur, telling the reader:

> *Oh hell no.*
> My fist snaps out.
> After that, everything is a blur.
> People are shouting. Someone grabs the back of my jacket … My hand throbs. I taste blood in my mouth. … I'm lost in a haze of unchecked anger. (Kennedy, 2015, p. 281)

Displays of violence are not confined to the hegemonic Alphaman hero. In Grace's Icebreaker, when Anastasia's malicious skating partner Aaron is hit in the face at a bar, she assumes her boyfriend Nate has punched Aaron because she sees "blood pouring out of both their faces" and Aaron's face is "swollen and cut". As it transpires, one of her closest hockey friends, mild-mannered Henry, has hit Aaron because Aaron was spreading spiteful lies about Anastasia. "He's a piece of shit and I'm not sorry", Henry states to Nate with an "emotionless" face – thereby sealing the performance of his own hegemonic masculinity. "You're only pissed at me

because you should have done it months ago" (Grace, 2022, pp. 266–267). By curbing his own violence as Anastasia has demanded of him, Nate has failed an archaic test of hegemonic masculinity: chivalry – he did not defend her honour. Nate takes this lesson to heart. At the end of the novel, Nate redeems himself at the national figure skating championship when, after a near-flawless pair performance on the ice, Aaron kisses Anastasia against her will and Nate sees her in tears. Anastasia then narrates Nate's response:

> "You don't fucking get it, do you?" Nathan seethes, releasing me and stalking toward Aaron. Before I even have time to tell him to leave it, his fist smashes into Aaron's face, dropping him to the floor. … "You forced yourself on her, you piece of shit!" he shouts down at Aaron. (Grace, 2022, p. 395)

Nathan Hawkins, Anastasia tells us proudly, is "a man who was most definitely written by a woman" (Grace, 2022, p. 383). In other words, he is the ideal hero for women romance writers and readers. This scene indicates that violence towards others is acceptable – even expected – in heterosexual women's romantic fantasies of hegemonic masculinity when it is perpetrated "chivalrously" on behalf of the heroine, because the man is then acting as the protector or avenger despite the strong heroines' insistence that they are capable of defending themselves.

Although aggression and violence are fundamentally constitutive of readers' fantasies of the hypermasculine Alphaman hero, readers must also be assured that the hero will never turn this violence against women. Authors tackle this problem by revealing the fundamental decency and softer, "feminine" qualities of the men the heroines love, distinguishing their masculinity from that of other more toxic males in the novels. In Tijan's *The Not-Outcast,* the heroine Cheyenne attacks her stepbrother because he provokes her with an unbearably shocking revelation, and the hero Cut responds by tending to her wounds, comforting her and protecting her from the potential legal consequences of her violence. With Grace's *Icebreaker*, Fay's *For the Love of Skating*, and Kennedy's *The Deal*, the authors create cold, even more aggressive and abusive men – often fathers – as foils for the heroes' kindness and gentleness toward the heroines. The father of the heroine in Fay's novel is a "monster" prone, she says, to "seeking answers at the bottom of the bottle, and taking his rage out on me every time he sees me" (Fay, 2020, p. 96). In contrast, the hero nurtures and encourages her. Nate's father in *Icebreaker* is an acerbic, emotionally unavailable, controlling and manipulative man who abandoned his wife when she was dying. He relentlessly drives Nate's sister to be a champion skier, denying her anything that does not further this goal. In *The Deal*, Garrett's father, a legendary hockey player, is depicted as a verbally, emotionally and physically abusive man who beat up his son and wife, and who perpetrates domestic violence against his current girlfriend. Garrett comes to recognise that he himself has the potential for violence because he is "broken" due to his own experience of abuse as a child. As he processes and overcomes his emotional damage with the help of the heroine, Hannah reaffirms his essential decency in a humorous way, telling him:

> "You're not like him. You will never be like him. … You're a good person. … You're honest and kind and compassionate. … I mean, don't get me wrong, you're a total dick sometimes, but it's a tolerable kind of dickishness." (Kennedy, 2015, p. 270)

The heroes' potential for domination and violence may be attributes of hegemonic masculinity but these novels place limits on when and how they are displayed. Violence is only justifiable in the defence of women, always reprehensible when used against women, and the heroes ensure that women always have a choice. By depicting overbearing and controlling fathers and other toxic male rivals for the heroine, the authors produce an array of Allan's "female-authored masculinities" (2019, p. 11), but they then affirm the qualities, values and expression of hegemonic masculinity that are acceptable. The different types of masculinities in the novels, and the heroine's choice and implicit approval of the hero, is significant because, as Raewyn Connell argues, hegemonic masculinity is contestable since it is defined against "various subordinated masculinities" (Connell, 1987, p. 183). The fathers mentioned above are all powerful, good-looking, physically domineering, professionally and economically successful men who perform hegemonic masculinity. But hockey romance authors reject and contest this version of hegemonic masculinity, instead reshaping the ideal Alphaman hero as a man who exhibits dominance and aggression but learns to restrain them. He employs these hypermasculine traits only in service of the heroine and the weak, combining them with softer "feminine" traits such as listening, emotional sharing, kindness, gentleness, and nurturing, caretaking behaviour, especially when the heroines are vulnerable or wounded.

Hockey players easily embody a modified, somewhat "feminised" form of female-authored hegemonic masculinity because hockey is a "masculine" sport that necessitates "aggressive play" and "asserting physical dominance" ("Ruling the Rink", 2024). However, this is not the case when it comes to men who participate in the "feminine" sport of figure skating, because male figure-skaters are often associated homophobically with homosexuality and effeminacy (Adams, 2010, p. 237).

Masculinity, homophobia and figure skating heroes

In her landmark work *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology* (2014), Jayashree Kamblé argues that throughout most of its history, the romance novel has exhibited "hyperbolic heterosexuality and machismo" (p. 88) during times when the gay rights movement gains ground. The Alphaman hero comes to prominence at such times while readers turn from him afterwards, when gay rights issues recede in public consciousness. Kamblé observes that "social changes involving sexual orientation show up in the straight romance as anxiety when the change involves legalisation" (pp. 123–124). Thus the "alpha-male hero developed" to act "as a charm against the growing anxiety over the presence of homosexual desire among men" (p. 124). Although the trend in romance novels of the 21st century "has been a largely liberal one" towards more progressive values, Kamblé suggests that the debate in 21st century America over "awarding the status of marriage to gay unions" incited "similar anxieties over homosexuality" (p. 124) as earlier periods of gay activism. This perhaps explains why certain sections of the romance community revived the Alphaman hero, especially in the sports romance. Kamblé's thesis is supported by the gender studies sociologist Michael Kimmel who argues that "homophobia is a central organising principle of our cultural definition of manhood" (2016, p. 65), contending that one of the key reasons why men feel pressured to

prove their masculinity is to alleviate any suspicion that they might be gay. This is particularly the case in "feminine" sports such as figure skating, where men's participation often comes with the stereotypical presumption that the male athletes are effeminate or gay (Adams, 2010, p. 237).

Romance writers' construction of male figure skaters in sports romances engage rather uncomfortably with such homophobic stereotypes. In Comeaux's pair skating romance *Crossing the Ice*, the figure skating heroine notices that the male partner of the opposing team skates so elegantly, so deeply attuned to and expressive of the music, that she questions his sexual orientation. "Most of the guys I knew with that much artistic style and sensitivity to the music were gay," she comments, "And Josh seemed to be a sensitive person off the ice, too. He was either gay or way more evolved than the straight guys I knew" (Comeaux, 2014, Kindle location p. 432). In this YA novel, Josh turns out to be a beta hero: he has the requisite height and fantasy body type with a well-muscled torso that is "smooth and cut lean and hard" (Kindle location p. 1298), but he is a shy, sweet, college guy who is an artistic and talented musician, dancer, skater and choreographer. Moreover, like many of the YA and NA hockey heroes, Josh is still financially dependent on his parents. They agree to support his pair skating with his sister providing he gives it up after the Olympics to attend law school instead. Because they control the purse strings, they control his choices and his future. YA/NA hockey heroes often have trust funds they will inherit (for example, Kennedy's *The Deal*), or else they demonstrate hypermasculine aggression to offset their economic dependence and, hence, their "weakness" as a man. Josh's own "hero's journey" towards hegemonic masculinity across Comeaux's trilogy involves breaking away from the control of his parents, becoming financially independent, and pursuing his dream: partnership with the heroine in pair skating and as a romantic couple, and setting up his own business as a dance and skating instructor. He achieves all of this with single-minded determination but never with an overt display of aggression. Such a soft portrait of a beta male athlete hero is very rare in romances, let alone sports romance.

Where male figure skaters are compared to hockey players in sport romances, they are often found wanting in hegemonic masculine traits. Consequently, they often fall into the role of the antagonist or villain of the story. The heroine Claire's French pair skating partner in Kates's *Our Offseason* is malicious, verbally abusive, and rough and careless with her on the ice, whereas the larger hockey hero Duke, even when he is wounded, immediately tries to defend Claire. Aaron, Anastasia's pair skating partner in Grace's *Icebreaker*, is another figure-skating villain described as lacking in the essential qualities of hegemonic masculinity in every way. Grace frequently emphasises that Aaron is physically smaller and weaker than the hockey hero. "Nate is a big guy, much bigger than Aaron," Anastasia reflects as she compares the two men. "Aaron is built like a ballet dancer, strong, too, but lean. Plus, he has never been in a fight in his cushy, privileged life" (Grace, 2022, pp. 42–43). Aaron is a male athlete in a sport stereotyped as "feminine", and Grace uses size discrepancy as well as association with another stereotypically "feminine" activity – ballet – to diminish Aaron's masculinity. Until he sexually assaults Anastasia at the end of the novel by kissing her against her will, Aaron is not shown to be physically aggressive. Instead, his antagonism is displayed through passive aggression, controlling behaviour, belittling comments and spiteful, backstabbing acts. He is not physically

aggressive because he lacks physical strength. In the novel, Aaron is not strong enough to lift Anastasia, and he blames her for putting on weight. Nate, however, is able to lift her with ease both during training and during sex. Unlike the hypermasculinity of the strong hockey hero, Grace associates the "feminine" sport of figure skating, and the male athletes who participate in it, with physical weakness. Yet this caricature of lithe and effeminate Aaron has little basis in reality; male pair skaters require tremendous strength and stamina to perform the lifting tasks inherent in their sport (Voelker & Reel, 2020, p. 14). Aaron is nevertheless represented as an emasculated male character whose lack of stereotypically ideal masculinity is directly linked with his "feminine" display of "bitchy" hostility towards Anastasia. Such a depiction confirms Mary Louise Adams's observation that men's participation in "feminine" sports such as figure skating often comes with the stereotypical presumption that the male athletes are effeminate or gay (2010, p. 237).

However, while Grace's characterisation of Aaron is stereotypical in *Icebreaker* because she is contrasting the "feminine" sport of ice skating with the "masculine" sport of ice hockey, Zapata manages to subvert the stereotype of male figure skaters in *From Lukov with Love* with her eponymous hero, Ivan Lukov. Like other male figure skater heroes, Ivan's body is muscular and powerful but lean, not broad and towering like the hockey heroes' bodies. The heroine Jasmine celebrates Ivan's physique because she can "appreciate all the different forms male athletes held" and she is attracted to "raw strength in all its shapes" (Zapata, 2018, p. 230). Zapata describes Ivan's body as being "painted by a master" with shoulder muscles "drawn by pen" (p. 230). By using softer imagery such as "painted" and "drawn" as opposed to stronger, more commonly used terms such as "chiselled", "sculpted" or "built", Zapata creates a less hyper-masculinised image for Ivan. Zapata also describes Ivan as having "lean, rigid muscles" and a "high and tight" backside (p. 231), a less conventional image than that of the broad-chested, muscle-bound sporting hero, yet he is still desired by the heroine and therefore framed as desirable to the reader. The only instance where Zapata deploys the "large male athlete" stereotype is in her description of Ivan as being extremely well-endowed. Heroine Jasmine notes that Ivan has "huge balls" that make her "wonder what the hell he did with [them] in his costumes" (p. 233). During their first sexual encounter she is surprised by his size, declaring: "What kind of bullshit was this that someone so long and lean had that monster between his legs?" (p. 473). Male athletes in mainstream sports romances may come in different shapes and sizes, but it seems they must still be generously endowed and great in bed.

Depictions of male aggression in hockey romances are unsurprising, considering the aggressive nature of the sport. However, the heterosexual male figure skaters depicted in Zapata's *From Lukov with Love*, Grace's *Icebreaker* and Cali Melle's *Tell Me How You Hate Me* (2024) also display varying levels of aggression and violence, although expressed in different ways. In Zapata's *From Lukov With Love*, the hero Ivan's aggression is not physically threatening, manifesting instead as hyper-competitiveness and bullying comments that he dismisses as good-natured teasing. Jasmine, however, takes them to heart; his remarks affect her body image and belief in her own attractiveness. Bully romances with plots that align with the "enemies to lovers" trope are common in the YA/NA market. They find literary antecedents in Charlotte Brontë's Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847), E.M. Hull's Ahmed Ben Hassan in *The Sheik* (1919)

or the Alphaman romantic heroes of the 1970s and 1980s discussed by Kamblé (2014, pp. 107–111). In Zapata's characterisation of hegemonic masculinity, verbal aggression seems to signify to readers that, despite Ivan's participation in a "feminine" sport, he is still "all man" and part of that is his desire to dominate (in this case, in his sport). But this trait initially aligns him with Aaron, the antagonist in Grace's *Icebreaker* whose passive aggression manifests in making snide comments and gaslighting accusations to Anastasia, spreading "slut-shaming" rumours about her, and exhibiting controlling behaviour towards her although, as mentioned before, he refrains from physical altercations. Grace imbues Aaron with stereotypically feminine "mean girl" traits, thus denigrating men in feminine sports and framing them as predatory towards and controlling of their women counterparts. When the hockey players become aggressive towards him because of his nastiness to Anastasia, Aaron backs down and flees from them, and the reader is meant to interpret his non-confrontational response as "cowardly," thereby indicating he is less of a man than the hockey players who stand up for Anastasia.

Among the figure skater heroes discussed in this article, Melle's Leo in *Tell Me How You Hate Me* is perhaps the most ambiguous in his performance of hegemonic masculinity. Like Aaron in *Icebreaker*, Leo can be "bitchy" to the heroine, and, like Ivan in Zapata's novel, he verbally bullies the heroine at the start of this "enemies to lovers" romance. This behaviour hides his insecurity about his worth as a person as opposed to his worth as a skater. He also displays what readers might regard as an "unmanly" fear of flying. However, the traits that stereotype him as an "effeminate" skater are offset by the typical markers of hegemonic masculinity in sports romances: lavish descriptions of his muscular strength, emotionless affect, hyper-competitiveness, astonishing sexual prowess expressed in very crude terms, and, unusually for a figure skating hero, his physical violence. When he sees the heroine being sexually harassed by a stranger at a bar, he immediately resorts to violence, recounting:

> I move my hands to grip the front of his shirt.
> I shake my head at him as my free hand curls into a fist. She told him no and he couldn't respect her. What if I wasn't there to stop him? (Melle, 2024, p. 173)

As a figure skater, Leo may take part in an "effeminate" sport and have an "unmanly" fear of flying, but like the violent hockey players discussed above, he too can take care of "his woman" by resorting to violence and making sure "That man's blood [is] painted all over the wood floor of the bar" (Melle, 2024, p. 174). After proving his status as an Alphaman even though he is a skater, Leo realises he loves the heroine unconditionally. They proceed to win the world skating championship and, in the epilogue to the novel, she agrees to marry him.

Hetero-Ever-After

The romance novel's "happily ever after" (HEA) ending – or "happy for now" (HFN) in YA/NA romances – is crucial. Pamela Regis lists the "betrothal" as one of the eight "essential elements" defining a romance (2003, pp. 37–38), while Catherine Roach suggests that the end point of the romance is "healing, great sex, and happiness" (2016, p. 21). The sports romance often concludes with both a romantic HEA for the couple as well as a sporting HEA for the

athlete or athletes. In Kennedy's NA romance *The Deal*, the hockey hero and his team achieve a shutout in the Frozen Four championship. Similarly, the hockey heroes in Tijan's *The Not-Outcast* and Grace's *Icebreaker* win the Stanley Cup. Pair skater Anastasia from Grace's *Icebreaker* leaves her toxic skating partner Aaron and wins Olympic gold in the women's singles event. While Comeaux's pair skating lovers qualify for the Sochi Olympics, and Melle's pair skaters in *Tell Me How You Hate Me* win the world figure skating championships. Zapata's pair skaters in *From Lukov with Love* become Olympic gold medallists before retiring from competition to pursue a long and successful coaching career. Religious persuasion aside, the male athlete heroes achieve a fairly stable ideal of American masculinity described by Erving Goffman in the 1960s as "young, married, white, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a decent record in sports" (qtd in Allan, 2019, p. 12).

In addition to the romantic and athletic HEA, parenthood is an important conclusion to many sports romances. Allan argues that the sexual prowess and virility of hegemonic masculinity is intimately connected to "the (re)productive potential of that sexuality. This reproductive potential, or what Lee Edelman might call 'reproductive futurism' (2004), reinscribes – importantly – the heterosexuality of the hero" (Allan, 2019, p. 30). Thus, in Tijan's *The Not-Outcast*, Zapata's *From Lukov with Love* and Grace's *Icebreaker*, although their sports have been an integral part of the characters' identities, all three epilogues frame the career-defining athletic achievements as secondary to the heteronormative HEA: monogamous, heterosexual marriage and the fertility of the female characters. In these epilogues, the hero and the heroine are married or engaged, and either have children or are pregnant, with the birth – or impending birth – of the child effectively ending (or at least pausing) the career of the woman athlete although, crucially, not that of the athlete hero. The epilogue of Grace's *Icebreaker* is set two years in the future. The heroine Anastasia is now pregnant and engaged to the hero Nate, who is playing in the NHL. Throughout the novel, Anastasia's figure skating career has been emphasised as the most important part of her life. Yet the epilogue contains only two lines referring to her career success. The first line is spoken by a minor character who – in reference to Anastasia's unborn daughter – declares: "I'm sure with a gold medalist for a mother and a Stanley Cup winner for a father, whatever she decides to be, she'll be the best at it" (Grace, 2022, p. 423). The second line comes from Anastasia herself who states: "My pre-Olympic debut anxiety cause[d] me to vomit up my contraceptive pill. I won gold in the women's singles" (p. 424). In both instances, Anastasia's Olympic gold – the ultimate career success for many athletes – is overshadowed by the true achievement: her pregnancy.

Zapata's *From Lukov with Love* has a similar conclusion. The epilogue is set ten years after the main story and we learn that in the interim, the pair had a very successful sporting career, winning three National titles, two World titles and two Olympic gold medals, with Ivan becoming the most decorated figure skater in US history (Zapata, 2018, p. 483). Despite these outstanding athletic achievements, the heroine's final words in the epilogue prioritise her relationship. "Most importantly," Jasmine states, "it had been nine years since we'd gotten married" (p. 483). The epilogue also reveals that the pair have had three children, one of whom was accidentally conceived the night the pair won their second world championship title (p.

484). In these cases, the heroine's sporting prowess is overshadowed by her fertility as the news about the pregnancy is always narrated by or focalised through the athlete heroine, while the hero's focus remains on his sport.

The maintenance of hegemonic masculinity for athlete heroes thus requires their female partners to refocus from sporting achievement to motherhood – whether the athlete heroines initially wanted to or not. Unplanned pregnancy is a recurring theme in *The Not-Outcast*, *From Lukov with Love* and *Icebreaker*, with two of the unplanned pregnancies occurring despite the heroine's initial desires. As an adopted child herself, Anastasia in *Icebreaker* states that she has always wanted to adopt and has no desire to be pregnant (Grace, 2022, p. 325), yet in the epilogue we learn that Anastasia is now expecting. Similarly, in *The Not-Outcast*, Cheyenne and Cut initially decide to become foster parents because Cheyenne suffers from an unnamed condition likely generated by foetal alcohol syndrome and an abusive childhood. Again, the epilogue reveals that Cheyenne has become pregnant despite her previous desire not to "bring someone into the world that would suffer how [she] did" (Tijan, 2020, p. 434). It is telling that, despite the athletes' dazzling achievements, all three authors employ the ultimate result of heterosexuality as well as hegemonic masculinity – biological reproduction – to complete the HEA. It is not sufficient for the couples simply to adopt, foster, or even choose not to have children. By implying that the HEA ending for athletes necessitates passing on their athletically superior genetic material, the authors reaffirm the heteronormativity of the sports romance, reducing the heroine, whatever her previous achievements, to a vessel of reproduction while the hegemonic hero always retains his status as a star athlete.

It must be acknowledged that these books are all romance novels before they are sports fiction, so the emphasis on the love plot is expected and understandable. However, for elite and professional athletes such as those depicted in these novels, their sport is a major facet of both their lives and the driving plot, and it seems reductive to diminish their achievements to focus solely on their love lives and children. These endings facilitate the notion that coupledom (and in these cases, reproduction) is the defining proof that one has led a successful life (Roach, 2016, p. 92). Pamela Regis suggests that the heroine's decision to marry the hero in a romance novel is "just one manifestation of her freedom" (2003, p. 15) but these mainstream sports romances tend to focus on the romantic HEA while ultimately downplaying the other highly impressive achievements of the characters.

In his groundbreaking study of masculinity in romance novels, Jonathan Allan poses the question:

> Why is traditional or stereotypical masculinity desirable in romance? Feminists have rightly critiqued a culture of hegemonic masculinity, and yet, time and again, the popular romance celebrates this form of masculinity. How do we reconcile ourselves with the political desire for a "softer" masculinity with the erotic and sexual desire for hegemonic masculinity? (2019, p. 27)

Throughout this article, we have argued that the sports romance replicates the real-life gendering of sports and the reproduction of the idea that male athletes exemplify hegemonic masculinity. However, the version of hegemonic masculinity presented in these novels is a woman-authored fantasy that gradually replaces the subordination of women with chivalrous protection and the prioritisation of the heroine's desires as one of the athlete hero's primary goals. Sports romances confirm the belief that contact sports such as ice hockey are "manly" and do little to counter the stereotype that figure skating is a "feminine" sport. They tend to reinforce the notion that figure skating is practised by slim, beautiful women and by men whose masculinity is questionable and who must therefore keep proving their heterosexuality. The rampant sexual appetites especially of the hockey players enforces the heteronormativity of the sports romance, and almost all the female authors of the hockey romances show that many women apart from the heroine desire and court this type of sexual attention. As the hero Garrett states in Kennedy's *The Deal*: "when you're the captain of a Division I hockey team that's won two consecutive national titles, people know who you are. And women want to fuck you" (2015, p. 32). But this belief and sense of sexual entitlement often lay the foundation for violence against women in these novels.

We have shown that many of the female characters in these novels experience various kinds of abuse – verbal, emotional, physical and sexual – at the hands of minor male characters, sometimes because the women are prime athletes and the men's main competitors, and often because they are regarded as fair game (pun intended) for men to display their sexual prowess and hegemonic traits of domination. The chivalrous protection of women and prioritisation of their safety and desires that constitute a female-authored fantasy of hegemonic masculinity are thus still necessary because, sports romances show, we are still living in a heteropatriarchal society where, as Roach argues, "it is hard to be alone" as "a woman in a man's world" (2016, p. 21). In return for this protection and prioritisation, high-achieving female athletes eventually refocus on "reproductive futurism" whereby children serve as "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics" because of a societal inability to conceive "a future without the figure of the Child" (Edelman, 2004, p. 11). Their intense concentration on sporting objectives is redirected to marriage and children who might become future athletic champions, thus ensuring the hero maintains and perpetuates a heteronormative ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

Notes

[1] Some material in this paper has appeared in Alexandra Mulvey's (2023) unpublished Master of Research dissertation, *Gender and Sex Stereotypes in Sports Romance Fiction*. Macquarie University. The thesis was the basis of this article.

[2] There is no other website which tracks the popularity of sports romance novels.

References

Adams, M. L. (2010). From mixed-sex sport to sport for girls: The feminization of figure skating. *Sport in History, 30*(2), 218–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2010.481208

Allan, J. A. (2019). *Men, masculinities, and popular romance*. Routledge.

Allan, J. A. (2020). Gender and sexuality. In J. Kamblé, E.M. Selinger, & H. Teo (Eds.), *The Routledge research companion to popular romance fiction* (pp. 428–453). Routledge.

Anderson, E. (2005). *In the game: Gay athletes and the cult of masculinity*. State University of New York Press.

Archer, S. (2023). *Behind the net*. Independently published, Amazon.

Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.

Burke, P. (2013, April 18). Brittney Griner comes out, and sports world shrugs. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/19/sports/ncaabasketball/brittney-griner-comes-out-and-sports-world-shrugs.html

Chamblee, G. (2020, February 5). Sports romance writing tips: How to write sports romance. *Creole Bayou*. https://genevivechambleeconnect.wordpress.com/2021/07/14/what-is-sports-romance-writing-genre/

Chamblee, G. (2021, July 14). What is sports romance (writing genre). *Creole Bayou.* https://genevivechambleeconnect.wordpress.com/2021/07/14/what-is-sports-romance-writing-genre/

Comeaux, J. (2014). *Crossing the ice*. Independently published, Amazon.

Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and power.* Stanford University Press.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity. Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society, 19(*6), 832–833.

Cooky, C., Messner, M.A., & Hextrum, R.H. (2013). Women play sport, but not on TV: A longitudinal study of televised news media. *Communication & Sport*, *1*(3), 203–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479513476947

Dauber, R. (2024, October 30). Are hockey romance books here to stay – or are they just a 2023 trend? *The Elm*. https://blog.washcoll.edu/wordpress/theelm/2024/01/are-hockey-romance-books-here-to-stay-or-are-they-just-a-2023-trend/

Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press.

Fay, M. (2020). *For the love of skating*. Independently published, Amazon.

Fink, J.S. (2015). Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really "Come a long way, baby"? *Sport Management Review, 18*(3), 331–342. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.001

Fink, J. S. (2016). Hiding in plain sight: The embedded nature of sexism in sport. *Journal of Sport Management*, *30*, 1–7.

Glaser, P. M. (Director). (1992). *The cutting edge* [Film]. MGM Home Entertainment.

Grace, H. (2022). *Icebreaker*. Pig & Bear Publishing.

Hindman, L. C., & Walker, N. A. (2020). Sexism in professional sports: How women managers experience and survive sport organizational culture. *Journal of Sport Management*, *34*, 64–76.

Hull, E. M. (1919). *The sheik*. E. Nast & Grayson.

Hussack, H. & Skowron Schmidt, P. (2014). Carpe librum: Seize the (YA) book: Where is the girl power? The search for authentic portrayals of female athletes in YA Lit. *The English Journal*, *104*(1), 82–85. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484233

Jansen S. C., & Sabo D. (1994). The sport/war metaphor: Hegemonic masculinity, the Persian Gulf war, and the new world order. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *11*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.11.1.1

Jenshak, R. (2021). *Broken hearts*. Independently published, Amazon.

Kamblé, J. (2014). *Making meaning in popular romance fiction: An epistemology*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kane, M. (2023). *Bad intentions*. Independently published, Amazon.

Kates, S. C. (2022). *Our offseason*. Independently published, Amazon.

Keelan, A. (2023). *Shutout*. Independently published, Amazon.

Kennedy, E. (2015). *The deal*. Bloom Books.

Khonach, T. (2023). Feminine negotiations and patriarchal bargains: Contradictory resistance in women's flat track roller derby. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *58*(6), 1014–1029. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902221142149

Kimmel, M. (2016). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame, and silence in the construction of gender identity. In P.S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Race, class and gender in the United States: An integrated study* (10th ed., pp. 59–70). Worth Publishers. (Original work published in 1994)

Kurzius, R. (2023, August 6). Hockey romance novels are in the news. Here's why they're so popular. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2023/08/06/alex-wennberg-hockey-romance/

Locke, A. (2023). *The proposal*. Umbrella Publishing.

Mack, B. (2023). *Unravel me*. Simon & Schuster.

McAlister, J. (2021). "Couple goals": Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir as celebrity romance text at the 2018 Winter Olympic Games." *Celebrity Studies*, *12*(3), 460–479. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1657920

Melle. C. (2024). *Tell me how you hate me*. Independently published, Amazon.

Messerschmidt, J. (2019). The salience of "hegemonic masculinity". *Men and Masculinities*, *22*(1), 85–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X18805555

Messner, M. A. (1992). *Power at play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*. Beacon.

Messner, M. A., & Sabo, D. F. (Eds.). (1990). *Sport, men, and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives*. Human Kinetics.

Morrow, S. (2024, May). Sports romance: An in-depth genre guide. *Seacrow Books*. https://seacrowbooks.com/blog/sports-romance

Plaza, M., Boiché, J., Brunel, L., & Ruchaud, F. (2017). Sport = male… but not all sports: Investigating the gender stereotypes of sport activities at the explicit and implicit levels. *Sex Roles*, 76, 202–217.

Prahl, A. (2024, July 3). 11 sports romances that hit a home run. *Paste Magazine*. https://www.pastemagazine.com/books/romance/11-sports-romances-that-hit-a-romantic-home-run

Regis, P. (2003). *A natural history of the romance novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Roach, C. (2016). *Happily ever after: The romance story in popular culture*. Indiana University Press.

Ruling the rink: How to establish aggressive dominance on the ice. (2024, February 16). *Inside the Circle*. Aycane. https://aycane.com/en-au/blogs/news/ruling-the-rink-how-to-establish-aggressive-dominance-on-the-ice

Sparkes, A. C., Brighton, J., & Inckle, K. (2014). Disabled sporting bodies as sexual beings: Reflections and challenges. In J. Hargreaves and E. Anderson (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of sport, gender and sexuality* (pp. 179–188). Routledge.

Stratton, S. (Creator). (2020). *Spinning out* [TV series]. Netflix.

Tijan. (2020). *The not-outcast*. Independently published, Amazon.

UNESCO. (2023, January 4). *Gender equality in sports media*. https://webarchive.unesco.org/web/20230104165710/https:/en.unesco.org/themes/gender-equality-sports-media

Voelker, D. K. & Reel, J. J. (2020). "It's just a lot different being male than female in the sport": An exploration of the gendered culture around body pressures in competitive figure skating. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, *28*, 11–19. https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2018-0030

Yasharoff, H. (2024, May 23). The Taylor Swift-Travis Kelce effect? Why sports romance stories are hot right now. *USA Today*. https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/books/2024/05/23/taylor-swift-travis-kelce-sports-romance-novels/73086777007/

Zapata, M. (2018). *From Lukov with love*. Headline Eternal.