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Reading the romance in Australia: The preferences and practices of romance readers from ARRA survey data

Abstract:
The Australian Romance Readers Association (ARRA), a special interest group that publicises the romance form and provides opportunities for readers to network and discuss the genre, has run a dedicated annual survey since 2009. The survey results between 2009 and 2023 illustrate the changing reading practices of respondents, especially in terms of modes of reading, preferred subgenres of romance, purchasing habits, information sources about new romances, and book formats. This article describes key survey results in terms of the changing characteristics and practices of the respondents. Key findings include that respondents generally read quickly, they read a lot, tend to always carry a romance novel, increasingly embrace eBook use, undertake most reading at home, and increasingly try a broad range of romance subgenres. The surveys provide insights into the importance of social media marketing and recommendations for readers to learn about new books. The ARRA survey data between 2009 and 2023 provides insights for writers who wish to strategically market their texts while showing some of the changing practices and trends of respondents. Overall, this paper emphasises that the romance reading respondents are highly committed, engaged and discerning in their decision-making and reading practices.

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Keywords:
Romance reading, romance readers, book purchasing, digital reading practices

Introduction

For a literary genre as popular as romance, surprisingly little is known about the general or individual practices of its readers, such as the where, when, how and why of their reading. Some available data, such as bestseller lists and publisher book sales, provides an entry point for investigating readers; however, at best, such data reinforces the popularity of individual books and the genre more widely. The texts that appear on bestseller lists indicate which texts are being purchased in large numbers yet cannot be taken as representative of actual book sales, texts read or popularity without using other measures (Miller, 2000). However, when seeking out other measures, Maggie Walsh has noted, “the single most influential data in the publishing industry – which, every day, determines book contracts and authors’ lives – is basically inaccessible to anyone beyond the industry” (2022). In 2016, market research company Nielsen released a short summary of data about romance readers including demographics and market share. Most of their respondents were women (84%), between 18–44 years of age (53%), self-identified as “white” (81%) and used a tablet or eReader (69%). Perhaps the most powerful statistic in their snapshot was that the market share of romance in all formats was 29% (Nielsen, By the Numbers, 2016). Although Nielsen only listed their general sources for this snapshot and did not specify the sample size, how “the numbers” were calculated or whether those numbers applied to a global, regional or national context, the “29%” reinforces a long running perception of the sizeable market share and reach of the romance genre.

Sales of romance novels have reportedly doubled in the United States and United Kingdom between 2020 and 2023 (Kembrey, 2024). In Australia, the genre has experienced huge growth in post-pandemic sales, including a reported 49% annual growth rate between 2021 and 2024 (Kembrey, 2024). Despite such huge growth in romance sales, there is limited information about the readers who make this genre so successful. In Australia, a dedicated organisation for readers, the Australian Romance Readers Association (ARRA), has conducted their annual survey of romance readers since 2009. The results, which form the focus of this article, provide insights into the changing practices of their respondents over the life of the survey and potentially contribute to a broader conversation about reading in Australia.

Romance readers are a sub-group that sit within the wider reading public. Understanding the habits and preferences of romance readers specifically can be illustrative when considered in relation to more general studies of readers in Australia. General reader surveys provide insights into reading habits and practices while potentially identifying barriers to reading or literacy more widely. Three recent studies that paint a picture of Australian readers are the Macquarie Economic Study of Australian Book Readers (Throsby et al., 2017), the Australia Reads National Reading Survey (2021) and the Understanding Australian Readers study (2025). One key finding across these studies was the sense that reading rates had fallen between the 2017 Macquarie study and 2021 when Australia Reads National Survey was conducted. These surveys underscore the importance of reading as part of a broader set of literacies. An Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey, released in 2013, found that approximately 44% of Australians aged 15–74 read at a year 7 level (level 2 reading) or lower (ABS, 2013). An inability to read to at least level 2 may prevent full participation in work and life (Del Rio, 2022). The Australia Reads and Macquarie surveys provide insights into Australian readers and their practices and habits; they underscore the complexity of reading practices for different types of reader. Such insights are useful as a comparison point for elements of the ARRA survey results as we discuss in more detail below.

Insights from academic studies of romance readers can complement and deepen insights from general studies of Australian readers. Joanne Hollows (2000) noted that until Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, the reader had been largely “absent or abstract in studies of romance fiction” (p. 77). Radway’s (1991) complex ethnographic study drew attention to the place or “where” of reading, and what the act of reading can symbolise or mean for readers. Radway also asked why women read romance novels. While Radway was critical of some aspects of romance reading, she also found that romance reading was associated with “pleasure and restoration” as well as served educational or even mood management purposes (Radway, 1991, p. 119). It is evident from Radway’s study that readers were articulate about their reading choices as well as their identification and justification of “ideal” and “failed” romances.

While much research related to the romance genre focusses on the novels, since Radway’s study, a growing body of research has developed in relation to the romance reader. As O’Mahony (2021) explains, this research has “sought to understand what draws readers to romance fiction, the context of reading, the meanings that readers derive from their textual encounters, and the possible effects of romance reading” (p. 82). In addition to analysing romance texts, researchers have deployed a diverse range of methodologies including surveys, content analysis, interviews, ethnography, focus groups and experiments (see O’Mahony, 2021 for an overview). Some studies have used several methods together such as surveys, interviews and/or ethnography (see Fekete, 2022; Michelson, 2020). In Australia, the readers of romance fiction have seemingly received very little academic investigation. As O’Mahony (2021) notes, there are but a “handful” of studies, including those discussed by Juliet Flesch (2004), the ethnographic/interview study by Gilbert and Taylor (2002) and focus groups undertaken by Thomas (2007). Flesch (2004) notes that Harlequin Mills and Boon Australia have also undertaken surveys and focus groups of Australian romance readers. While academic studies outside Australia have employed surveys to investigate romance reading (such as Radway, 1991; Crane, 1994; Bonomi, 2013; Owen, 1997; Fekete, 2022), surveys have been underutilised in Australia to investigate this community of readers. Surveys are a useful method for gaining broad insights about a population or as a precursor to or in complement with other (qualitative) methods.

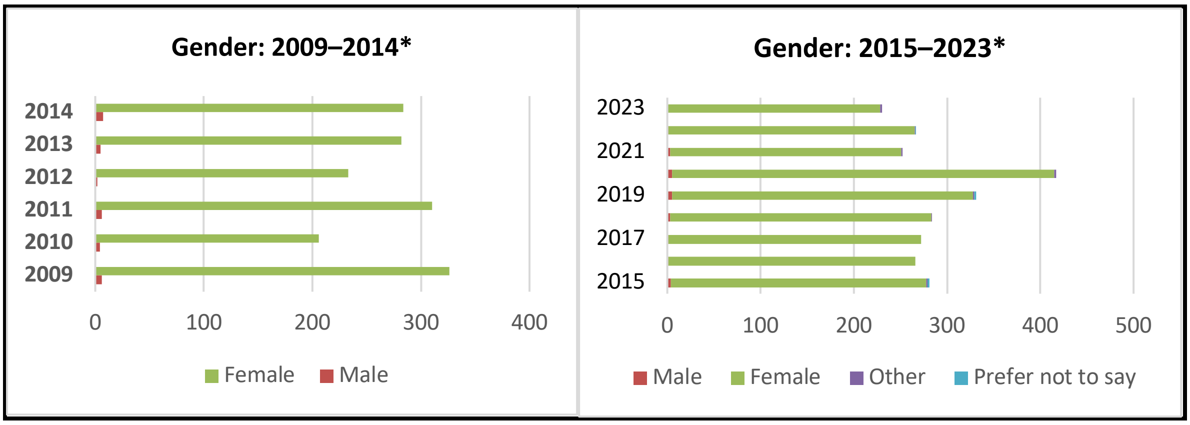
ARRA’s annual survey, conducted since 2009, provides a rich set of data for understanding the practices of their romance reading respondents. There are no known studies of romance readers over subsequent years in Australia, let alone 14 consecutive years of surveys, that either use a similar sample or a relatively stable data collection tool to investigate their practices or preferences; this is a unique aspect to the ARRA surveys. ARRA’s survey initially focused primarily on ARRA members but has since extended to include romance readers outside the organisation. The tabulated survey data for each year is publicly available in the “about” section on their website (ARRA, n.d.). Given the gap in available data about romance readers over time, especially Australian romance readers, our article explores what the ARRA data between 2009 and 2023 reveals about the romance buying, reading and borrowing practices of their respondents. We explore and note key changes in how much respondents read, where they read, where they learn about new releases and where they buy their books. We situate our key findings within the scholarship of romance and in conjunction with more general surveys that are run in Australia about literacy and reading as needed. Our analysis of the survey results reveals a complex picture of respondents who appear to make careful decisions about their romance reading and demonstrate a high level of commitment and engagement.

ARRA and their annual survey (2009–2023)

ARRA is a very active and vibrant community of romance readers which started in 2007. ARRA membership requires an initial application and payment of an annual fee. The community is mainly online; however, they also hold in person events such as multi-author signings, individual author events, high teas and other events designed to bring readers and authors together. According to their website, the organisation's goals are to "promote romance fiction and its subgenres, increase awareness of the variety and quality of books, and their authors and provide a forum for readers to communicate, share and explore all things romance fiction" (ARRA, 2024). ARRA has a regularly updated online blog as well a multiple social media feeds (Facebook, X, Goodreads, Instagram) to keep their members updated with their news. In 2023, ARRA's annual report stated that they had 270 active members (ARRA Annual Report 2022–23, 2024). The report also stated that in 2022–2023 their website had 16,558 total page views and 7632 visitors, which was double that of the previous year (ARRA Annual Report 2022–23).

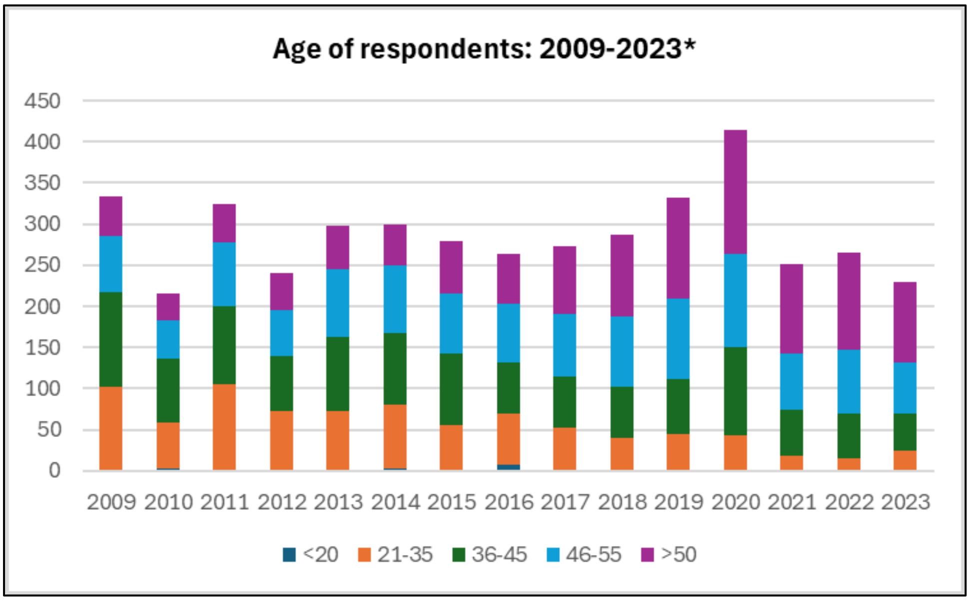
ARRA's annual survey is an innovative way to understand romance readers within or via their organisation or members. Aggregated results for each question from their surveys are provided by ARRA and publicly accessible on their website for each year the survey is conducted. In this article we focus on the survey results from 2009 and 2023; the survey ran in 2024 however results were released after we conducted our analysis and therefore are not discussed in this article. Their survey is usually open to respondents for about six weeks per year; their website and social media networks encourage members to participate and complete the survey. Between 2009 and 2023, the sample of survey respondents has ranged between 200 and 423. In terms of location of respondents, the majority have been from New South Wales, followed by Victoria and Queensland across the survey years. In most years, every state and territory has been represented in the sample; a small number of respondents each year (usually less than ten) have indicated they live outside Australia. Therefore, the sample is mostly Australian readers who are likely members of ARRA or contacts of them.

Over the implementation years of the survey, most of the respondents were female; seven male-identifying respondents was the highest number recorded in one survey year (2014). It should be noted that from 2015, more response options have been added. Figure 1 below depicts the number of responses obtained per response option from 2009–2023.



**2009 N=332; 2010 N=210; 2011 N=316; 2012 N=235; 2013 N=287; 2014 N=291; 2015 N=281; 2016 N=266; 2017 N=272; 2018 N=284; 2019 N=333; 2020 N=417; 2021 N=252; 2022 N=267; 2023 N=230*
Figure 1: Gender comparisons 2009–2023

Over the implementation years of the survey, the age of respondents has noticeably increased, as illustrated in Figure 2.



**2009 N=333; 2010 N=215; 2011 N=324; 2012 N=241; 2013 N=298; 2014 N=299; 2015 N= 280; 2016 N=264; 2017 N =273; 2018 N=287; 2019 N=332; 2020 N= 414; 2021 N=251; 2022 N= 265; 2023 N=230*
Figure 2: Age of respondents

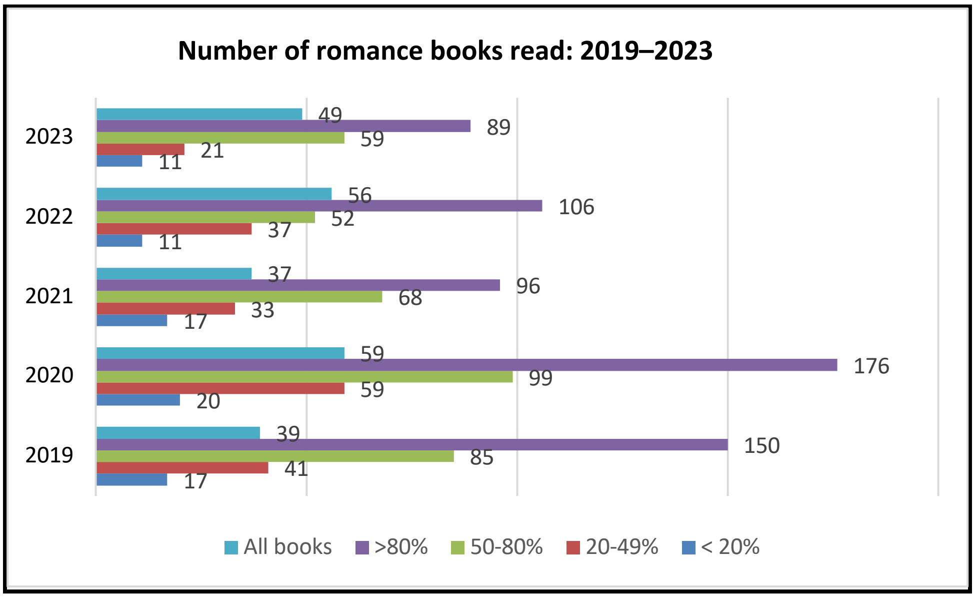
In 2009, 65% were 21–45 and 35% were 46 years or more in age. In 2014, this shifts to 55 % being 21–45 years of age and 43% being 46 years or over. In 2019, 33% were 21–45 years and 66 % were 46 years or over. In 2023, 30% were 21–45 and 69% were 46 years or over. Between 2009 and 2018, only a small number of respondents were below the age of 20; the highest percentage recorded under 21 years of age was 3% in 2016. Between 2019 and 2023, no respondents selected the below 20 years of age option. This age limitation is important in that the sample does not appear to represent readers below the age of 20, such as those who may read young adult (YA) fiction.

It is also important to note that the shape and length of the ARRA survey tool has changed since it was introduced. In 2009 there were 34 questions and in 2023 there were over 50; some of the question phrasing has also changed, as have the answer options. The changes to the survey are important because it means that results need to be carefully qualified between years, especially if the question wording changed; careful qualification is needed to avoid misrepresenting any relationships or trends across more than one year of survey results. In relation to some questions, we provide a more expansive impression of the results, especially if the question and other options have remained the same or similar. We do, however, emphasise the most recent data (2023 at the time of writing) to create an impression of trends with respondents up to then.

For the purposes of our analysis, it is important to emphasise that ARRA designed the survey, collected the responses and tallied the data for each year. The sample of participants was convenient in being mostly drawn from ARRA members or those affiliated with or otherwise connected to the association or its members. Because of the specificity of the sample, we cannot generalise the results to Australian romance readers or romance readers more widely. Moreover, the survey required respondents to self-assess and self-report their reading practices and habits rather than being directly observed or interviewed by a researcher. While self-reporting of media usage and practices via an anonymous survey is an excellent way to obtain general insights and an impression of actual practices, it does have limitations and necessitates further qualitative exploration to explore the "why" or "how" of a phenomenon. This article serves as the first and foundational phase for further inferential analyses to correlate the quantitative data as well as qualitative interviews and focus groups with engaged romance readers.

The ARRA survey romance reader

When analysing the survey data between 2009 and 2023, one of the first impressions is that the respondents appeared to be highly committed and enthusiastic romance readers. Most books read by respondents were romance. Figure 3, for example, showcases a comparison between the number of romance books read by survey respondents between 2019–2023. The labels on the X-axis represent the number of responses obtained per response option.



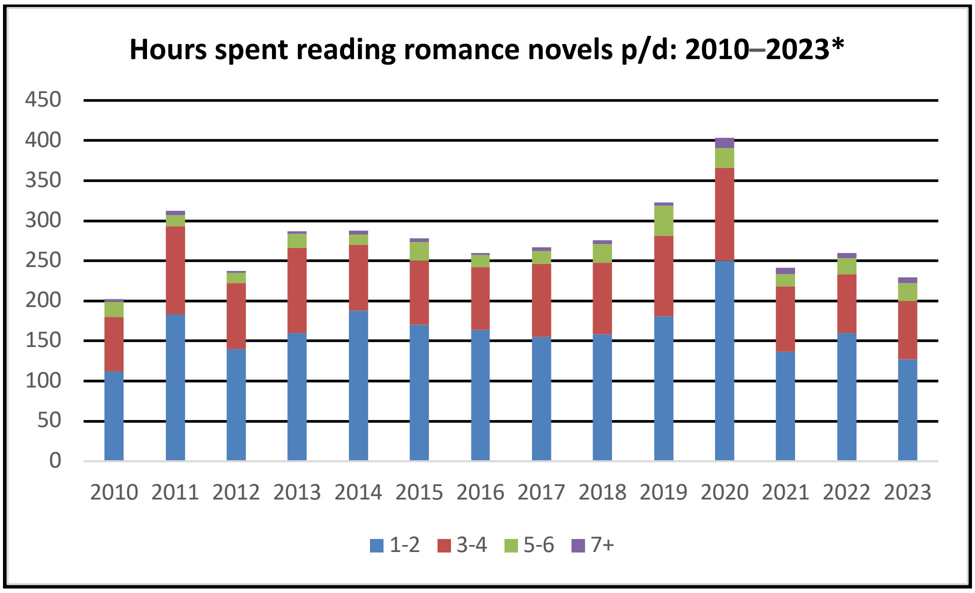
**2019 N=332; 2020 N=413; 2021 N=251; 2022 N=262; 2023 N=229*
Figure 3: Comparison of romance titles selected 2019–2023

As Figure 3 shows, when respondents were asked how many of the books they read in that respective year were romance titles, between 47% and 61% selected either "more than 80%" or "all of them". In 2023, 21% of respondents said all novels they read were romances, and 39% selected more than 80%. Unsurprisingly, respondents showed a high level of reading commitment to the romance genre. However, for most respondents, romance was part of a wider range of texts they read. For all survey years between 2009–2023, 70% or more of respondents read up to 10 romances a month. In 2023, 14% selected that they read more than 15 romance books monthly. Compared to the Australian Book Readers study (Throsby et al., 2017), the number of romances read by ARRA survey respondents (which notably does not include any other novels they read that may not be romances) was significantly more than the Australian Book Readers' "occasional reader" who read 1.2 books per month and "frequent reader" who read 6.4 books per month (Throsby et al., 2017, p. 8). Across the Australian Book Reader respondents, they read about 3.2 books per month (p. 8).

Fast and committed readers

The speed at which ARRA respondents read a novel is another important insight offered by the survey results. Many respondents read a book in less than two days, and most read a novel in five days or less. For example, in 2023, 14% indicated they "typically take" "less than a day" to finish a novel, with 45% selecting "1–2 days" and 28% selecting "3–5 days". Only 7% selected "more than a week". This finding raises questions about the process of reading, particularly the pace and quality of reading, especially whether ARRA readers could be considered "expert readers" who read both "slowly and closely but also quickly and selectively" (Wilner, 2020, p. 44) depending on what they are reading or for other reasons.

Figure 4 shows the number of hours that ARRA readers devote to reading romance novels per day. The data on the Y-axis represents the number of actual responses obtained.



**2010 N=202; 2011 N=312; 2012 N=237; 2013 N=287; 2014 N=288; 2015 N=278; 2016 N=260; 2017 N=267; 2018 N=276; 2019 N=323; 2020 N=403; 2021 N=241; 2022 N=260; 2023 N= 229*
Figure 4: Number of hours reading romance novels per day

In terms of how much reading was done daily, as Figure 4 above illustrates, ARRA survey results were consistent across the survey years in that in 2010, 55% of respondents selected 1–2 hours a day and 34% selected 3–4 hours; in 2023 the results were similar with 55% selecting 1–2 hours a day and 32% selecting 3–4 hours daily. Notably 10% of respondents selected 5–6 hours per day and 3% selected 7 hours or more. Most ARRA readers are therefore reading above the 6.9 hours per week indicated by the Australian Book Readers respondents (in the Australian Book Readers survey "occasional" readers spent 4.7 hours and "frequent" readers spent 10.8 hours per week) (Throsby et al., 2017, p. 8). Many ARRA survey respondents are seemingly spending more time reading daily than Australian Book Readers respondents, evidencing their seeming high commitment and enthusiasm for reading.

Always carry a romance novel

One explanation for the frequency and speed of reading by ARRA members may be found in the questions related to whether they carry a romance novel with them and the extent of eBook use. Arguably, the ability to read often and finish novels at a reasonable pace is related to having easy access to reading material, amongst other factors. ARRA survey respondents indicated an increasing level of continued access to what they were reading between 2009 and 2023. In 2009, when asked, "Do you always carry a romance novel with you?", 42.5% selected "yes". In 2023, the question wording changed slightly to ask, "Do you usually carry a romance novel with you? (Indicate all that apply)", with four answer options ("Audiobook", "eBook", "Paper book", "No"); respondents could choose multiple responses. In 2023, only 9.25% of respondents selected "no". This implies that in 2023 just over 90% of ARRA respondents usually carried a romance novel with 77% carrying an eBook, 30% carried a "paper book" and 22% carried an "audiobook". Because respondents could select multiple answers to this question, it is possible that they carried more than one type of book at once, such as eBooks and hard copies; they may also toggle between them as needed. Moreover, even when they are not carrying their hard copy, they may access an eBook or audio book via mobile media devices such as a phone, tablet or e-reader. Arguably ARRA survey respondents may be reading more than one novel at a time with those novels in different formats.

Increasing eBook use

The increasing market penetration and dominance of eBook use can be charted across the ARRA surveys. The Creating Value National Arts Participation Survey (2023) found that of those who read books in their sample, 60% read eBooks and 34% listened to audiobooks (p. 156). There has been an increasing availability of eBooks in Australia through a range of booksellers such as Amazon, Dymocks, Booktopia and QBD including by established publishers, small publishers and through self-publishing. Libraries are also increasingly offering eBooks to recreational readers from local libraries through to the National Library for the many advantages they offer (Wells & Sallenbach, 2023). Given the increasing availability of eBooks and the privacy and convenience they afford, it is not surprising that ARRA survey respondents indicated a high level of eBook use. Figure 5 depicts the increasing percentage of eBook usage from 2017–2023 based on the survey question "Do you always carry a romance novel with you?" It is important to note that the response options changed slightly in the survey between 2021 and 2023.

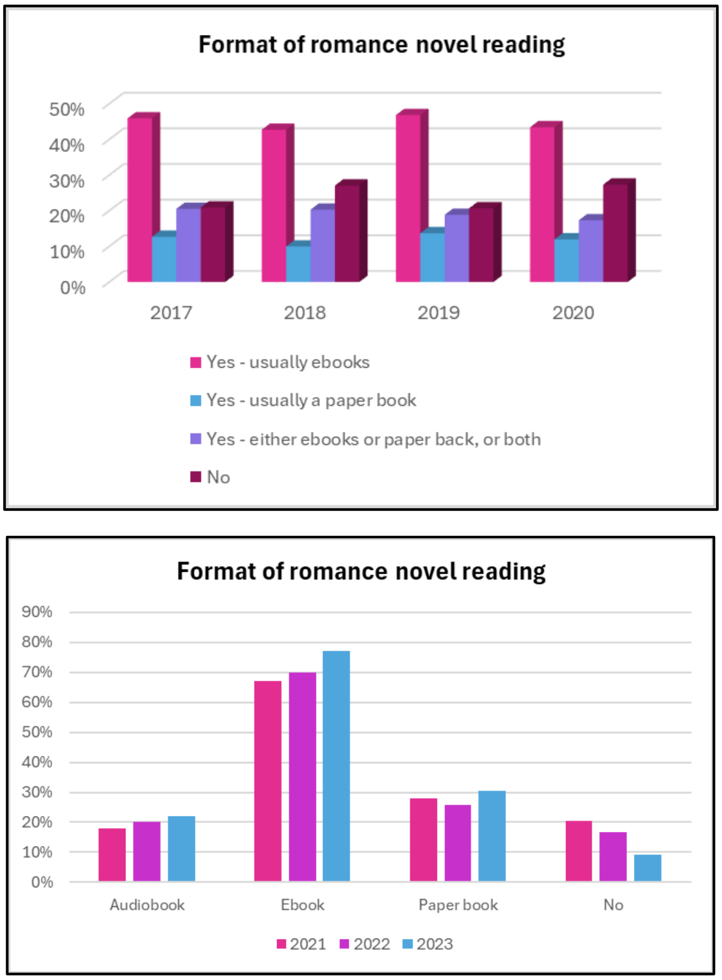


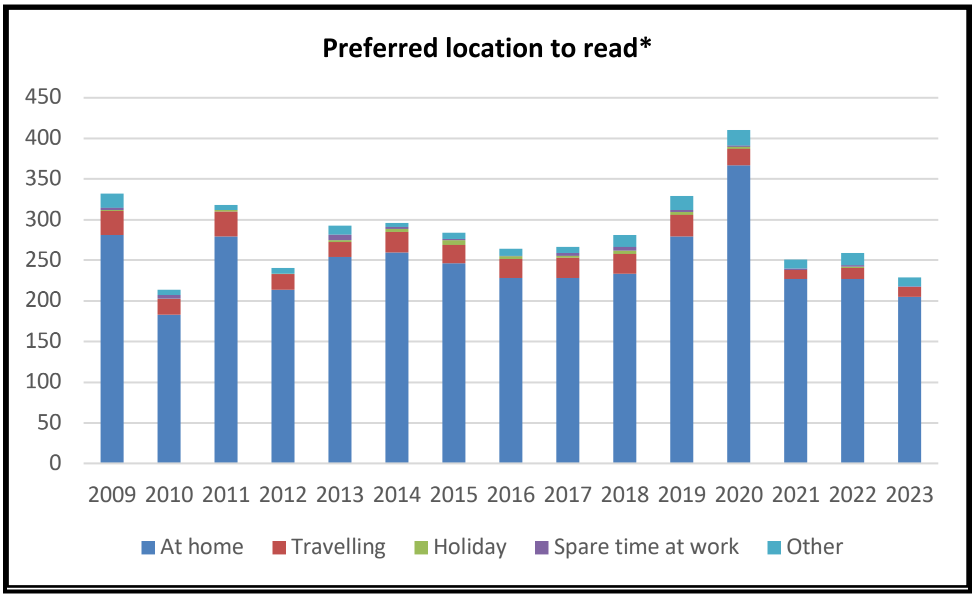
Figure 5: Format of romance novel reading 2017–2020 and 2021–2023

Interestingly, in 2023, 77% of respondents selected they usually carried an eBook, which is starkly different to 2009, when only 10% of respondents frequently purchased eBooks. This huge shift gestures to the growth in eBook use for ARRA survey respondents between 2009 and 2023. The increasing uptake of eBooks by ARRA respondents may result from several factors. Key factors include improved eBook reader technology, such as "weight, screen size, and screen resolution" (Gibson & Gibb, 2011, p. 305); portability and convenience (Merga, 2014); increased availability of a broad range of titles; and the integration of eBooks apps or readers into smart devices, which are often within arm's reach most of the day (and night).

In addition to portability, eBook reading has several other advantages. eBooks potentially offer a more inclusive reading experience for those who may experience challenges with print materials, such as those with some visual, perceptual, learning or physical conditions (Ganner et al., 2023; Order et al., 2021). eBooks are often lighter and easier to handle, text can be increased in size and in-built dictionaries can quickly define words. Some eReading apps also provide functionality to switch between a text-based version of a book and audio reader. Another advantage of eBooks reading for romance readers is the relative privacy it offers in terms of what is being read. eBooks keep private the cover and other identifying information that would be revealed if a hard copy was being read. Such concealment reduces the likelihood that an observer will engage with the reader about *what* they are reading. While interactions around reading may be positive for romance readers, eBooks do offer a way to keep what one is reading private if necessary. Any likelihood of having to deploy "facework" or "face-saving" strategies in the event of an unwelcome conversation (Brackett, 2000) is seemingly avoided through eBook use; in other words, whether by accident or intention, eBooks offer a "preventative face strategy" (Brackett, 2000, p. 349). The ARRA responses around eBook use suggest a strong commitment amongst respondents to using eBooks; however, it should be noted that eBook use is often complemented by hard copy reading and, for some respondents, audio listening as well.

Most reading occurs at home

One further insight into ARRA respondents is related to where they undertook most of their reading. Figure 6 outlines respondents' preferred location for reading romance novels based on the number of responses per response option.



**2009 N=315; 2010 N=208; 2011 N=318; 2012 N=241; 2013 N=293; 2014 N=296; 2015=284; 2016 N=264; 2017 N=281; 2018 N= 329; 2020 N=410; 2021 N=251; 2022 N=259; 2023 N =229*
Figure 6: Preferred location to read

From Figure 6, it could be inferred that between 2009 and 2023, between 80% and 90% of respondents chose "at home" as the location for most reading. In 2009, 89% selected at home and this slightly increased to 90% in 2023. Interestingly, in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the much bigger survey sample saw 90% of respondents still selecting "at home" as where most of their reading occurred, possibly reflecting the impact of lockdowns and movement restrictions during that time. In 2009, nearly 10% of respondents selected "travelling or commuting"; however, this decreased to 5% by 2023. The emphasis on home being the place of reading conjures Janice Radway's (1991) ethnographic study of romance readers where her participants viewed their reading as a way to carve out space for themselves and immerse themselves in stories usually very different to their own lives. The high response rate for "home" reading from ARRA survey respondents suggests that romances form part of personal recreational or leisure time activities. The emphasis on "home" as the place where most reading occurs also needs to be considered in conjunction with eBook use. It may be assumed that the rise in eBook use means that reading has become more portable with a potential for reading outside the home such as when commuting. Yet, the dominance of "home" as the place where most reading occurs contradicts any suggestion that reading increasingly occurs while on the move. Indeed, Australia is known for its reliance on cars for personal commuting and correspondingly lower use of public transport compared to countries with higher levels of public transport use; high levels of personal commuting can reflect into reading rates (Johanson, 2024). Countries with a higher use of public transport reportedly have higher reading rates (Johanson, 2024).

Romance sub-genres, typologies and formats

Several questions in the ARRA surveys relate to romance subgenres. The overarching romance genre, according to the Romance Writers of Australia (RWA) website, contains "two basic elements: a love-story that is central to the story, and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (RWA, accessed 2024). Over time, the subgenres within the broader Romance genre have diversified and expanded to now include those that are both "traditional and new" (Roach, 2016, p. 6). As RWA notes, new subgenres are "evolving all the time" (RWA, 2024). The ARRA survey results between 2009 and 2023 reflect the expansion of subgenres and increasing articulation by readers of emerging and new subgenres.

Increasing diversification in a range of subgenres

In 2009, when ARRA respondents were asked the main subgenres that were their "favourite" there were eight main answer options and "other" to select from. In 2009, "Paranormal romance", "historical romance", "romantic suspense" and "contemporary" were the top four (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Main subgenres identified in 2009

In 2009, 6% of respondents selected "other" with many indicating they wanted to "select all", add other subgenres or be able to tick multiple boxes. By 2023, the design of the question-and-answer options had changed significantly. In 2023, the question asked, "Which of the following romance subgenres have you read in the past year?" followed by a question asking which had been read "most". The various subgenres from this year are illustrated in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Main subgenres identified in 2023

The list of subgenres read in 2023 contained 25 options with "contemporary romance" the most popular, followed by "historical romance", "paranormal romance", "romantic comedy", "rural romance" and "romantic suspense". The subgenres mentioned for those who selected "other" are interesting, with the small number of respondents listing "litrpg" (literary role-playing games), "small town", "dark romance" and "auto-biographies and true stories". In the 2023 survey, for the question about the subgenre respondents had read the most in the past year, "contemporary romance" had the highest result at 23%, followed by "historical", "romantic suspense" and "rural romance". However, the name "contemporary romance" may be interpreted and applied differently by individuals. For some respondents, "contemporary" may mean set in recent years or published recently; however, the demarcations between subgenres where "contemporary" may apply can be unclear. The responses to these questions provide useful insight into the range of subgenres familiar to readers; however, they may come with the caveat that there are likely crossovers between some subgenres and subgenre names have several possible interpretations.

A further point to note from the subgenre questions and results in the ARRA surveys is that the respondents are increasingly more articulate about the subgenres they are reading. This suggests that they may purchase books based on subgenre preferences and/or clearly identify the subgenre of the books they read. From the ARRA surveys, it is not clear how much awareness of subgenres can be explained through publisher and author marketing. Another explanation is any labelling, tags or keywords, whether physical or virtual, when readers are choosing their books. The subgenre question illustrates Philips' (2006) point about the complexity of the genre and the "sophistication" of readers "in their awareness of subgenres and categories" (p. 1). ARRA's respondents appear to know which subgenres their reading falls into and are confident in declaring other, sometimes emerging, subgenres they have encountered. Moreover, the survey results show that respondents are expanding their reading as new subgenres emerge.

Openness to trying new subgenres

In the 2022 and 2023 ARRA surveys, after the subgenre questions, respondents have been asked about their openness to trying a new subgenre in the next year. Given the amount that ARRA respondents tend to read and the number of books they read monthly, it is unsurprising that only 10% of 2023 respondents selected "very unlikely" when asked if they would read a new subgenre. Essentially, when collated, nearly 90% of respondents were definitely likely, very likely or somewhat likely to try a new subgenre in 2024. Those who chose "very unlikely" were invited to explain why in an open answer. The main reasons given were that they were not interested, that they had already tried most subgenres, they only read certain types of romance, they were time or space poor or already had many books waiting to be read. An astute familiarity with the genre was noted in several open comments, with one 2023 respondent stating, "I've been reading romance for 50 plus years. I have read all genres, and I know exactly what I want to read" (p. 15). Such comments demonstrate a keen awareness amongst respondents of their reading tastes alongside purposeful decision-making around what they read. These results also demonstrate that readers use subgenres as typologies to categorise the romances they read. As such, these readers are aware of the types of novels they read and likely select novels using a subgenre type lens.

The dominance of single titles

The subgenre information from the ARRA surveys is seemingly connected to the formats that readers indicate reading. The ARRA survey asks about two main formats in the romance genre: category romance and single title books. Category romances (usually shorter than 85,000 words), as Romance Writers of Australia clarifies, are “shorter … books issued under a common imprint/series name that are usually numbered sequentially and released at regular intervals with a pre-determined number of releases” often purchased in “big super-stores”, by mail order or online (RWA, 2024). Single titles (sometimes called trade fiction) are “longer romances released individually and not as part of a numbered series … released in hard-cover, trade paperback, or mass-market paperback sizes” (RWA, 2024). In the ARRA survey results, between 2010 and 2023, most respondents consistently read either “mainly single titles, plus some category romances” or “only single titles”. In 2023, for example, 37% read “mainly single title, plus some category romance” and 35% read “only single titles”. The number of respondents indicating reading only category romance was less than 5% consistently between 2009 and 2023; in 2023 those who read only category romances totalled 3%. These results show that category romances remain popular with these respondents in combination with reading single-title books; however, it appears that only a small number read only category romances. Most respondents read a mix of category and single-title books. The high number of respondents who indicate reading a combination of category and single titles may suggest that they favour reading one format in particular contexts or for specific reasons.

New titles, decision-making, and influences

Finding out about new books, especially books they are likely to enjoy, is important for many readers. As explored in the Australia Reads survey (2021), the books a reader purchases or reads are often influenced by recommendations they receive or information sources they come across (p. 15). As the Australia Reads survey noted, it is important to distinguish between books that are read and books that are bought (2021, p. 16); there are potentially different influences and reasons for just reading a book (such as borrowing from the library, a friend or family member) as opposed to purchasing a book to read. This information is also important for writers and publishers because the success of a book is usually measured by unit sales. It is difficult (if not impossible) to measure reach in terms of informal exposures such as library use or social borrowing, sharing or exchanging. The ARRA survey results shed some light on how readers learn about books, especially from emerging authors, and how recommendations figure into their book purchasing process.

Learning about new books through social media

Figure 9 showcases the sources of learning about new romance titles from 2015 to 2020:

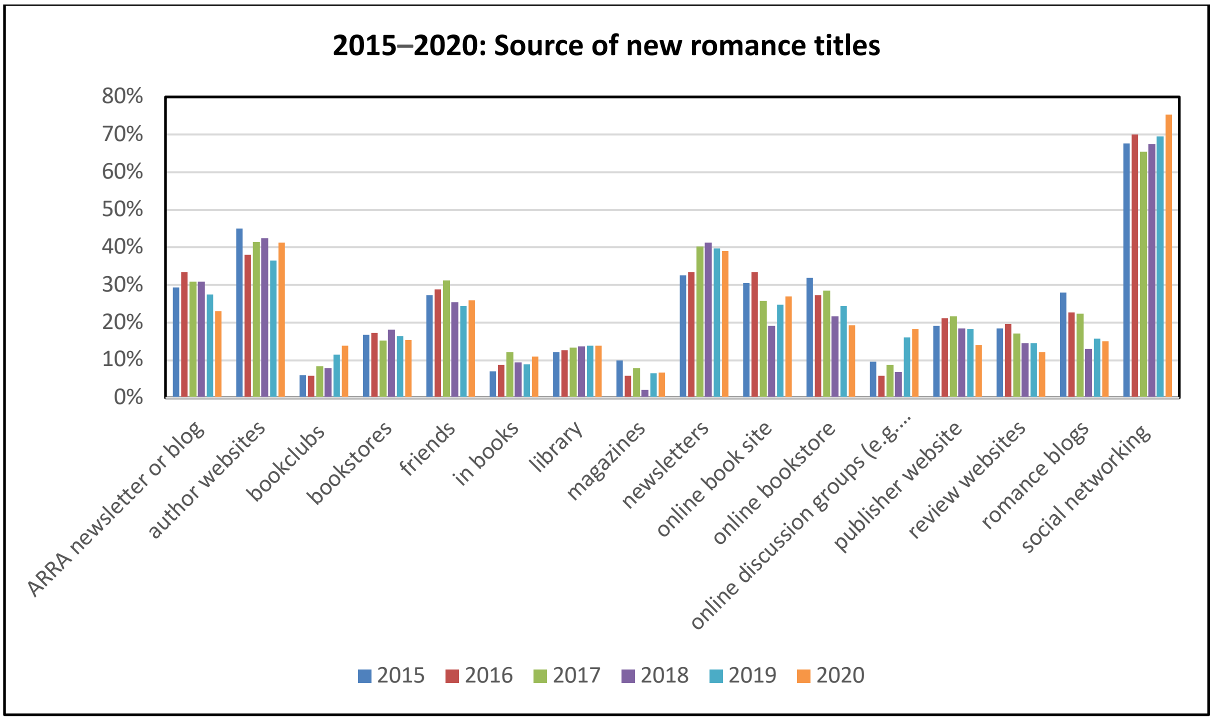
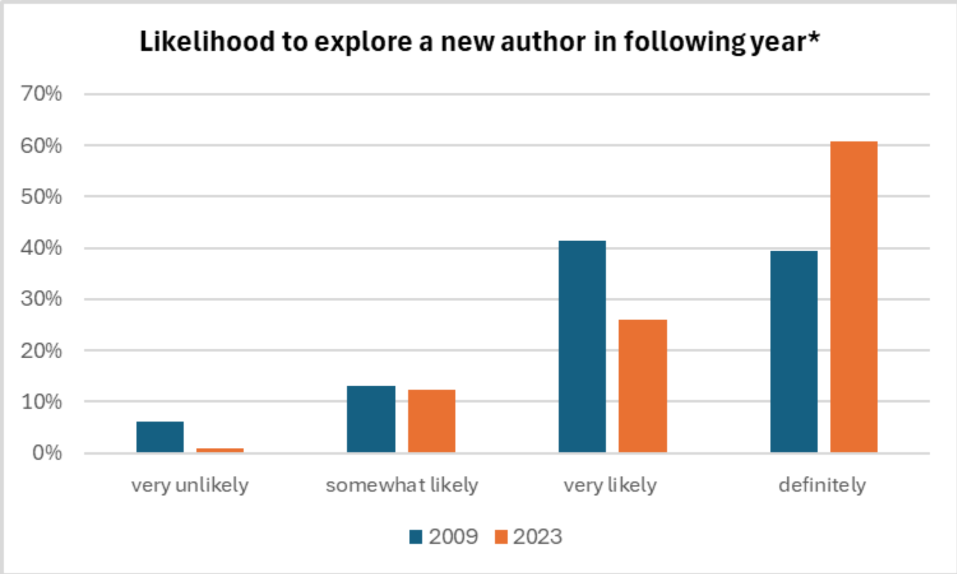


Figure 9: Sources of new book titles: 2015–2020

Figure 9 indicates that between 2015 and 2020, social networking sites dominated where respondents discovered new and forthcoming releases. However, in 2023 respondents chose "author websites/emails" slightly more than "social media" as where they found out about new books. Such results provide insights into where respondents discovered new books and indicate a slight shift from social media to author communications. It is unclear which kinds of social media platforms, channels or communities (such as the TikTok community #BookTok) provide this kind of information and whether specific information on author websites is more influential in book purchasing decisions than others. The likely importance of author publicity and marketing should be noted here in that readers seemingly join an author's mailing list after an enjoyable reading experience; their enjoyment of one novel by an author likely leads them to want to read more novels by that author. This suggests that author publicity, marketing and outreach play an important role in relationship building with readers.

Openness to trying the books of new authors

The results about author websites are connected to results from another question in the survey about what most influences the decision to buy a book. As stated by Veros (2019) when discussing Ross's (1999) research into information seeking by recreational readers, book selections occur "through an elaborate system of meta-knowledge based on previous readings, knowledge of authors, conventions and recommendations of family and friends, and literary authorities bestowing reviews and awards" (Ross, 1999, as cited in Veros, 2019, p. 257). Figure 10 shows a comparison between 2009 and 2023 of the likelihood for respondents to explore a new author in the following year:



**2009 N=324; 2023 N=227*
Figure 10: The likelihood of exploring a new author: 2009 vs 2023

In the 2023 ARRA survey results, more than 61% of respondents were "definitely likely" to try a new author in the next year (less than 1% were "very unlikely"). This suggests that most respondents were as receptive to trying new authors as they were to explore a new subgenre, as discussed above. However, it does raise the question of how respondents hear about new authors and how new or emerging authors might best connect with their target readers, especially before a first release. When asked in the 2023 survey which "elements most influence" the decision to purchase a book, 79% of respondents selected the "author", which was closely followed by the "blurb" at 70%. "Recommendations" and "reviews" were selected by approximately 44% of the respondents. Interestingly, "price" was selected by 29% of the respondents. From these results, of which respondents could select multiple options, it is noteworthy that price appears less important than other factors such as the author. Indeed, for ARRA respondents, the author may be the most important element in the decision to buy a book, followed closely by the blurb. While it is not completely clear which characteristics about the author most influences buying decisions, it is likely that previous enjoyable reading experiences from an author will be closely connected to purchasing more novels from the same author. The blurb or synopsis is another important element, as per the 70% result mentioned above, in 2023 for influences in book buying; how a blurb is written and presented to a prospective reader is therefore likely to be important in influencing buying decisions.

The importance of recommendations

Recommendations play a role in decision-making about which books to buy or read. In the 2023 results, only 4% of respondents said that their book purchases were "never" based on "reviews/recommendations" with 74% selecting either "frequently" or "occasionally". This suggests that book purchases were often influenced by recommendations directly from other people and information sources such as book reviews. Correspondingly, 96% of respondents either frequently or occasionally read book reviews/recommendations and 80% either frequently or occasionally wrote book reviews. Such results indicate the importance of writing and reading reviews as part of the practice of romance reading; for publishers and authors, reviews of new books should be supported and encouraged where possible. In 2023, when respondents were asked the type of review/recommendation that was most influential in a book buying decision, friends were selected by 23% of respondents followed by "a bookseller or review website" (16%). Another 16% of respondents selected that they do not buy based on recommendations. The responses to this question suggest that exposure to reviews and recommendations come from many sources with friends slightly more influential than other sources. For writers and publishers, publicising books in various ways to reach a range of target readers appears to be a reasonable strategy.

The price of purchasing books matters to frequent readers

The "where" of romance purchasing or obtaining books was an important theme that emerged from the ARRA survey results. As noted by the Australia Reads (2024) survey, it is important to delineate the buyers of romance novels from those who either read books shared by friends or those who obtained books from libraries. The informal economy of romance novel sharing and library borrowing is not reflected in book sales data, when that data is available. Bestseller lists or the numbers of books sold, as mentioned by romance writers or on book covers, do not include informal borrowing or sharing practices. The exposure to particular books will almost certainly be much higher than the available data, especially book sales data. In the ARRA 2023 survey results, only 24% of respondents indicated that, on average they do not buy any new (paper) romance books per month. This means that 76% of respondents buy one or more books per month, whereas 65% said they bought less than 5 books per month. In terms of where they bought their books, 27% indicated that they bought from an online bookseller and 23% bought from discount stores, 12% bought from chain or local bookstores. What is interesting here is the emphasis on online or discount booksellers. Often, online sellers have discounted books, and for many respondents, the cost of book buying was an important consideration. Cost may be a greater consideration if they are buying many books per month (the less they cost, the more books they can buy). In terms of where romance books were bought, in the 2023 results, 12% of respondents said author events. This suggests that for some readers, marketing or promotion events where they can meet other fans, hear an author speak, have a book signed, and/or interact through a Q and A session are important precursors to book buying. For writers, these types of engagements may support book sales through building a rapport with readers. The importance of buying new books was emphasised in the survey data: 65% bought no *used* paper books, suggesting a significant proportion were not engaging in second-hand book buying.

Library use

Library use by respondents was also explored by the ARRA surveys. In the 2023 survey results, 45% "never" borrowed romance books from a local library in the past year. This suggests that 55% will use the library at some point, either "rarely" (13%), "occasionally" (19%), "often" (15%) or "always" (9%). A related question in the survey asked respondents whether "new romance releases (either physical or eBook)" are "usually available" from their local library. For those who selected "yes" (37%), it seems that this portion of respondents knew what was available in their local library and could identify if new romance releases were added. It is unclear how they found out about new romance releases, whether their library communicated with members about new releases or if readers searched for new releases. Forty-five per cent selected "I don't know" in response to whether new releases were usually available in their library; however, this may well be linked to the proportion of respondents who do not use the library. If they do not use the library or use it only occasionally, they may not be aware of new releases being added to the shelves or catalogue. Conversely, this result may also reflect the interaction between library users and library practices where romance catalogue records may be incomplete or the books may be acquired, stored and/or discarded without adequate planning or communication (Veros, 2015; Ramsdell, 2012). Given the popularity of the romance genre, it behoves libraries to dedicate resources towards investing in their romance collections and publicising the existing and new works to their members and broader communities.

Conclusion

This analysis of the ARRA survey data between 2009 and 2023 serves as a much-needed starting point for exploring the preferences and practices of Australian romance readers. The ARRA surveys, though drawing upon a relatively small voluntary sample of highly dedicated romance readers, capture key changes for respondents that, at times, reflect wider market, technological, and industry forces. The survey results demonstrate changes in reading practices, such as the uptake in eBook use and proliferation of romance subgenres. ARRA survey respondents, for the most part, appear to be engaged and frequent readers who demonstrate dedicated, enthusiastic engagement with the novels they encounter. Most seem to read above the rate found in the Australian Book Readers survey (2017); ARRA respondents read for more time each day and more books per week or month. Moreover, ARRA survey respondents are articulate about their reading choices, particularly related to the subgenres that they most read and enjoyed. Most ARRA survey respondents were willing to embrace new authors and/or new subgenres; however, it is important to note that they need to know about new authors or book releases to try them. Communication, therefore, appears paramount in terms of readers knowing about new developments in the genre, whether from writers, publishers, or libraries, reinforced by readers learning about new releases from author newsletters or websites. Between 2009 and 2023, most respondents carried a novel with them, with eBooks an increasingly popular mode for reading to complement hard copy reading.

What emerges from the survey data is that romance readers, at least the ones who responded to ARRA's call for participants, are complex; potentially different age groups, or occasional versus frequent readers, are engaging in different reading practices. This analysis serves as a starting point for more detailed statistical analyses of this ARRA data to explore the highly committed, frequent, and engaged ARRA respondents. Further investigation is needed to learn whether highly committed readers engage in practices that distinguish them from more occasional readers. Qualitative research through interviews and/or focus groups are also needed to build on the initial research conducted here to better explore the types of books that they read, their key reasons for reading, and what they enjoy most from the reading experience. It would also be useful to investigate whether ARRA members read multiple books at once and, if they do, how and why they toggle between them. In conjunction with reading multiple books at once is the role of media devices that support reading: Do ARRA readers switch between books and mediums, and if they do, under which conditions? More research is needed to explore the library use of romance readers in detail, particularly their book-borrowing habits, extent of hard copy or eBook use, how many books they borrow, and how easy it is to find and borrow romance books. The ARRA results demonstrate the complexity of romance reading practices for respondents, underscoring the many unknowns of these readers and the need for more research to understand them better.

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