



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

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

Flinders University

Abby Guy

liquid honey

Abstract:

This creative piece is an excerpt from my romantasy (romantic fantasy) novel, set in a fictional desert landscape in which drovers ride wyvern to muster their cattle. This scene takes place during the novel's climax, where the protagonists (Pym and Elias) reunite after a tragic incident and finally relent to their (abiding) love for one another. This was written in order to explore cis-het male leads in romantasy fiction and their representations of masculinity. The "cinnamon roll" hero trope is a representation of masculinity sought after by readers for being sweet, kind and emotionally intelligent, especially when juxtaposed against the "alpha male" alternative, who is stoic, sexually aggressive, and dominant. In the accompanying exegetical statement, I argue that these "cinnamon roll" men are not different to, but rather direct reflections of, the "alpha" romance hero, by adhering to patriarchal social scripts about masculinity – such as an emphasis on the (often toxic) exaggeration of the male body. Through my creative excerpt I paint a male hero who is not rough, thuggish and towering, but gentle, pleading, soft and quiet. In doing so, I hope to create blueprints for a male romance lead that subverts the patriarchal ideals reinscribed in current romantasy novels.

Biographical note:

Abby Guy is a writer, PhD Candidate and casual academic at Flinders University. Her research focuses on popular romance scholarship, men and masculinities studies, and genre fiction. Her short stories have been published in the anthologies *Last Call* (2022) and *FUTURES* (2024), and her short story, "A Tomato Grave for a Tomato Man", was shortlisted for *The Best Australian Yarn* 2024.

Keywords:

Cinnamon roll, romance heroes, romantasy, masculinity

Foreword

The following excerpt is from a larger romantasy novel that follows the female protagonist, Pym, orphaned at a young age after her mother drowned in the Threadbare Sea. Pym's orphanage closes and she is shipped West to work for the drovers who use wyvern to muster cattle over the desert. Pym sees this as an opportunity to escape from the ocean that haunts her, but the Threadbare can seep through the smallest of cracks and Pym can never seem to swallow the taste of salt. She does not think she belongs in the desert, and she does not believe that the drovers want her there. "liquid honey" takes place at the climax of the novel as Pym sets out alone to save her wyvern, Pseudechis, who has been swept into the sea at the bottom of a ravine. Elias (the Nightjar), a fellow drover and the novel's love interest, has just pulled Pym from the sea with the aid of his wyvern Mujadsril. The amounting grief, fear and frustration that Pym has been carrying throughout the novel finally spills over.

liquid honey

Mujadsril pulled them from the bowels of the Threadbare and deposited them on a ledge deep within the ravine, where they could not be lost to the gullet of the sea. Pym's eyes still stung with vinegar, but she heard the wyvern ascend between the narrow faces of rock, the leather of his wings like the slow unfurling of wet sails, and the jars of whyr glass strung through his breastplate rattling. The Nightjar did not watch his wyvern go – he stared only at Pym, his eyes as stinging as the spray of ocean salt on her cheeks.

She hated him for it. Hated that he had followed her, hated that he had reached into the ocean to pull her free and got himself wet in the process. The current had taken his outerwear, stripped him of his hooded cowl so that his face was exposed, curls of hair stuck to his forehead. She hated that the Threadbare had cleaned every inch of the red, red desert from his skin and laid bare the raw boy beneath. She had put so much dirt and dust and pindan between herself and the sea and it *still* touched everything Pym held close. To be loved by Pym was to drown.

"You left without saying anything. I would have ..." Elias started.

"You didn't believe me," Pym interrupted. "You *wouldn't* believe me."

They were saturated, clothes slick to their bodies and the thick scent of brine heavy between them.

"Pym, I—"

"I was hurting. It ... I felt like someone had cleaved straight through me." She jabbed her hand against her sternum, mimed the act of slicing into flesh and bone. "Like someone had ripped my heart out, and you *didn't* believe me."

Pym could still feel the pain of it, like she was slick with blood instead of the sea.

Elias's hands reached out, but he did not touch her. They hovered in the space between them – held nothing.

"I'm sorry, Pym. I should have listened. I should have listened, I'm so sorry."

"They must all want me gone," she said. Her voice rose above the sound of the ocean until she was yelling. "Without Pseudechis, I am nothing. Without her, I can't be here."

She pressed the palm of her hands against her temples and slipped her fingers into her hair. Pym could not breathe. She could still feel the Threadbare in her lungs, in her throat, shrivelling her from the inside. She could not fucking breathe. Her mouth fell agape with the need to scream but it never came.

She turned her eyes on Elias and stared straight into his. "You wanted me gone."

Elias stared back. He lowered his hands to his sides.

"You can't believe that."

"I do." Her lips trembled. "I do. You've all wanted me gone since the beginning. Send the waif away, send her back to drown." She laughed then, and the sound of it frightened even her.

A frustrated noise passed through Elias and his knees dipped for a moment, as though he was going to crumble before her, but he remained standing.

"You think Ilsodir wants you gone?" he asked. "Epham? The drovers? Do you think *any* of them want to send you out to sea?"

Pym said nothing.

"Do you?" he insisted. "Before you, there was grief and hunger and anger, but nothing more. Do you think Clement would have sent you back? Walked you across the gangplank himself and waved you off?" Elias had started to gesticulate, and he punctuated the end of each sentence with a sharp motion from his hand. Pym had never seen this much frustration from him. "'See you, Pym!'" he mocked. "'*Don't let the kelpies gnaw your bones!*' As if every single one of us wouldn't have rotted away without you here."

Still, she said nothing. She trembled, an old, familiar cold seeping into her skin as the Threadbare roiled beside them. Elias crossed the short gap between them until they stood, almost chest to chest, breathing the same air. Pym untangled her fingers from her hair and her arms fell limp at her sides. She looked at him and only then did she realise he was crying. Tears had gathered in his eyes like liquid honey, and when he blinked, they spilled over his flushed cheeks.

“We are all trying to love you,” he breathed, “but you won’t let us.”

Pym closed her eyes and felt a sharp stab of pain in her chest. She wanted to believe him. She did, but Pym felt stuck in an endless cycle of breaking and mending that had started because of her. Her father had died, her mother had followed, and Pym had held the hammer in her own hands ever since.

“I—” she inhaled, and the air was ice in her lungs. “Everyone I have ever loved ... everyone I have cared for, everyone just ...” She opened her eyes again. “They’re all gone, and I was the one who shepherded them to their graves.”

Elias took her face in his hands, gentle fingers at her jaw and his palms cold against her damp cheeks.

“It is not your fault.”

“Mother knew it,” she said. “Mother tried to end it all and she drowned in my place. I blamed the Threadbare for everyone she has taken from me but it’s not her fault, not really; it’s *mine*. I killed her.” Pym cried too, then, and her face contorted as she tried to speak through it. “I killed Mother.”

“Your mother was wrong, Pym. She looked into the face of her grief, and she was afraid. You cannot blame yourself for her cowardice. It is not your fault.” Elias’s fingers ghosted beneath her eyes, gathered her tears on his thumbs.

Grief was just love with no home, and the love she carried had become so heavy. Her arms ached. She wanted to put it all down, to plant it somewhere and let it grow.

“Do you really think I want you gone?” Elias asked again. His voice came out as a whisper, a small plea in the sliver of space between them.

Pym reached up and circled her fingers around one of his wrists. To Elias, Pym had always been transparent. An open window with no latch. And when she looked at him then, she could see into the core of his being where she found him shivering and wanting. His heart an unseeded garden.

Pym shook her head.

“I have confessed to you over and over since the day we met, and you ...” Elias swallowed, like he was choking on his words. “You heard none of them.”

His thumb moved over her lips, and he watched her, his brow soft and pleading. Pym slipped her hand from his wrist and touched her fingers to his face, moved them slowly over his cheekbone, like she had wanted to in the library. His eyes fluttered closed and he leaned into

her touch. His breath fanned over her cheeks. She thought of the quiet warmth of their library, of aloe vera on cheeks, the light brush of fingertips, paper dragons folded from the pages of books, and of stories shared in the dark. All the quiet confessions Elias had made, and that Pym had ignored.

When he opened his eyes again, they made eye contact.

“I heard them all,” she confessed. “I’m sorry. I heard them all.”

She closed the gap between them, and she pressed her lips to his.

The kiss was gentle and fleeting, like the flutter of moths cupped in-hand, but when she pulled back Elias groaned and chased her through the vacuum of space between them. He kept his hands on her face, and he pulled her back to him until their lips met again.

Exegetical statement

“liquid honey” is an excerpt from a larger body of work, a romantasy novel, through which I explore representations of the “cinnamon roll” hero trope in 21st-century romantasy novels. I seek to challenge the toxic and hypermasculine traits that underpin current cinnamon roll heroes by creating an alternative model of the romantic hero that is divorced from patriarchal cultures of masculinity.

Prior to the late 20th century, the alpha hero dominated the romance narrative. He was defined by his “ultraprotective, overtly territorial, controlling, and domineering nature” (Lynch et al., 2012), and he was known to be dangerous, untamed, tormented, hard edged, sexually aggressive, a brute, an abuser and a jerk (Krentz, 2012; Ramsdell, 2012). These were men that valued the traits of patriarchal masculinities, including gendered power imbalance, sexual assault, the belittling of traditionally feminine behaviours and emotional stoicism, and they were part of a hierarchical system of dominance (Levant, 1992, p. 326–327). This is not dissimilar to the heroes of the 21st-century romantasy novel – recently popularised by author Sarah J. Maas, who Bloomsbury stated is “spearheading” the genre (Creamer, 2024). Maas’s heroes have been described as powerful, ruthless, strong, emotionally stoic and followers of patriarchal social scripts (Holmes, 2024). When asked about romantasy novels Nisha J. Tuli, author of *Trial of the Sun Queen*, stated that she “love[s] the whole ‘he murdered your family, but now you’re going to fall in love’” (Creamer, 2024), and romantasy author Lyndall Clipstone similarly states that “falling for the monster you’d sworn to kill” (*Kill Your Darlings*, 2024) is a romantasy narrative that she loves. If the alpha is the dominator of the romantasy novel, is there space for a cinnamon roll hero in the romantasy narrative and, if so, how does he differ from the patriarchal alternative?

The cinnamon roll trope has recently been popularised in the age of #BookTok, but it was originally derived from a 2014 *Onion* headline, which read: “Beautiful Cinnamon Roll Too Good For This World, Too Pure” (Makhijani, 2023). According to online articles, a cinnamon

roll is a “supportive, and kind hero” (Makhijani, 2023); the ultimate good guy and caregiver (Becky, 2023); “the kind of guy you’d *actually* [sic] want to be in a relationship with in real life” (Jeevesreads, 2021); “soft and squishy on the inside” (Price, 2022); and “oh-so-sweet” (RomanceRehab, 2019). The romantasy novels *Curse of the Wolf King* by Tessonja Odette and *Strange the Dreamer* by Laini Taylor are quoted by fans to have cinnamon roll heroes that fall within this category by being “feminist” (Redhead Haze, 2022), “gentle” (Aly, 2021) and “empathetic” (Melanie, 2017). However, when reading these novels, I am met by male protagonists who are not different to, but rather direct reflections of, the traditional romance hero who is “spectacular” in his masculinity – a representation of men that glorifies the male body, maleness, masculinity and male sexuality (Radway, 1984; Allan, 2016). Odette (2021) describes her hero as “a towering bear of a man with broad shoulders”, with a “grizzly beard” and “predatory” eyes (pp. 44–67), and Taylor (2018) describes hers much the same; a tall man whose “hair was dark and heavy ... his brows were dark and heavy ... his features strong and broad” with “a raw, rugged look—and sound ... his voice low and masculine and not at all smooth” (Taylor).

The physical characteristics of these “cinnamon roll” men seem little different from representations of the physically dominant alpha romance heroes that predate them. Ramsdell (2012) described alpha heroes as “strong, take-charge [and] handsome [men]” (p. 50) and Lauren Schmelz (2013), an editor and founder of the blog *Write Divas*, asks: “can you name an alpha male you have read that didn’t have rippling muscles, was tall with broad shoulders, maybe tattoos, perfect hair, or an impeccable sense of style?”. The cinnamon roll heroes that Odette and Taylor write share the alpha male’s broadness, their height and their perfect hair – the alpha and the cinnamon roll are identical in physical being. Must male kindness always be balanced by exaggerated, “traditionally” masculine traits (such as strength and solid build) in the romance narrative? Are we scraping the bottom of the barrel, in terms of idealised heroes, seeing the cinnamon roll hero as an improvement just because he is nice to you?

My goal when writing the hero of my novel – Elias, the Nightjar – was to avoid the focus on his physical being and hence his “masculinity”, and point, instead, to the softness of his demeanour. I write Elias as exposed, crying, flushed, shivering, wanting, soft and quiet. He is not rough and thuggish and towering, but gentle, pleading and raw. He does not need a beard to counteract his kindness, and I, the author, do not need to emphasise his height and the razor-sharp strength of his cheekbones for my readership to remember that he is still a man. He is allowed to be as sweet as liquid honey and still be secure in his masculinity.

By writing and creating a hero that subverts the dominating, murderous and patriarchal ideals of the alpha (and, arguably, cinnamon roll) hero, I hope to model new representations of masculinity in the romantasy genre. bell hooks (2004) posits that in order for men to change – and to remove the fear of a man you desire/love and who desires/loves you – there must be blueprints created to teach them the art of loving (p. 18). For the heroes of the romantasy genre to change, there must be blueprints created, and I hope that my hero is a blueprint.

References

- Allan, J. A. (2016). The purity of his maleness. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 24(1), 3–116.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826515624382>
- Aly. (2021, May 26). [Review of the book *Curse of the Wolf King* by T. Odette] *Goodreads*.
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4018897908>
- Becky. (2023, February 23). What is the cinnamon roll hero? *Bookcase and Coffee*.
bookcaseandcoffee.com/what-is-the-cinnamon-roll-hero/
- bell hooks. (2004). *The will to change: Men, masculinity and love*. Atria Books.
- Creamer, E. (2023, February 3). A genre of swords and soulmates: the rise and rise of 'romantasy' novels. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/feb/02/romantasy-literary-genre-booktok>
- Davis, A. (2024, March 29). Romantasy series to tide you over until the next 'ACOTAR'. *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/article/best-romantasy-series-like-acotar.html>
- Giltz, M. (2025, January 16). The 32 best romantasy books of all time. *Parade*.
<https://parade.com/books/best-reads/best-romantasy-books-of-all-time>
- Holmes, E. T. (2024, February 3). Romantasy: Feminist or patriarchy 2.0 electric boogaloo? *Substack*. <https://ellahasthoughts.substack.com/p/romantasy-feminist-or-patriarchy>
- Jeevesreads. (2021, October 18). 15 sweet cinnamon roll romance heroes. *Jeeves Reads Romance*. jeevesreads.com/2021/10/16/15-sweet-cinnamon-roll-romance-heroes/
- Kill Your Darlings. (2024, October 8). What I wish I'd known about romantasy. *Kill Your Darlings*. <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/what-i-wish-id-known-about-romantasy/>
- Krentz, J. A. (1992). Trying to tame the romance: Critics and correctness. In J. A. Krentz (Ed.), *Dangerous men and adventurous women: Romance writers on the appeal of the romance* (pp. 107–114). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Levant, R. F., Hirsch, L. S., Celentano, E., Cozza, T. M., et al. (1992). The male role: An investigation of contemporary norms. *Journal of Mental Health Counselling*, 14(3), 325–337.
- Lynch, K. E., Sternglantz, Ruth E., & Barot, Len. (2012). Queering the romantic heroine: Where her power lies. *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 3(1).
<https://www.jprstudies.org/2012/10/queering-the-romantic-heroine-where-her-power-lies-by-katherine-e-lynch-ruth-e-sternglantz-and-len-barot/>
- Makhijani, P. (2023, June 2). Sweet cinnamon roll heroes: New romance novels. *PublishersWeekly*. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/new-titles/adult-announcements/article/92469-sweet-cinnamon-roll-heroes-new-romance-novels.html>
- Melanie. (2017, January 30). [Review of the book *Strange the Dreamer* by L. Taylor]. *Goodreads*. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1897501493>

- Odette, T. (2021). *Curse of the wolf king*. Crystal Moon Press.
- Olivia. (2024, October 25). 73 best romantasy books you can read right now. *Candid Cover*. <https://candidcover.net/romantasy-books-list/>
- Price, T. (2021, August 2). The best cinnamon roll heroes in romance novels. *TBR*. <https://mytbr.co/the-best-cinnamon-roll-heroes-in-romance-novels/>
- Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy and popular literature*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Ramsdell, K. (2012). *Romance fiction: A guide to the genre*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Redhead Haze. (2022, March 1). [Review of the book *Curse of the Wolf King* by T. Odette] *Goodreads*. <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/4010779830>
- RomanceRehab. (2019, August 2). The ultimate cinnamon roll romance reading list. *Romance Rehab*. <https://www.romancerehab.com/blog/the-ultimate-cinnamon-roll-romance-reading-list>
- Schmelz, L. (2013, October 21). Divas on writing: Why women love alpha males in romance. *Write Divas*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20131026040206/http://writedivas.com/divas-on-writing-why-women-love-alpha-males-romance/>
- Taylor, L. (2018). *Strange the dreamer* [Ebook]. Hodder & Stoughton.