

THE POPULAR ROMANCE NOVEL COVER IN
THE DIGITAL AGE

by

KAYLA KUO

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

Winter 2025

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Kayla Kuo for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English to be taken July 2025

Title: The Popular Romance Novel Cover in the Digital Age

Approved: Mai-Lin Cheng, PhD.
Primary Thesis Advisor

With a book's paratext being extended to the digital space, we might begin to wonder how the book adapts and adjusts to its digital presence. Especially online, publishers/retailers/bloggers utilize this front cover as a representative image for the text itself. This prevalence of discussion and sharing of books over digital spaces, especially guided by the aesthetic appeal of the book covers themselves, have led to the book covers visually adapting to the digital age. Within this paper, I seek to define what exactly is the "cartoon cover," from where does it come from, and how it interacts with its source text. The following will contextualize this style of romance book cover by discussing (1) Genette's theory of the paratext and book's presence in the digital sphere and (2) the romance novel and its scholarship. Moving from this foundation, I will discuss how past trends in romance cover design progressed to this present one, what the current trend looks like, and how it functions in comparison to past trends. Finally, I delve into an analysis of popular romance author Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here* in order to explore how these covers function alongside their source text. Investigating the changing materiality of the romance genre, we can see the direct effects of the digital world on the media we consume.

Acknowledgements

I want to first thank my thesis committee for helping me through this entire process. Thanks to my sister who helped me think of this topic in the first place and encouraged me to research and learn more about the romance genre. I also want to thank everyone who showed so much interest in my thesis topic. The excitement that everyone brought to my discussion really fueled my research and writing. Finally, thanks to my super cool friends for the support and motivation to get through this project.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
The Contemporary Condition of the Novel: Genette's <i>Paratexts</i> and the Digital Age	11
Defining the Romance Novel	16
The Cartoon Cover: Recent Trends in Romance Novel Cover Design	21
An Analysis of Mariana Zapata's <i>All Rhodes Lead Here</i>	30
The Digital Paratext of <i>All Rhodes Lead Here</i>	30
Close Reading and Visual Analysis of <i>All Rhodes Lead Here</i>	32
Conclusion	40
Appendix	44
Glossary of Key Terms	60
Bibliography	63

List of Figures

Figure 1. Front cover of Kathryn Blair's <i>The Man at Mulera</i> , 1959, Mills & Boon.	44
Figure 2. Front cover of Jean S. MacLeod's <i>The Wolf of Heimra</i> , 1965, Mills & Boon.	45
Figure 3. Front cover of Janey Dailey's <i>No Quarter Asked</i> , 1976, Harlequin Presents.	46
Figure 4. Front Cover of Anne Mather's <i>Pale Dawn, Dark Sunset</i> , 1975, Harlequin Presents.	46
Figure 5. Front Cover of Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's <i>The Flame and the Flower</i> , 1972, Avon.	47
Figure 6. Front cover of Rosemary Roger's <i>Sweet Savage Love</i> , 1974, Avon.	47
Figure 7. Front cover of Johanna Lindsey's <i>Gentle Rogue</i> , 1990, Avon.	48
Figure 8. Front cover of Rebecca Brandewyne's <i>Desire in Disguise</i> , 1987, Grand Central Pub.	48
Figure 9. Front cover of Anne Carsley's <i>Defiant Desire</i> , 1982, Dell.	49
Figure 10. Front Cover of Christine Monson's <i>Stormfire</i> , 1984, Avon.	49
Figure 11. Front covers of Nora Roberts's <i>Bride Quartet Series: Vision in White</i> (2009), <i>Bed of Roses</i> (2009), <i>Savor the Moment</i> (2010), and <i>Happy Ever After</i> (2010), Berkley Books	50
Figure 12. Front covers of Nora Roberts's <i>Chesapeake Bay Saga: Sea Swept</i> (1998), <i>Rising Tides</i> (1998), <i>Inner Harbor</i> (1998), <i>Chesapeake Blue</i> (2002), Berkley Books.	50
Figure 13. Front cover of Nora Roberts's <i>Once Upon a Rose</i> , with Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Marianne Willman, 2001, Jove Books.	51
Figure 14. Front cover of Colleen Hoover's <i>Maybe Someday</i> , 2014, Atria Books.	52
Figure 15. Front cover of Colleen Hoover's <i>Maybe Now</i> , 2018, Atria Books.	52
Figure 16. Front cover of Jaci Burton's <i>The Perfect Play</i> , 2011, Berkley Heat.	53
Figure 17. Front cover of Jaci Burton's <i>The Perfect Play</i> , 2024, Berkley Romance.	53
Figure 18. Front cover of Jaci Burton's <i>Melting the Ice</i> , 2014, Berkley Sensation.	54
Figure 19. Front cover of Jaci Burton's <i>Melting the Ice</i> , 2024, Berkley Romance.	54
Figure 20. Front cover of Emily Henry's <i>Beach Read</i> , 2020, Berkley.	55
Figure 21. Front cover of Casey McQuiston's <i>Red White & Royal Blue</i> , 2019, St. Martin's Griffin.	55
Figure 22. Front cover of Jasmine Guillory's <i>While We Were Dating</i> , 2021, Berkley Books.	56
Figure 23. Front cover of Hannah Grace's <i>Icebreaker</i> , 2022, Atria Books.	56
Figure 24. Front cover of Mariana Zapata's <i>All Rhodes Lead Here</i> , 2021, self-published.	57
Figure 25. Front cover of Mariana Zapata's <i>All Rhodes Lead Here</i> , 2024, Avon Books.	58
Figure 26. Front cover of Helen Hoang's <i>The Kiss Quotient</i> , 2018, Berkley.	59

Introduction

In October 2023, writer and data analyst Alice Liang produced a visual essay on the digital publication *The Pudding* which surveyed 1,400+ book covers featured in Publishers Weekly's announcements within their Romance/Romance & Erotica sections from 2011 to 2023.¹ In doing so, Liang investigated the evolution of covers based on three factors: raunchiness, racial diversity, and cover design (Liang). One of the conclusions which Liang found was that romance covers designed in an illustrated style, that is to say not photorealistic based on Liang's style guidelines, made up a total of 72% of the featured romance covers in romance novels featured in 2023. This is in stark comparison to the 4% of covers between 2011 and 2012.

Since the initial spike in cartoon style covers in 2018 (with 18% of covers), many romance readers have similarly noticed this trend in romance cover design (Murphy). Interchangeably referencing this trend as "cartoon covers," or "illustrated covers," community members often weigh the advantages and disadvantages for this emerging trend (Hinton).² Some individuals feel that these covers misrepresent the romance genre and ultimately view the trend negatively (Lott), while others feel that it opens up the romance genre for new readers (Reid). Within this paper, I seek to define what exactly is the "cartoon cover," where does it come from, and how does it interact with its source text?

In order to discuss these questions, we first must go back to the book cover. A work of published text is accompanied by additional textual and visual material such as a cover, title, copyright, forward, afterward, acknowledgements, and so on and on. It is these elements which

¹ See Liang's study here: <https://pudding.cool/2023/10/romance-covers/>.

² Romance readers have similarly also referenced this trend as 'graphic art covers' (Murphy).

the reader encounters before, after, and during their interaction with the primary text, and it is these elements which inform the reader, however consciously or unconsciously they are aware of it, of what the text is and what to expect from it. This supplementary material is what literary theorist Gerard Genette terms the paratext. For Genette, the paratext is a threshold or a zone “not only of transition” between the material world to the textual one, but the paratext is also a space of transaction (Genette 2). It is a space of transaction in the sense that it maintains a dialogue between reader and text, author and text, critics, publishers, scholars, academics, and any contemporaneous issues and concerns with the text. The paratext is also a space of transaction in a commercial sense, especially concerning the space of the front book cover. Designed specially in order to convey essential characteristics of plot, character, genre, and theme concisely as well as attract consumer interest by validating qualities of essentialness or popularity through author name, author endorsements, awards, and other promotional material, the front book cover markets its text to the general viewer. Publishers constantly adjust their covers to popular trends in design or strive to invent new ones in order to catch the eye of a reader against a mass of formulaic covers. As such, this outward facing representation of text continuously reinvents itself, reinterpreting and re-presenting essential characteristics of the content (Genette 3). Underdiscussed in comparison to the material it promotes, book covers are a rich site for how publishers adapt to their understanding of the changing moods and attitudes of their target audience.

The covers of the romance novel rely on a visual formula in order to market their novels. Since its rise in popularity in the United States during the 20th century with the dominance of the market held by Canadian publishing company Harlequin and UK publishing company Mills & Boon, the romance novel’s cover evolved through changing public attitudes and preferences, and

adjusted to popular trends, discarding iconography which no longer suits the desires of its audience.

This evolution is especially evident in the romance novel covers of the past decade, which have entered a new distinct trend of design due especially to the increased influence of social media within the digital age. Romance readers create subcommunities on popular social media apps such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok³ in order to share and promote books.⁴ Each social media app has its own sub-community of readers who create accounts dedicated to reviewing and photographing/videoing the books they read. Some of these subcommunities are called #Bookstagram, #BookTube, and #BookTok. Romance readers have a particularly strong influence on these subcommunities, and often use hashtags to designate thematic groupings of books such as #SpicyTok, which is dedicated to romance novels with high sexual content. Across numerous social media apps readers have created communities dedicated to sharing and discussing books, and as such the marketing that occurs for contemporary novels is most strongly promoted through the use of social media.⁵

³ At the time of writing this paper, governmental concerns of the security of U.S. user data collection in the hands of TikTok - as it is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company - have led to a nationwide ban on the use of TikTok since January 19th, 2025. Upon inauguration, President Trump granted an extension to TikTok and halted the ban for 75 days. The question of whether the ban on TikTok will continue leading social media users to migrate to other apps is still up in the air at this current moment. Despite the potential ban, the influence of TikTok in conjunction with other social media platforms still remain and will continue to be relevant.

⁴ For those who may not be familiar, Instagram (a name created from the combination of instant camera and telegram) is a photo and video social media app that was initially released in 2010. YouTube (founded in 2005, purchased by Google in 2006) is a video sharing platform, and TikTok is a short form video platform that was initially released in 2016. TikTok became more widely used after its merger with Musical.ly, another short form video sharing platform, in 2018. Shortly after, the COVID-19 quarantine in the U.S. during 2019-2020 influenced many to increase social media use, which led to TikTok becoming the most downloaded app at the time.

⁵ Goodreads is another notable social media mention, which is a social cataloging platform utilized specifically for reviewing and discussing books. Created in 2006 and bought by Amazon in 2013, individuals using Goodreads create digital 'bookshelves,' as well as find/create reviews, quotes, and annotations. Amazon's acquisition of Goodreads allowed for a hybridization of digital and word of mouth recommendations from reading communities in selling and promoting books (Collins xxii).

The sharing of books over such highly visual social media platforms as such relies on the cover as a signifier for the text. Across Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Goodreads the book cover becomes a stand in for the text itself – on Instagram book bloggers focus on photographing aesthetic groupings of books, whereas on TikTok and YouTube reviewers will commonly paste a photograph of the book cover to the side of their face as they review it. As such, book bloggers often pick book covers that appeal to them visually to post on their social media. This prevalence of discussion and sharing of books over digital spaces, especially guided by the aesthetic appeal of the book covers themselves, have led to the book covers visually adapting to the digital age.

As discussed at the very beginning, romance community members have noticed this distinct trend emerging in romance novel cover design. Utilizing similar terminology circulating through discussions online, I refer to this trend as the ‘cartoon cover’ throughout this paper to create the distinction between these trends and past ones (Hinton; Lott; Reid). These covers emerge from a history of romance novel cover design, as we will see, with the early 20th century covers characterized by painterly images of romantic couples and the move into the twenty-first covers with covers relying on stock photography. The move from the painterly and the photorealistic/photographic to this new ‘cartoon cover,’ particularly is what characterizes the materiality of the romance novel within this contemporary moment. These ‘cartoon covers,’ have solid colored and colorful backgrounds on which a digitally drawn image of the romantic couple in a stylized and often extremely flat design. This flatness is created through clean and solid lines, and minimal or lack of shading (see figs. 17, 19, 20-23, 25-6). Simplicity attained in this design through solid shapes and lines allows for these images to function effectively on digital platforms and smaller sizes. Thus, these covers shift away from the sultry covers of the romance novel’s past, and progress into a more digitally accessible and colorful future.

The following will contextualize this style of romance book cover by discussing (1) Genette's theory of the paratext and book's presence in the digital sphere and (2) the romance novel and its scholarship. Moving from this foundation, I will discuss how past trends in romance cover design progressed to this present one, what the current trend looks like, and how it functions in comparison to past trends. Finally, I delve into an analysis of popular romance author Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here* which was originally self-published in 2021, but was picked up by the traditional publisher Avon in 2024 and republished with a new cover aligning to the cartoon cover trend in order to explore how these covers function alongside their source text. Investigating the changing materiality of the romance genre, we can see the direct effects of the digital world on the media we consume.

The Contemporary Condition of the Novel: Genette's *Paratexts* and the Digital Age

Text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions...they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it...to ensure the text's presence in the world.

– Gerard Genette, *Paratexts* (1987)

Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.

– Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (2006)

I begin this section pulling from Genette's *Paratexts* and Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* as a way to introduce the modern interdependency between the print book and its digital presence. I argue in this section that the print book's dissemination throughout digital spheres such as social media platforms has led to increased importance of the paratextual element of the front cover as a signifier for the novel itself.

Primarily interested in how media consumers become central to the operations of culture industries, Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* discusses the relationship between media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence (Jenkins 2). Jenkins theorizes a media convergence to describe the "technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture," where these various media systems coexist and mutually influence each other (Jenkins 322). Within this context of media convergence, consumers become more active participants in cultural production (hence, participatory culture), and media consumption becomes a collective process (collective intelligence). This theorization of a convergence culture, built on the interdependency of old and

new media as well as active consumers in media culture, built an important foundation from which scholars could discuss the contemporary condition of the book.

Jim Collins continues this discussion within *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (2010), where he discusses the fundamental changes within literary culture. Collins notices that “what used to be an exclusively print-based activity...has become an increasingly image-based activity in which literary reading has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences” (Collins 4). The image-based activity which Collins discusses being, for instance, television and film adaptations, superstore bookshops, and celebrity book clubs. This aspect of literary culture has become even more relevant with social media. Scholarship such as Reddan et al.’s *Social reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok* (2023), Pianzola’s *Digital Social Reading: Sharing Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (2025), Thomas’s *Literature and Social Media* (2020), and Birke’s “Social Reading? On the Rise of a ‘Bookish’ Reading Culture Online” (2021) discuss this interrelation between social media and literary culture. Other scholarship continues to consider the relation between digital culture and books, such as Murray’s *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (2018), Pressman’s *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (2018), Thompson’s *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* (2021), Fuller and Rehberg Sedo’s *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader* (2023), and Ensslin et al.’s *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media* (2023). José M. Tomasena’s “Negotiating Collaborations: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube’s Ecosystem” (2019), Birke and Fehrle’s “#Booklove: How Reading Culture is Adapted on the Internet” (2019), and Birke’s “Doing’ Literary Reading Online: The Case of BookTube” (2023) specifically discuss BookTube’s

impact on the book/reading industries. Thus, recently there has been significant consideration into how the digital world impacts literary culture.

It is in this context of contemporary literary culture and the interdependence of old and new media that I discuss Genette's *Paratexts*. Part of the post-war structuralist group of French theorists, Gerard Genette (1930-2018) surveys what he terms as 'paratext,' and its distinct forms and relations between author, publisher, and audience as well as between the text and the published work as a whole in his theoretical work *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987). As such, Genette embarks on a synchronic study of the paratext concerned mainly with defining paratext as well as inventorying different paratextual features and elements. Genette begins his work describing what a published literary work is: a series of statements that carry significance (text), and which is accompanied by additional material such as a title, author name, cover, copyright, foreword, afterward, and so on. Uniting this supplementary material under the designation of paratext, Genette is interested in their "convergence of effects," in presenting the text to an audience. Specifically, Genette's paratext is some "conveyor of commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author" (Genette 2). As such, Genette's paratext may be defined as supplementary material created or validated by the author or publisher of a text and which function to "present" the text to readers (Genette 1).

In defining the substantial features of the paratext, Genette primarily focuses on either verbal or textual forms. This is due to the fact that "almost all paratexts" Genette considers are "of a textual, or at least verbal kind" (7). Genette does not extend this qualification of textual or verbal form to all paratexts, however, as there is "paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestations" (Genette 7). Specifically, Genette mentions three different types of other manifestations of paratext which are especially relevant to this inquiry into the contemporary

romance novel front cover: iconic, such as the illustration, color, and design of the front cover; material, such as digital or print editions or the typeface and letter foiling of text; and purely factual. By this last manifestation, Genette means a fact that the public is aware of, and which may influence how the text is received such as age and sex of the author. In explaining this manifestation, Genette asks, “do we ever read ‘a novel by a woman’ exactly as we read ‘a novel’ plain and simple, that is, a novel by a man?” (7). Innate femininity of the author name, aesthetic design, or even genre may, and historically has, influenced how a novel is received. This is especially relevant in the context of the romance genre, as we will see. Genette mentions these last three manifestations of the paratext stating “I have likewise left out three practices whose paratextual relevance seems to me undeniable, but investigating each one individually might demand as much work as was required here in treating this subject as a whole” (Genette 405). This is where my evaluation of the romance novels’ front covers picks up.

Since the publication of Genette’s theory of the paratext, the paratext is now able to manifest in digital formats. Novels today experience a digital existence through author and publisher social media, online book marketplaces, as well as the adaptation of books into digital and audio formats. Within the contemporary context, as supplementary material to text which is “immutable,” and “incapable of adapting to changes,” the paratext acts as an “instrument of adaptation,” for presenting novels to an increasingly digital world (Genette 408).

Within most of the digital paratextual contexts, the front cover is utilized as a representative image of the text. For instance, covers are often utilized to decorate the thumbnails or feeds of book bloggers’ posts (Christel; Nicholson; Lopes). There have also been trends where bloggers utilize the front cover in order to rank books (Emmie; Denson; Edwards). Most commonly, book bloggers hold up the book, with the cover facing the camera, and insert images

of the cover in order to discuss it (C. Pham; H. Pham; Moblo). Within this discussion, I pull evidence from bloggers on Instagram and YouTube. However, these trends and these patterns occur across media platforms aside from these two examples. TikTok, for example, is another major source for this discussion. Across media platforms, the front cover of a book appears again and again. As such, the front cover especially is more effective if it can perform well on digital platforms. The covers of the romance genre demonstrate this adaptation to this digital context of a novel, as I will discuss later.

Within this section we have discussed how contemporary literary culture is especially influenced by the convergence of old and new medias, and the increased participatory culture of media consumers as demonstrated through social media. We have also discussed Genette's theory of the paratext, defining paratext as supplementary material created or validated by the author or publisher of a text and which functions to present the text to readers. This investigation works to pick up where Genette left off, specifically in providing a diachronic evaluation of a specific paratextual element, the romance novel front cover, and an analysis on how iconic paratext influences reception and reading of a text.

Defining the Romance Novel

Exactly how to define the romance novel is something which has been reinvestigated within romance scholarship. Conceptualizing romance scholarship as occurring in distinct phases, or generations, this following section provides an overview of how the definition of the romance novel has moved through each generation, from the first wave in the 1980s to the recently emerging third wave, pioneered with scholars such as Jayashree Kamblé.

Scholarship into the romance genre took off during the romance revolution of the 1980s, so named a revolution due to the fact that “many publishers were rushing to capture a slice of the romance market,” by creating new lines and experimenting with different sub genres and subject matter while the “popular press...tended to headline the slew of romance novels being produced” (Markert 10, 198). Another contributing factor besides the sheer mass of romance novels being published during this time was the formation of the historical romance sub-genre called the bodice-ripper, spearheaded by Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and The Flower* (1972) which was characterized by the violent sexual encounters and the implied “surrender on the heroine’s part” (Kamblé, “Branding a Genre” 259). Reacting to the contents of these bodice rippers, academic interest - primarily from feminist scholars - was sparked (Regis 3; Kamblé 12). This period comprises the first phase of romance genre scholarship with critical writings from Ann Barr Snitow, Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell, Jan Cohn, and Carol Thurston.⁶ Most notably from this initial wave of romance novel scholarship is Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). Radway investigates why women read

⁶ Snitow’s “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” Modleski’s “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances,” Mussell’s *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction* and *Women’s Gothic and Romantic Fiction* (1981), Cohn’s *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-market Fiction for Women*, Carol Thurston’s *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*.

romances, and the effect it has through an ethnographic study, concluding that the appeal of the romance novel to its readers is the fulfillment of desires and needs which are, “not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices” yet the reading of the romances itself, “continues to justify the social placement of women that has led to the very discontent that is the source of their desire to read romances,” (Radway 211, 217). Scholarship during this period was primarily focused on the “texts, readers, and publishing trends,” and as such provide an important foundation upon which discussion of the romance novel could evolve (Gleason and Selinger 11).

As noted by Kamblé, Radway does not define the romance novel “except to say that the ‘ideal romance’ focuses ‘on a single, developing relationship between heroine and hero” (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 1). Snitow and Modleski specifically investigate Harlequin romances, with Snitow defining the Harlequin formula as one in which “all tension and problems arise,” within the plot, “from a world which ‘is inhabited by two species incapable of communicating with each other, male and female” (Snitow 143). The non-profit organization, the Romance Writers of America, created during the 1980s, similarly defines the romance novel as a text comprised of “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (“About the Romance,”). As such, definitions surrounding the romance novel at this time in scholarship center a formula where the plot is moved by and centralized around the romantic development and interactions between individuals, and most importantly that the narrative ends with the successful pairing of these individuals in a relationship.⁷

A turn in scholarship from the first generation may be attributed to Pamela Regis who identifies that past critique on the romance genre comes from a place of misunderstanding, or, in

⁷ So named the Happy Ever After (HEA) or Happy For Now (HFN) within the romance community.

the case of Mariam Darce Frenier, Radway, and Modelski, of generalizations which lead to rejection and condemnation of the romance genre (Regis 6). Regis states, “Critics mistake the romance novel’s effects because they do not know, precisely, what a romance novel is” (Regis 6). Addressing this, Regis defines the romance novel and its eight essential narrative parts. For Regis, the romance novel is “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines,” and must have all of her eight essential elements: society defined, the meeting, the barrier, the attraction, the declaration, the point of ritual death, the recognition, and the betrothal (Regis 19). To Jayashree Kamblé - in her book *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine’s Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation* (2023) – Regis’ work brought on a new generation of scholarship that looked into the romance heroine while “explicitly rejecting scholarly precedent that limited itself to scoring the genre on its feminist credentials” (Kamblé, *Creating Identity* 12). Thus, this new generation of scholars approaches the romance genre in new ways from the first generation of scholars whose primary focus was about whether the romance genre was feminist or not, and is not so focused on the negative reputation the romance genre has garnered as formulaic and sexually violent. Rather, Kamblé’s book on the romance heroine foregrounds “the richness and depth of different kinds of romance novels,” and uses “those details to demonstrate the genre’s relevance and appeal to its audience” (Kamblé, *Creating Identity* 18). Similarly, Catherine Roach in *Happily Ever After* (2016) aims not for “critique or defense of the genre” instead reading it as a site for “changing norms for gender roles, sexuality, partnership, and romance” (9). As such, the way in which I conceptualize the distinction between first and second wave romance novel scholarship, building from a precedent set by Kamblé, is through a shift away from a reactionary defense of the romance genre towards a celebration of the appeal of the romance to its audience.

Building from this conceptualization of waves, we might begin to discuss a current approach to the romance novel's definition. In her scholarship, Kamblé posits that scholars in the past have been utilizing the term 'romance novel' on a case-by-case basis where it functions "purely as a naming device that specifies the boundaries of the analysis, a category title for a data set," (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 1). We saw this with Snitow, Modleski, and the RWA. Regis similarly participates in this trend, specifically in her discussion of the difference between a love story and a romance. In defining the romance novel, Regis utilizes Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) as an example of a love story which is commonly read as a romance novel. For Regis, *Gone with the Wind* misses the mark in being a romance because, while all eight elements are present, the barrier – reasons which the protagonists cannot be together – never falls (and of course, it ends with Scarlett alone) (Regis 49). Regis's definition as such focuses on the structural components, worried with the boundaries for what qualifies and what is excluded.

Kamblé, rather, investigates the term romance novel, conceptualizing it as a "double helix" where its 'romance' form and 'novel' form are intrinsically interwoven (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 2). Romance, as a larger genre, has often been taken to signify narratives which concern an idealized or non-mimetic world. Gleason and Selinger define this larger genre as those "prodigal, searching narratives not fettered by realism" (5). However, the romance within Kamblé's double helix "is actually the adjective 'romantic,'" and thus strays away from the idealized world of this larger genre but rather positions the term so that it concerns "regularly updated idealizations of various components...of the imperfect world" (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 15). In other words, rather than positioning the romance novel within the broader category of the romance, Kamblé understands the 'romance' in 'romance novel' to represent what is erotic, desirable, and pleasurable (*Making Meaning* 15). Interwoven into this

understanding of romance, the novel is characterized by an “adaptive tendency” (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 11). As such Kamblé understands the romance novel as something which “continually recalibrates itself by taking on new elements while shedding ones that no longer fit a contemporary audience’s ideas of romance and the erotic” (Kamblé, *Creating Identity* 17).

Kamblé situates herself within this second wave of scholarship, beginning with Regis’s *Natural History* (Kamblé, *Creating Identity* 12). However, Gleason and Selinger posit a third wave of scholarship, which Kamblé is a part of. This third wave is “a motley, twenty-first-century work in progress” whose contributors come from a range of professions from novelists to scholars, editors, publishers, and bloggers (Gleason and Selinger 13). Similarly, I understand this current wave as one which is more focused on the romance novel as an expression of freedom rather than bondage and expands over a variety of studies such as those of disability, fat, trauma, queer, and gender studies.

Taking into consideration this evolution of romance scholarship and the ways in which the definition of the romance novel has continually changed, I utilize Kamblé’s understanding of the romance novel. Kamblé shifts away from the previous static definitions into an understanding of the romance novel as an evolving organism which acquires “versions of traits that are favorable to its survival and discarding ones that are not” (Kamblé, *Making Meaning* 15). This understanding of the romance novel is especially relevant to this investigation of romance novel covers. As the romance novel evolves to contemporary notions of what is romantic and desirable, so too does its cover.

The Cartoon Cover: Recent Trends in Romance Novel Cover Design

The romance novel utilizes specific visual formulas on its front cover to convey its genre to readers. Most commonly and most recognizably, romance novels employ the icon of romantic partners in varying degrees of physical interaction. Specifically, it is the depiction of the romantic couple on the cover which acts as a genre indication on popular romance novels. The style of this image has varied over different trends, yet it was the images of heterosexual couples in various stages of undress locked in a passionate embrace, termed ‘the clinch,’ which emerged from the late 20th century as an iconic sign of the romance genre, whose “constant reformulations of the image on a seemingly endless string of category romance front covers” that “perpetuate a number of cultural stereotypes of the romance genre” such as it being formulaic, hypersexual, and ridiculous (Goris 17). Covers produced recently have shied away from these past clinch covers, delving into a variety of different trends such as landscapes, still lifes, a shirtless headless torso, and – the main subject of this essay – cartoon images of the romantic couple. This last trend specifically demonstrates the genre’s reformulation of the icon of a romantic couple in order to retreat from the negative connotations associated with the clinch covers of the past as well as adapt to the increasingly digital world.

As previously discussed, covers are a significant paratextual element that allow individuals to interpret the contents of the novel through illustrations, title, author, blurbs, and other textual material, and are especially significant as a marketing tool. Author and Designer Jennifer McKnight-Trontz notes in her book *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel* which surveys primarily early 20th century romance novel covers, that “the bright colorful covers of romance novels became crucial sales tools for their publishers. An entire genre of fiction was sold based on the premise that you could, in fact, tell a book by its cover”

(McKnight-Trontz 9). Publishing houses at this time often attained artwork from illustrators, then added the textual material such as author, title, etc. Some of the notable illustrators from the early to late 20th century are Robert Maguire, Robert McGinnis, and Gerald Gregg, who worked mainly with acrylic or oil paint on board, and often had their beginnings in illustrating pulp magazines and fiction.

In the design of the romance novel cover, the Canadian publishing company Harlequin and UK publisher Mills & Boon set the standard.⁸ Early Mills & Boon hardcover dust jackets were individualized with a “mise-en-scène that suggests the characters’ unique story” which “construct the lifestyle and personalities of the novels’ main actors and particularize their story in advance of reading” (Kamblé 243). These covers dedicated most of their composition to author, title, and large painted images of the romantic couple. Take, for instance, the composition of *The Man at Mulera* by Kathryn Blair (see fig. 1), one of the many pseudonyms for one of Mills & Boon’s top authors during her time, Lilian Warren (“Our History”). The cover of this early Mills & Boon novel utilizes a painting of a man and women, individualizing the narrative through details such as a lantern in the top left corner, and blocky, abstract flowers in the background. The illustration also suggests a more serious and sultry narrative as the man stares at the back of the woman who leans against an edge of either a pole or a wall and gazes out. This painting takes up the entire composition of the book cover, with the author and title occupying strips of space on the top and bottom. This cover design prioritizes the tension between the female and male protagonists over other paratextual details such as author or novel title.

⁸ The Mills & Boon website declares that their “army of dedicated readers know that once they pick up a brightly coloured paperback, they will be taken on an easy, thrilling read – with a guaranteed happy ending” and attribute this successful cover design to son of founder Charles Boon, Alan Boon, who declared that their books “could take the place of Valium’ – because they are so well known for their restorative quality” (“Our History”)

Kamblé, in her essay “Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art,” discusses the history of romance novel covers produced by Harlequin Mills & Boon, bringing up the example of Jean S. MacLeod’s *The Wolf of Heimra* (see fig. 2) which particularizes the narrative through the illustration of a pivotal event within the narrative, the Scottish setting through the men’s clothing, and the demonstration of a more complex plot by portraying the love triangle through three characters. These older covers also utilized similar themes such as those noted by McKnight-Trontz where, “the covers relate something of the period in which they were drawn, particularly in regard to women’s roles in society” (McKnight-Trontz 18). Some novels focused on the choice of man vs career, others on bridal themes, or air stewardesses. A particularly popular strain of romance novels post WWI and WWII were the doctor/nurse romances, especially in exotic locations. As such, these older covers of early publishing companies for the romance genre focus primarily on particularizing the narrative through their portrayal of character, plot, and setting.

Romance novel covers became more standardized and developed a brand style to market their novels (Kamblé 241). Mills & Boon attribute the beginning of standardization with their expansion into the paperback market during the 1960s (“Our History”). However, Kamblé states that the true standardization was due to the merging of Harlequin with Mills & Boon in 1971, and Harlequin’s second imprint Harlequin Presents in 1973 (Kamblé 250).⁹ Harlequin Presents novels utilized a standardized cover with the imprint title, author name, and book title at the top and an illustration of one or both individuals in the romantic couple constrained within a circle. The original covers of Janey Dailey’s *No Quarter Asked* (see fig. 3) and Anne Mather’s *Pale Dawn, Dark Sunset* (see fig. 4) published by Harlequin in the 1970s demonstrate this

⁹ While Mills & Boon and Harlequin merged in 1971, Harlequin had been reprinting Mills & Boon novels since the 1950s, with the first novel being Ann Vinton’s *The Hospital in Buwambo* (1957) (“Our History”).

standardized format. The repeated use of the same format for such novels creates the sense that the novels are “indistinguishable from each other and fed into the uninitiated onlooker’s assumption that the book was relating the same old boy-meets-girl tale in 180 pages” (Kamblé 257). Kamblé thus demonstrates how the formulaic nature of the romance genre is thus communicated through the strict visual formula of the Harlequin Presents line – which began after the companies Mill & Boons and Harlequin merged.

When romance novel covers transitioned to the clinch trend beginning in the 1970s, it only reinforced the readers’ and onlookers’ perception of the romance genre’s negative reputation – one “perceived by literary critics as unchanged and unchanging” (Markert 4) as well as their “over sexualized,” and “more than a little ridiculous” plots (Goris par. 17). The romance genre moved into publishing more sensual and erotic plotlines during the 1970s and 80s, the transition which is often marked by Kathleen Woodiwiss’s *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) (see fig. 5) and Rosemary Roger’s *Sweet Savage Love* (1974) (see fig. 6). These novels began the subgenre termed the bodice-ripper, so named for the intense sexual encounters within these historical romances. Due to the violent sexual content of Woodiwiss’s novel, the sub-genre became a symbol of “reactionary genre politics and soft-core pornography” (Kamblé 257).

The cover of *The Flame and the Flower* (see fig. 5) was designed by the prominent illustrator Robert McGinnis.¹⁰ This cover’s image of the embracing couple with lidded gazes, the woman’s head tipped upwards and mouth slightly open. This expression became a visual formula that began to proliferate in covers on romance books that were beginning to include more and more sexual content in the 1980s. The cover style was made possible through the sexual content

¹⁰ Robert McGinnis created art for movie posters as well as novels. He created posters for the James Bond franchise as well as the *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. He also is a part of the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame (including artists such as Norman Rockwell). (<https://robertmcginnis.com/about-robert-mcginnis>).

of the bodice rippers which “would pave the way for the more liberated treatment of sexual relations” (Markert 11). The mood changed for the romance covers of this time. These covers became more “passionate and erotic” where “the new formula consisted of a bare-chested hero forcing a long-haired heroine into a steamy embrace” (McKnight-Trontz 23-4).¹¹ This visual icon utilized in romance novels was termed ‘the clinch.’ Within these covers, women’s heads tilt upwards with parted lips, are they are often wearing loose and flowy dresses which fall low on their breast. The men often wear open or no shirts, with flexed arms embracing the woman. Overset upon this image, the typography is often multicolored and cursive, as well as foiled to add to the flashy covers. Such is the case with many of the covers by Pino Daeni and Elaine Duillo, two illustrators who contributed a significant amount of art for clinch romance covers. Among the many covers created by these illustrators, Johanna Lindsey’s *Gentle Rogue* (see fig. 7) and Rebecca Brandewyne’s *Desire in Disguise* (see fig. 8) are excellent examples of covers that were illustrated by Elaine Duillo, and Anne Carsley’s *Defiant Desire* (see fig. 9) and Christine Monson’s *Stormfire* (see fig. 10) as examples illustrated by Pino Daeni. Romance Bloggers Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan aptly write in their book on romance novels *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels*, “it’s not hard to abjectly dismiss a genre when so much of it is adorned” with dramatic clinch covers, and that “it’s frankly difficult sometimes to defend a love of romance novels when those novels are wrapped up in the visual assault that is some cover art” (Wendell and Tan 168). Whatever negative reputation the romance genre might have acquired through past covers (as demonstrated through the novels of Harlequin Mills & Boon) was only exacerbated by the sexual and dramatic covers

¹¹ Famously known for being featured on the covers of romance novels during this time, Italian model Fabio Lanzoni became an inextricable icon for the late 20th c. romance novels. See fig. 7 for a cover which features Fabio.

of the late 20th century. Such covers, “left little, if anything, to the reader’s imagination, and often told nothing of the story inside” (McKnight-Trontz 30).

Attempting to move away from the clinch, romance novels from the late 1990s to the present-day experiment with a variety of other iconography such as landscapes, still lifes, and headless torsos. Current covers are often designed with stock images.¹² Take the covers of popular romance authors Nora Roberts and Colleen Hoover. Nora Roberts’s *Bride Quartet* (see fig. 11) mainly utilizes headless torsos of women in bridal gowns, her *Chesapeake Bay Saga* (see fig. 12) utilizes landscapes, and many of her books display single objects such as with her *Once Upon* (see fig. 13) series co-authored by Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Marianne Willman. Similarly, Colleen Hoover’s *Maybe* series (see figs. 14 and 15) covers were recently redone to portray a collection of objects such as sheet music and guitars, or crumpled paper and pens. Lacking the genre indicator of the romantic couple on the cover, these covers convey genre through other methods. Nora Roberts’ books rely mainly on her name to occupy the majority of space on the cover as she is such a prevalent author within the field.

A more direct trend of male torsos is also prevalent within recent romance novels.¹³ For instance, original covers of Jaci Burton’s *Play by Play* series features photographs of shirtless men (see figs. 16 and 18). Kamblé interprets such covers to indicate that, “the genre is tied to the need to fetishize and decode ‘Man’ by making him the object of the gaze/narrative” (Kamblé 268). This variety of covers demonstrates the experimentation taking place in designing covers that indicate the genre of the novel without resorting to the tradition of the clinch and especially without having to outsource art to talented illustrators. Utilizing the stock photography available

¹² Stock photographs are photographs licensed for commercial purposes.

¹³ Occasionally referred to as “headless” heroes and heroines (Wendell and Tan 176-7)

at cheap prices and designing covers in house appears to be the current trend which has emerged from the advent of the digital era.

However, recently a singular and consistent trend has emerged from the slew of various romance covers, becoming prevalent enough that publishing houses even rework old covers within the style: the cartoon cover. These covers utilize stylized drawings of the romantic couple in various interactions (such as solely occupying the same space or sharing eye contact), often produced from digital artists, against a solid or semi-solid and brightly colored background, and are decorated with simple details to particularize the narrative further. These covers manage to be even more bright and colorful than any previous romance cover trends.

The popularity of this trend of cover design is linked to social media marketing of books. Instagram and Tumblr are two apps which in the past bloggers have utilized to promote books, especially through photography. Despite the familiar phrase “don't judge a book by its cover,” social media bloggers are incentivized to do exactly that – the better a book looks in a photo, the more likes and shares. The recent emergence and popularity of TikTok, and more specifically BookTok,¹⁴ a hashtag thread of influencers and users promoting and sharing books – further grounded the importance for books to look good in photos and on screen. Hence, the romance novel cover's backgrounds are simplified through solid and bright colors, important text is big and blocky in its sans-serif font, and illustrations are stylized through clear and solid lines. Ali Hazelwood, Emily Henry, Casey McQuiston, Elena Armas, Helen Hoang, Jasmine Guillory (see

¹⁴ Bookstores occasionally will set up displays solely featured to promoting books that were featured and popular on BookTok (labeled #BookTok), as well as utilize lingo from this community. Barnes and Noble's website even has a page dedicated to it (https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/booktok/_/N-2vdn). This phenomenon not only involves new and recent books, but also older books that have been rediscovered and re-popularized through social media.

fig. 22), Kristina Forest, Ashley Herring Blake, and Abby Jimenez are just a few of the many, many authors who are being published primarily with the cartoon cover.

The main contrast between the clinch covers and these cartoon covers is the interaction between the romantic couple. The clinch covers conveyed to the reader the sexual content within through the partially nude state, and passionate embraces of the characters. The cartoon covers convey no such thing with fully clothed characters that sometimes are not even interacting with one another in the illustration, such as in Emily Henry's *Beach Read* (see fig. 20) and Casey McQuiston's *Red, White & Royal Blue* (see fig. 21). The redesign of two novels – *The Perfect Play* (2011) (see fig. 17) and *Melting the Ice* (2014) (see fig. 19) – within Jaci Burton's *Play-By-Play* series, an erotic sports series published by Berkley Romance similarly demonstrate this contrast between older romance novel covers and those of the recent trend of cartoon covers. The original covers utilize photographs of shirtless men cut off at the nose and the knees. Taking up a majority of the composition, the image of the shirtless and headless torso objectifies the male body to be subject to a sexual gaze – and thus suggest a sexual encounter within the text itself. Recently several books from the *Play-by-Play* series were redesigned in the trend of the cartoon cover. These new covers depict illustrations of both individuals in the romantic couple, with the man dressed in athletic gear. The backgrounds are simplified illustrations of the athletic setting such as the football field or the ice rink, and colored with one consistent color. The text of the covers utilize a mix of serif and sans serif text, with the title of the novel given the most compositional importance through the size and color of the text. These covers are drastically different from the original headless design and indicate nothing of the sexual content within, or the target age group of the novel. One novel which gained notoriety on social media for the deceptive cover is *Icebreaker* by Hannah Grace (see fig. 23). The only indication on the cover

that the novel is targeted towards more mature audiences is the adjectives utilized in endorsement from romance author Elena Armas: sweltering, sizzling, and swoonworthy. The passion of past clinch covers promised to the reader a similar interaction between the characters within the novel, however the current trend of covers with their absence of the clinch or of skin can be mistaken for a lack of sexual content. To summarize, past romance cover trends have built up a visual vocabulary which prepares readers to expect sexual encounters between characters; however, the recent cartoon cover trend destabilizes these expectations in their omission of this representation despite sexual content within the narrative.

Within this section we have discussed how the cartoon cover trend has emerged from a history in which the romance novel has utilized a visual formula in order to convey its genre. We have also discussed what the cartoon cover looks like (exemplified through figs. 17, 19-23, 25-6). Finally, we have concluded that these cartoon covers contrast especially to the visual vocabulary of the clinch covers or the past, and that these cartoon covers destabilize romance readers expectations due to the lack of indication of sexual content within.

An Analysis of Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here*

Initially self-published in 2021, Mariana Zapata's novel *All Rhodes Lead Here* was picked up by Avon, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, and republished with a new cover and bonus content in 2024 (see figs. 24 and 25).¹⁵ The novel follows thirty-three year old Aurora as she escapes a turbulent past as a songwriter by moving back to her childhood town Pagosa Springs, Colorado.¹⁶ Looking for a new start, Aurora rents out a garage apartment from forty-two year old game warden and father Tobias Rhodes. This section will (1) discuss the digital paratext of Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here*, and (2) compare the original and Avon covers' relations with the text. Doing so, I demonstrate the significance of *All Rhodes Lead Here*'s cover as a representative image of the text online, as well as how the reading of the cover switches with the cover redesign.

The Digital Paratext of *All Rhodes Lead Here*

Digital paratext has accompanied *All Rhodes Lead Here* throughout all stages of its original self-publication. Romance author Mariana Zapata has a website, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, all of which she utilizes as platforms to promote her books. Prior to releasing her novel, Zapata teased *All Rhodes Lead Here* multiple times. For instance, Zapata posted a photograph of the word and page count – 167K words, and around 450 pages – for *All Rhodes Lead Here* on Instagram March 9th, 2021 - a little under a month prior to the self-publication of

¹⁵ In addition to the self-published cover and Avon's new cover, there is also one other edition of *All Rhodes Lead Here* published in 2022 by The Book Work Box, a non-profit created in 2015 by author Colleen Hoover and her sisters which collaborates with authors to sell their products through a subscription box and donate the proceeds. Zapata collaborated with them in 2022 for their January Romance Box. This edition of *All Rhodes Lead Here* featured a new cover designed by @emily_wittig_designs, and was autographed by Zapata. The design of this cover aligns more with the original self-published cover, depicting a starry sky reflecting against a lake, with mountains separating the two.

¹⁶ Zapata draws from her own personal experience here in her description of the hikes and scenery within this small town, as she currently lives in Pagosa Springs, Colorado.

the novel (Zapata, photograph of word and page count). Any of viewers who encountered this post would know to expect a long novel, as well as would know the first three words of the novel, “My eyes burned” (Zapata, *All Rhodes Lead Here* [2024] 1). In addition, Zapata posted the original front cover of *All Rhodes Lead Here* on March 15th, 2021 on multiple platforms prior to the publication of the novel - some of which were also posted with the blurb that would be attached to the back cover (Zapata, “Coming Soon!”). Then, when Zapata did release the novel in April 2021, she announced it across all her social media platforms, with the original cover accompanying every post (Photograph of front and back cover; “All Rhodes Lead Here’ Is **Out Now**!”). Even after its original publication, Zapata would continually promote the book on her social media platforms through the image of the front cover. For example, when *All Rhodes Lead Here* became #1 in contemporary romance on Amazon and #4 on the entire Kindle store, Zapata posted about it (Photograph All Rhodes Lead Here (2021) on Amazon). When an audio book version was released, Zapata also marketed that across her platforms (“Rhodes Audio Book”).

Digital paratext has also accompanied the Avon edition of *All Rhodes Lead Here*. The publisher of Zapata’s novel, Avon Books - an imprint of HarperCollins - also has its own page on the HarperCollins website, as well as an Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Threads¹⁷, and Twitter.¹⁸ When Avon initially redesigned All Rhodes Lead Here, they posted about it on their social medias (Avon Books, Photograph of Avon edition). They also continued to promote and post this new edition of Zapata’s book on their social media after the rerelease (Avon Books,

¹⁷ Originally a text-based extension of Instagram, Threads was launched as its own app in 2023, although it still requires an Instagram account to use. Twitter (created in 2006) is a text based social media platform officially known as X (due to a rebrand in 2023), more colloquially referred to as Twitter.

¹⁸ All of Zapata’s and Avon Book’s accounts and links can be found on their respective Linktrees: <https://linktr.ee/authormarianazapata> and <https://linktr.ee/avonbooks>. Linktree being a reference page for links and social media accounts associated with a group or person.

Photograph of Avon edition...and The Wall of Winnipeg and Me). Zapata herself also promoted this new cover ("Rhodes is Back!"). In addition to these social media sites, HarperCollins and Amazon both have online retail pages for the Avon edition of Zapata's novel ("All Rhodes Lead Here"; "All Rhodes Lead Here: A Novel").

The paratextual discussion here only investigated those which were posted on Instagram or on the websites for Zapata, HarperCollins, and Amazon. Yet, as discussed earlier, the publisher and author both have multiple other social media platforms. As such, the digital paratext for a novel can quickly build up through consistent posts and updates. Yet, in all these cases, the front cover is utilized as the representative image of the novel itself. This brings us to the close reading and visual analysis of the covers of *All Rhodes Lead Here*.

Close Reading and Visual Analysis of *All Rhodes Lead Here*

In the move from self to traditionally published, the cover of *All Rhodes Lead Here* was purposefully reworked in order to fit in with the current trend in romance novel covers of an illustrated depiction of the romance protagonists and as such, it exemplifies the prevalence of the cartoon style cover within traditionally published novels. As a result of the change, the new cover discards the old cover's goal of depicting Aurora's emotional journey and growth, instead prioritizing particularizing the narrative through the character appearance and aligning with current trends in romance cover design.

The original cover of *All Rhodes Lead Here* (2021), created by RBA Designs, prioritizes depicting Aurora's desire for Pagosa Springs as a place to begin anew and rediscover herself. The cover image is a photograph taken from a high angle looking down at the back of a woman sitting on a wooden bench that overlooks a sprawling expanse of hills and forest, most likely meant to evoke the scenery of Colorado given the setting of the novel and the coniferous forest

within the photo. The connection between the landscape on the cover and the landscape of Colorado is further developed as Pagosa Springs is described as being composed of “huge pine trees that made up so much of the national forest,” where “the bright greens and dense forest were predominant” (Zapata 31).

For Aurora, going back to Pagosa Springs is key for embarking on her journey of self-improvement and growth. At the beginning of the narrative, Aurora ends a two-month road trip from Florida into Pagosa Springs during which her inner monologue is filled with her hopes and desires that Pagosa Springs will be the place to recover from her past and begin anew. Aurora thinks of Pagosa Springs in metaphors. It is “a stepping stone for the future,” “a Band-Aid for the past,” and “a boost to the present” (Zapata 4). Throughout the narrative, as Aurora develops connections with people, and finds purpose in her work and relationships, she notes how “every decision that” she had made in her impulse to travel back to her childhood town, “had been a great one” (Zapata 578). Portraying a landscape akin to the natural environment of Colorado on the cover of the novel thus connects to the significance of Pagosa Springs to Aurora, and the desires she places on it as well as the fulfilment she finds there.

A road winds through the mountainous and hilly landscape in front of the woman on the cover, intersecting with the text “Rhodes” in the title. This choice in composition aligns with the substitution of Rhodes’ name with the word “roads” in the title, a play on the proverb “all roads lead to Rome.” The humorous use of the romantic interest’s name as a homophone for “roads” builds on Aurora’s desire for a new start, and the crucial role which Rhodes plays in fulfilling this desire.

Within the first chapter of the novel, references to roads are interwoven alongside Aurora’s internal monologue. The novel begins with Aurora driving on a road into Pagosa

Springs, and Aurora recalls the lyrics of her friend Yuki's song, "it's never too late to find a new road" (Zapata 4). In Aurora's journey, she thinks "the first step," to a better future "was to make a left down a dirt road that was technically called a country road," (Zapata 5). Struggling to find a place for herself she realizes that, "we were all trying to take small steps in our lives, trying to get somewhere," somewhere that "none of us knew what it was" (Zapata 142). At the end of that road, she finds Rhodes. Aurora realizes that what she had wanted at the end of that road was, "stability. To be loved. To love" (Zapata 364) and that the love between her and Rhodes "was meant to be. It always had been" (Zapata 597). By utilizing the proverb "all roads lead to Rome" for the title, Zapata places the relationship between Rhodes and Aurora as one of destiny – where, as Aurora concludes in the epilogue, she "ended up exactly where I should have, where every decision that had been made before me and made by me had led" (Zapata 583). As such, the cover conveys the significance of the connection between actual roads and the love interest Rhodes to Aurora in her conceptualization of her growth and development as a character.

As for the textual elements on this cover, primary importance is given to the title of the novel, then the author name, and finally the title of the author – "New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author" - through the sizing of the text. All of the text is in a white bold sans-serif font, and thus stands out strongly against the photograph. Primarily, these paratextual details bring the importance back to the significance of the title's meaning, the discussion of Rhodes, and self-growth.

The Avon cover for *All Rhodes Lead Here* follows popular trends in current mass-market romance novel covers by including stylistic drawings of Aurora and Rhodes against a semi solid colored background, emphasizing Rhodes' age and masculinity and Aurora's hiking gear. The background, an image taken from natrot/iStock/Getty images, consists of undulating lines

moving from the bottom left to top right edges of the cover. The shapes that these lines form are filled with different hues of orange, the bottom half brushed over with a textured pattern of a deeper orange. The shapes that move across the cover are akin to the shape of a road. Rather than using a solid-colored background, the cover is composed of a more visually interesting background through texturization and undulating lines, which make an abstracted reference to roads, which, as previously established, are significant to Aurora's journey and Rhodes' place within her growth as a character. However, as this reference is both abstract and occupies the background of the design, there is less compositional importance placed upon it. Rather, the cover focuses primarily on portraying the characters as promotional material.

The text emphasizes Rhodes's employment, age, and masculine features. Forty-two year old Tobias Rhodes is a retired Master Chief Petty Officer¹⁹ and a game warden.²⁰ Rhodes often wears his game warden uniform which is comprised of a "khaki-colored button down shirt tucked into dark pants," a gun at his hip, and "law enforcement patches" (Zapata 11-2) and is a source of attraction for Aurora, who "thought about the way Mr. Rhodes had looked in his uniform," (Zapata 125) and "bet if he was in a game warden calendar, it would sell out every year" (Zapata 61). According to Aurora, he would look younger if it weren't for his salt and pepper hair which made him a "silver fox" (Zapata, 16). The silvery hair which marks his older

¹⁹ Abbreviated as MCPO. This role is non-commissioned, meaning that the individual worked their way up the ranks, whereas commissioned officers usually enter their role from a military academy and post-secondary school. In Rhodes characterization, this position emphasizes a certain hard-ass quality, as well as initiative and resolve, that comes from working up the military ranks. As Rhodes is forty-two years old, it also demonstrates his prestige as it presumably only took him twenty-three years to achieve this high-ranking position.

²⁰ Game wardens (also known as conservation officers, wildlife officers, gamekeepers, or wildlife troopers) are a type of law enforcement officer which regulate fishing and hunting. They might also be involved in education or conservation programs. Their work is done outside. Game wardens also respond to search and rescue calls. To become a game warden, they put in training hours to meet Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) requirements. Training is done at an academy and lasts 3-4 months. They may attend the same academy as police officers. New wardens begin with a probationary period where they are paired with an experienced warden – this period lasts between 10 weeks and a year (see <https://www.gamewarden.org/>).

age is a repeated detail throughout the narrative. He has “lines branching out from the corners” off his silvery/gray eyes and “brackets along his mouth” which gave him a “weathered look” (Zapata, 203 and 88).

Relating to Rhodes’s physical appearance, his masculinity is emphasized. To Aurora, his face is “chiseled, not pretty by any means but masculine, sharp” with a “tight scowl,” “thick eyebrows,” “heavy brow bones,” and a “strong jaw” (Zapata 16). Aurora makes comments to herself emphasizing his masculinity as a source of attraction for her such as, “nothing weak about any part of his features” (Zapata 20), “he really was a big, old, hunk of a man” (Zapata 88), and that she “bet he had to shave twice a day” (Zapata 130). Additionally, Aurora’s focus often centers around his musculature such as the fact that his uniform seemed “poured over a whole lot of impressive muscles and bones” (Zapata 87).

Rhode’s illustration on the Avon cover emphasizes his physique and gray hair. He doesn’t wear his uniform despite his employment as game warden being an integral aspect to his character and relationship with Aurora. Rather, he wears a button-up maroon shirt with rolled up sleeves, dark wash jeans, a belt, and boots. His hair is almost entirely gray, including his eyebrows, although his beard and mustache remain dark. He has a square jaw and is depicted with light lines under his eyes as well as in between his eyebrows and across his forehead – emphasizing the age difference between him and Aurora.

Compared to Rhodes, thirty-three year old Aurora’s appearance is described significantly less within the text. Told in first person narrative, Aurora first mentions her appearance in terms of her mother’s. Aurora describes the last memory she has of her mother and her “greenish-brown eyes” and “very medium brown hair, not dark but not light” which they shared (Zapata, 5). As for the length of her hair, Aurora had chopped off her outgrown dyed blonde hair so that

her hair was, “shorter than it had been in forever” (Zapata, 36). Besides these details, we also know that Aurora is 5’6” and has very white teeth as she “used straws all the time and brushed my teeth three times a day,” (Zapata 65). Most importantly, Aurora is supposedly noticeably beautiful. Due to her looks, Aurora is often treated better just “because some people found me attractive,” and she sometimes finds her genetics to be a “kind of a curse,” where, “sometimes I got treated like I was an airhead. And a lot of times, I got more attention than I wanted, especially when it was the uncomfortable kind” (Zapata 108).

Part of the reason that Aurora finds herself in Pagosa Springs is to do with the hikes that her late mother had enjoyed before disappearing on a hike when Aurora was a kid. As such, Aurora often wears athletic gear throughout the novel, and at times when she is not, she works at an outdoor gear retail store. On her hikes, Aurora wears “dark UPF pants, a long-sleeved UPF white shirt...layered over a tank top, my jacket in one hand, hiking boots on, and a cap barely resting on top of my head” (Zapata 273).²¹ Aurora also carries an athletic backpack filled with snacks and tools with her on these hikes.

In comparison to her textual description, the artistic rendering of Aurora on the front cover has dark reddish-brown hair, and eyes of the same color. She has tan skin, red lips, and wears athletic gear. She wears a pale pink short sleeve shirt with sporty white lines running up the sides and down the sleeves, teal-colored leggings with a lighter teal pattern on the bottom, pale gray hiking shoes, and a black watch. In her hand she holds an athletic backpack.

Thus, the illustration depictions mostly align with the textual descriptions of Rhodes and Aurora - but omit certain details such as Rhodes’ uniform. The cover conveys a romance

²¹ UPF stands for Ultraviolet Protection Factor, and is a rating system for sun protective clothing, a type of clothing useful for hiking.

between two attractive individuals with an age difference, and some focus on the outdoors due to Aurora's athletic gear.

The textual details on the Avon cover are numerous: title, author name, author title ("New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Wall of Winnipeg and Me*"), genre indicator ("a novel"), promotional text ("new edition with exclusive bonus content!"), and an endorsement from another romance author, Ali Hazelwood. Ali Hazelwood, who has been mentioned earlier in this essay, is a current popular romance author who writes romances within STEM settings. As such, this endorsement from a successful author promises a novel of similar quality. The promotional text takes the form of a mock-sticker. It resembles the stickers that sometimes are placed upon books in bookstores to indicate a sale, or the fact that the book is an autographed copy. However, it really is just a part of the design of the novel, and there is nothing you can do to remove it. Most likely it is included in the design to give the incentive to buy this new edition of the novel which includes an extra epilogue of Aurora and Rhodes' proposal story, as opposed to keeping older versions or continuing to purchase the older version. As such, the textual details of the Avon edition of the front cover prioritize the marketing aspect of the novel – connecting the novel with similar successful authors, as well as promising bonus content to incentivize this edition over the original one.

Within this section we have seen the difference in the function of *All Rhodes Lead Here*'s front cover through the transition from a landscape, stock photography cover to the recent trend in cartoon covers. The original landscape cover prioritizes conveying the emotional journey within the narrative, and the main emphasis is on the title of the novel. In comparison, the Avon cover prioritizes particularizing the narrative through the physical descriptions of the protagonists, emphasizing details such as the age difference and outdoorsy themes. The Avon cover also

works to market and promote this new edition through its textual details. Through this analysis we have seen then the changing priorities in redesigning a cover with the cartoon trend. This trend strives to promote its book through the individualized narrative, conveyed through distinct characters and their romantic interaction.

Conclusion

The original goal of this paper was to investigate the recent trend of cartoon covers, and how they function as paratext of their source text. Throughout this paper we have contextualized the romance novel front cover through theoretical discussion of Genette's *Paratexts* alongside scholarship on contemporary literary culture and its presence online. We have also looked into the romance genre's scholarship and definitions from the first wave in the 1980s to the emerging third wave.

Moving from this foundation, we explored how the romance cover has evolved. Through the development of a specific brand and iconography by Harlequin and Mills & Boon, and especially the merging of these companies in the 1970s, the romance genre acquired a distinct pattern of cover design of painted images of the romantic couple. With the popularity of the bodice-ripper in the 1980s, and increased sexual content within romance novels, this pattern of cover design evolved into the flashy covers depicting a sensually embracing couple, termed "the clinch." Acquiring a negative reputation of being formulaic, overtly sexual, and occasionally ridiculous, the past covers of the romance genre were visual symbols of their negative reputation. Current covers of the romance genre attempt to move away from the loaded image of clinch covers and past painterly styles into more subtle photographic iconography such as landscapes, still lifes, and headless torsos. However, it was with the prominence of social media that the romance genre developed a new standardized trend of cover design: the cartoon cover. Containing no indication of sexual content, as other covers previously indicated, these covers discard in their materiality the connotations of sexuality through a simple, flat, and colorful design.

Finally, we explored the digital presence of *All Rhodes Lead Here*, and compared how the original cover and Avon cover function as iconic representations of their source text, and what they seek to convey to readers. Through this analysis, we concluded that the transition to the cartoon cover prioritized creating marketable images of the romantic couple, particularly highlighting the particular trope which characterizes their romantic relationship, such as the age gap within *All Rhodes Lead Here*, over any indication of the emotional journey within the narrative.

In the end, the cartoon cover is exactly that, a trend. How long it will continue to be utilized on romance covers is uncertain, it may fade out of use just as quickly as it emerged. The contemporary popular romance novel cover is also not completely homogenized with this trend. Novels still continue to be published with clinch designs such as romance author Lyla Sage's novels, or with the still life design such as with Christina Lauren's novels, and so on. However, this trend is utilized extensively within cover design, and warrants investigation.

Delving into this trend has brought up many significant aspects about how our contemporary media is affected by our increasingly digital age. For instance, this trend is not limited to romance novels. The move towards a more flat and minimal cover design has also been noted with other novels such as Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) or Torrey Peter's *Detransition Baby* (2021) (Pockros). Such design decisions may coincide with User Interface (UI) design such as with apps or logo design moving towards a flatter and more minimal design.

Also, this discussion's sole concern is romance novel covers published and circulating within the U.S. As such, more investigation needs to be done to see if this trend of the cartoon cover extends to publishing trends in other countries as well as track the history of the romance novel's publishing within that nation.

Another aspect of the cartoon cover which my investigation does not cover is the rise in BIPOC and queer representations on romance covers. This brings us back to the very study that began this investigation, Liang and her survey of romance covers within Publisher's Weekly. Liang found in addition to the discussion of a rise in cartoon styles on romance covers, that there was an increase in racial diversity of the character representation on the covers from a 5.5% from 2011-2019 to 22% in 2023. Liang notices this initial spike in 2020, rising to 20% of books featured in Publishers Weekly featuring BIPOC characters on the covers, and attributes it to the Black Lives Matter protests that were occurring across the U.S., and a controversy within the non-profit organization Romance Writers of America (RWA) where author Courtney Milan was suspended from the RWA, and banned from holding a leadership position within the RWA on December 23, 2019 for speaking out against perceived racism of other members (Kamblé "The Origins of U.S.").²² Another reason why BIPOC representation may be prevalent during a rise in books utilizing the "cartoon cover" is explored by romance author Helen Hoang (see fig. 26):

When the publisher first asked me what kind of cover I wanted for THE KISS QUOTIENT, I immediately said illustrated. Why? Because I wanted to slip past unconscious bias. With a fun illustrated cover, I could be on equal footing with other authors and tell a love story with an Asian person in it without race being the biggest part of it. (Hoang)

In some manner, Hoang feels that the form of the cartoon cover minimizes the racial identities of the romantic protagonists, instead focusing on the actual love story itself. Yet, as we saw with *All Rhodes Lead Here*, the switch to the cartoon cover trend discarded presenting emotional themes within the narrative in favor of marketable tropes of character identification such as the romantic protagonists' age gap. Questions of how these recent covers portray identity, and how this affects how readers receive the book are also interesting considerations.

²² See Kamblé's "The Origins of U.S. Mass-Market Category Romance Novels: Black Editors and Writers in the Early 1980s," for more discussion on this event and the influence of black editors and writers on the romance novel.

As such, these covers intersect with many current themes such as sexuality within popular culture, the effect of the digital age on the materiality of physical media, discussions of identity and representation within popular media. Thus, there are still many more possible avenues for discussing and contextualizing how this cover functions within our contemporary society.

Appendix

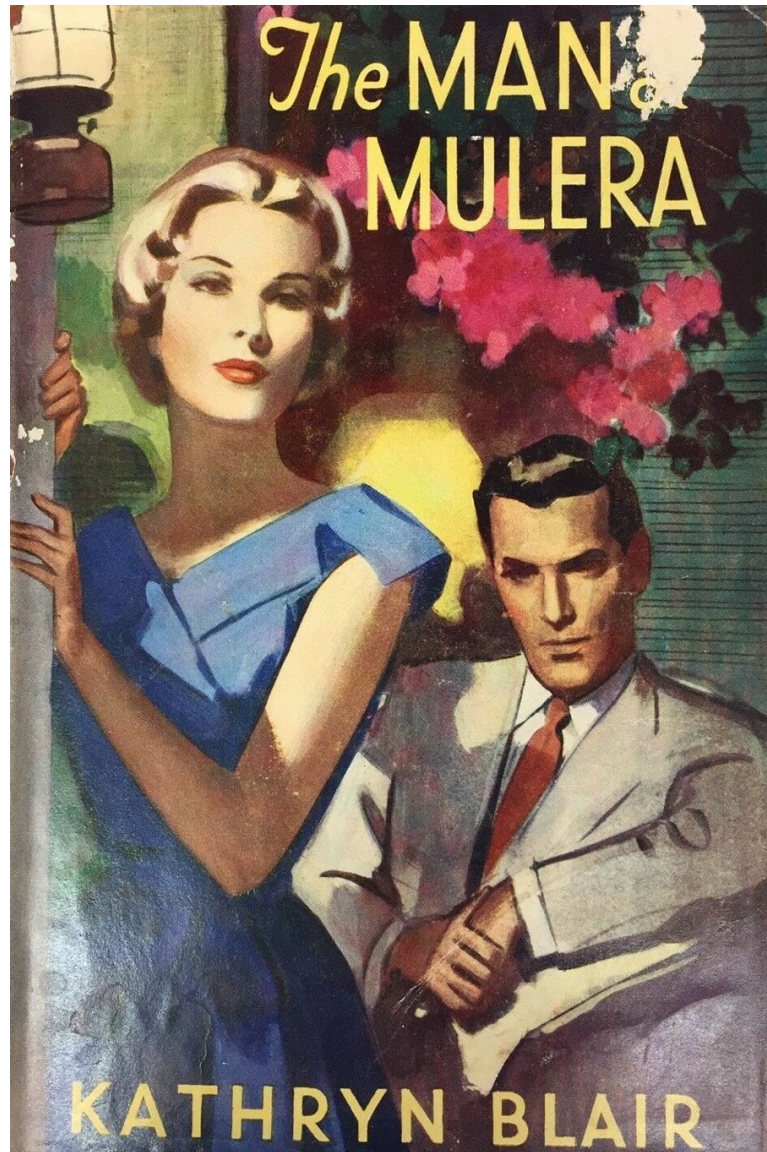


Figure 1. Front cover of Kathryn Blair's *The Man at Mulera*, 1959, Mills & Boon.

This is an early Mills & Boon hardcover dust jacket. The composition of his cover primarily focuses on particularizing the narrative through the tension between the romantic protagonists.

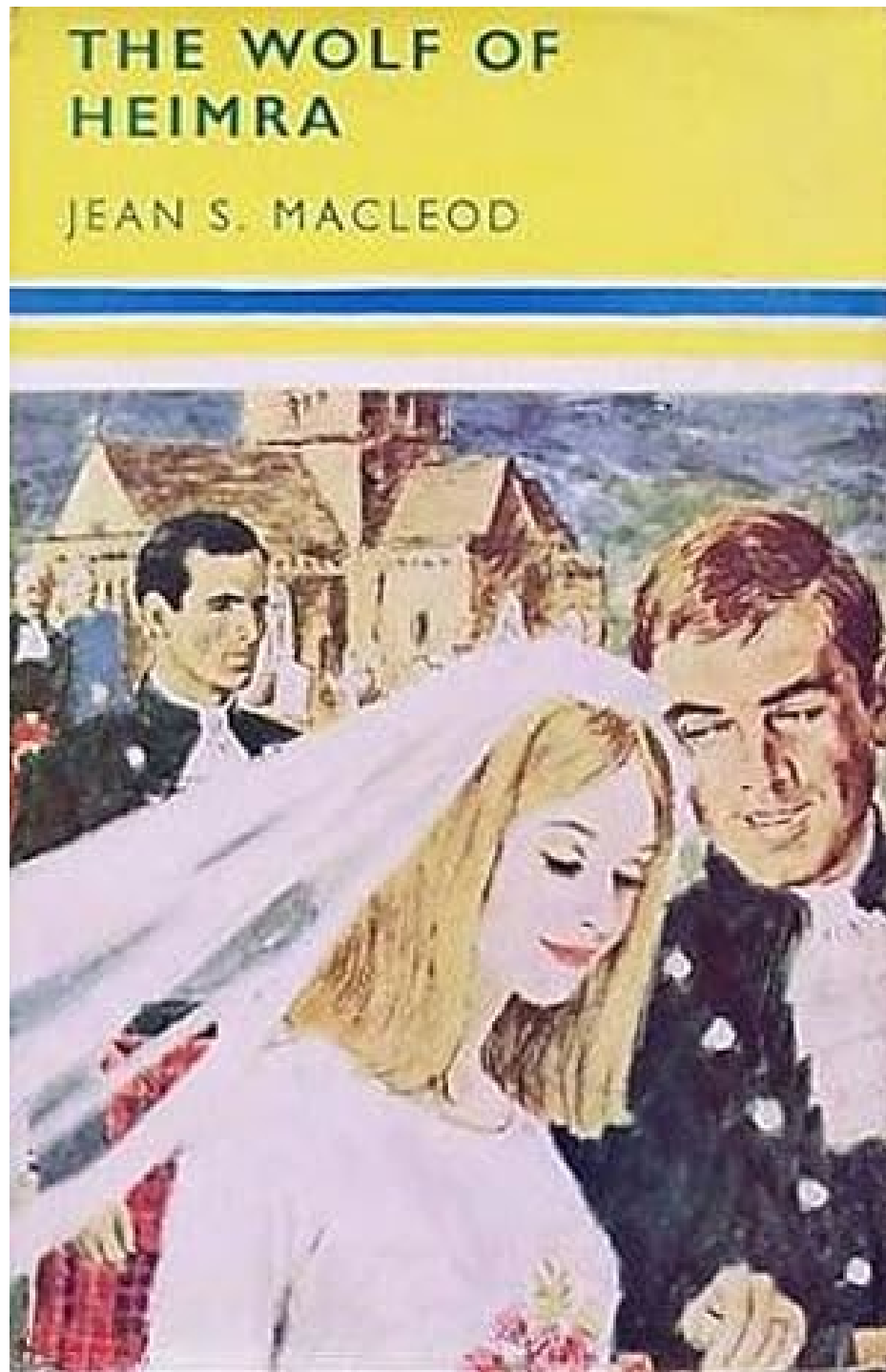


Figure 2. Front cover of Jean S. MacLeod's *The Wolf of Heimra*, 1965, Mills & Boon.

This is another early Mills & Boon cover which particularizes the narrative through the illustration of the romantic protagonists. The Scottish setting is established through the kilts, and the love triangle is conveyed through the triangulation of the gazes of the men in the cover linking to the woman.

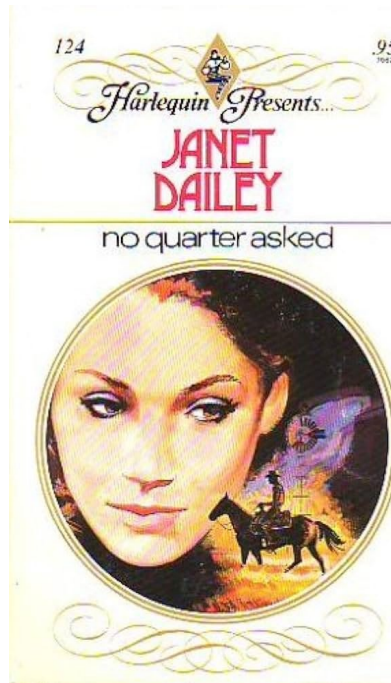


Figure 3. Front cover of Janey Dailey's *No Quarter Asked*, 1976, Harlequin Presents.

This cover represents the standardization of cover design in Harlequin Presents. The romantic couple is depicted within the constraints of the circle. Increased importance is placed on the publisher, author and title name by doing so.

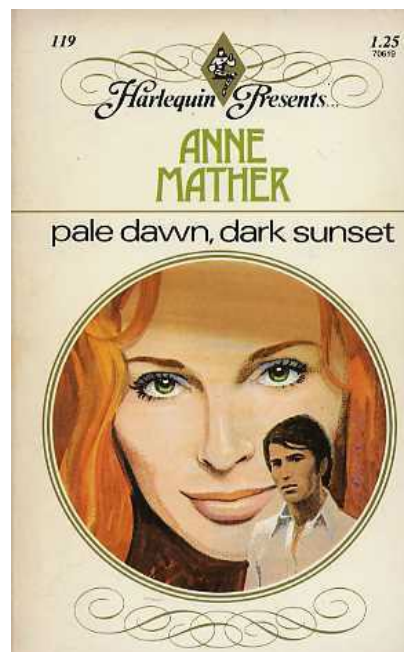


Figure 4. Front Cover of Anne Mather's *Pale Dawn, Dark Sunset*, 1975, Harlequin Presents.

Here is another example of the visual formula of Harlequin presents novels.

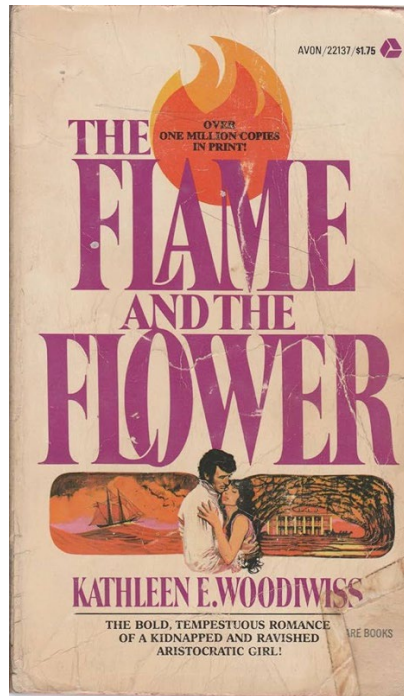


Figure 5. Front Cover of Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower*, 1972, Avon.

Designed by prominent illustrator Robert McGinnis, this novel is iconic for its spearheading of the bodice ripper genre. The beginnings of the clinch visual formula emerge from this novel cover, as seen in the small illustration of the romantic protagonists.



Figure 6. Front cover of Rosemary Rogers's *Sweet Savage Love*, 1974, Avon.

This novel is another example of the bodice ripper series – which sometimes may also be called sweet savage romances, a term deriving from the title of this novel.



Figure 7. Front cover of Johanna Lindsey's *Gentle Rogue*, 1990, Avon.

Illustrated by Elaine Duillo, featuring Fabio Lanzoni, this novel is an iconic cover featuring the clinch.

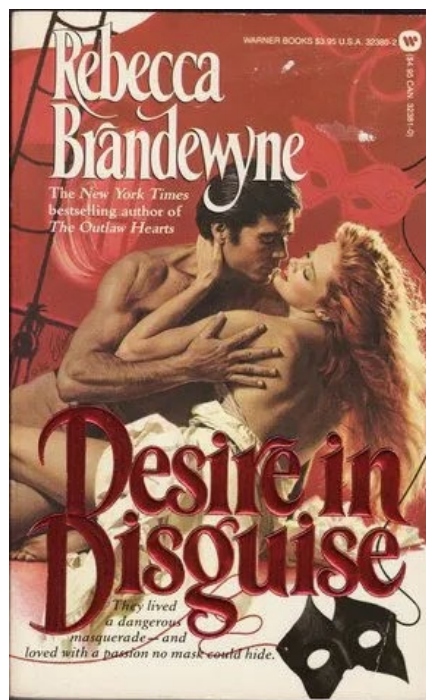


Figure 8. Front cover of Rebecca Brandewyne's *Desire in Disguise*, 1987, Grand Central Pub.

Illustrated by Elain Duillo, this cover is another example of the passionate mood within these clinch covers.

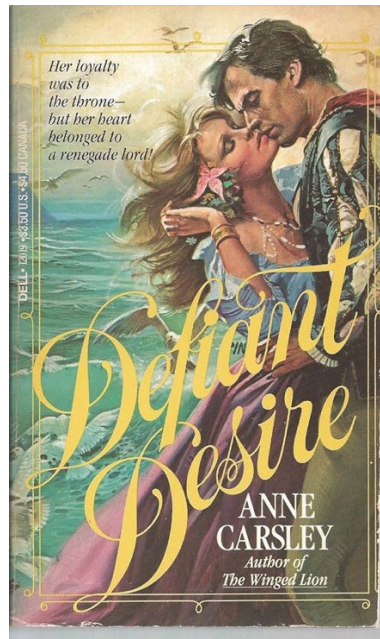


Figure 9. Front cover of Anne Carsley's *Defiant Desire*, 1982, Dell.

Illustrated by Pino Daeni. this is another clinch cover.



Figure 10. Front Cover of Christine Monson's *Stormfire*, 1984, Avon.

Illustrated by Pino Daeni, this is another clinch cover.

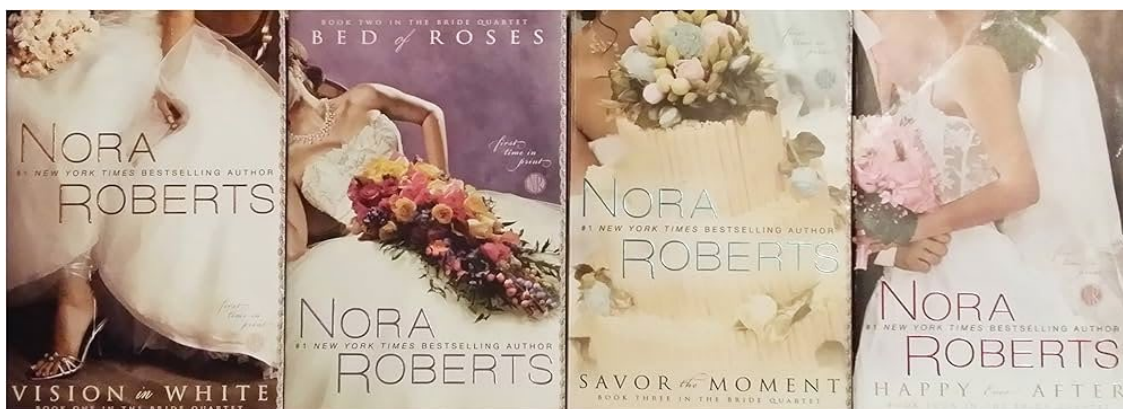


Figure 11. Front covers of Nora Roberts's *Bride Quartet Series*: *Vision in White* (2009), *Bed of Roses* (2009), *Savor the Moment* (2010), and *Happy Ever After* (2010), Berkley Books

These original covers of the *Bride Quartet* series feature the headless torso trend.

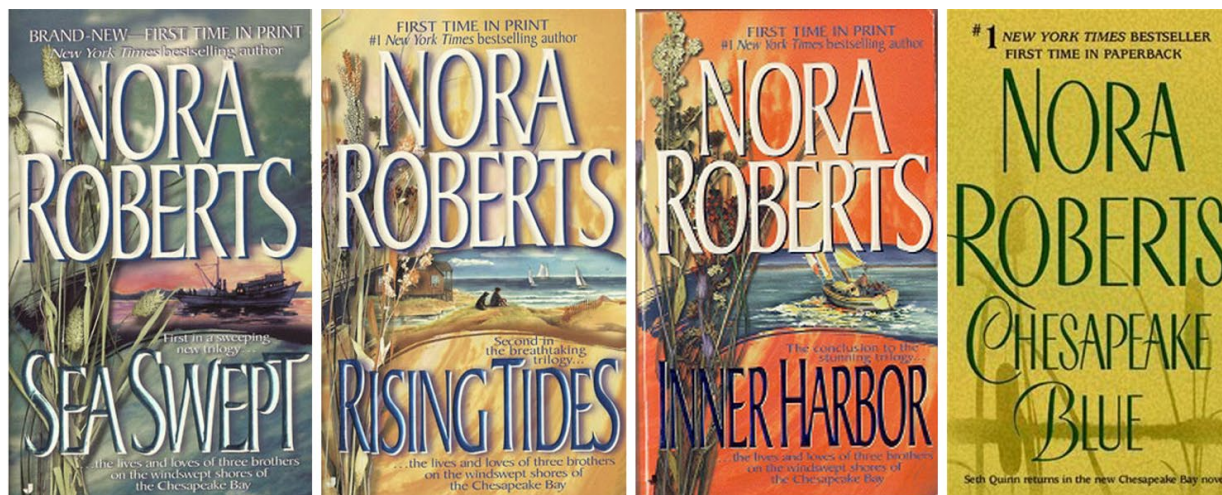


Figure 12. Front covers of Nora Roberts's *Chesapeake Bay Saga*: *Sea Swept* (1998), *Rising Tides* (1998), *Inner Harbor* (1998), *Chesapeake Blue* (2002), Berkley Books.

These original covers of the *Chesapeake Bay Saga* represent the landscape trend in romance novel cover design.

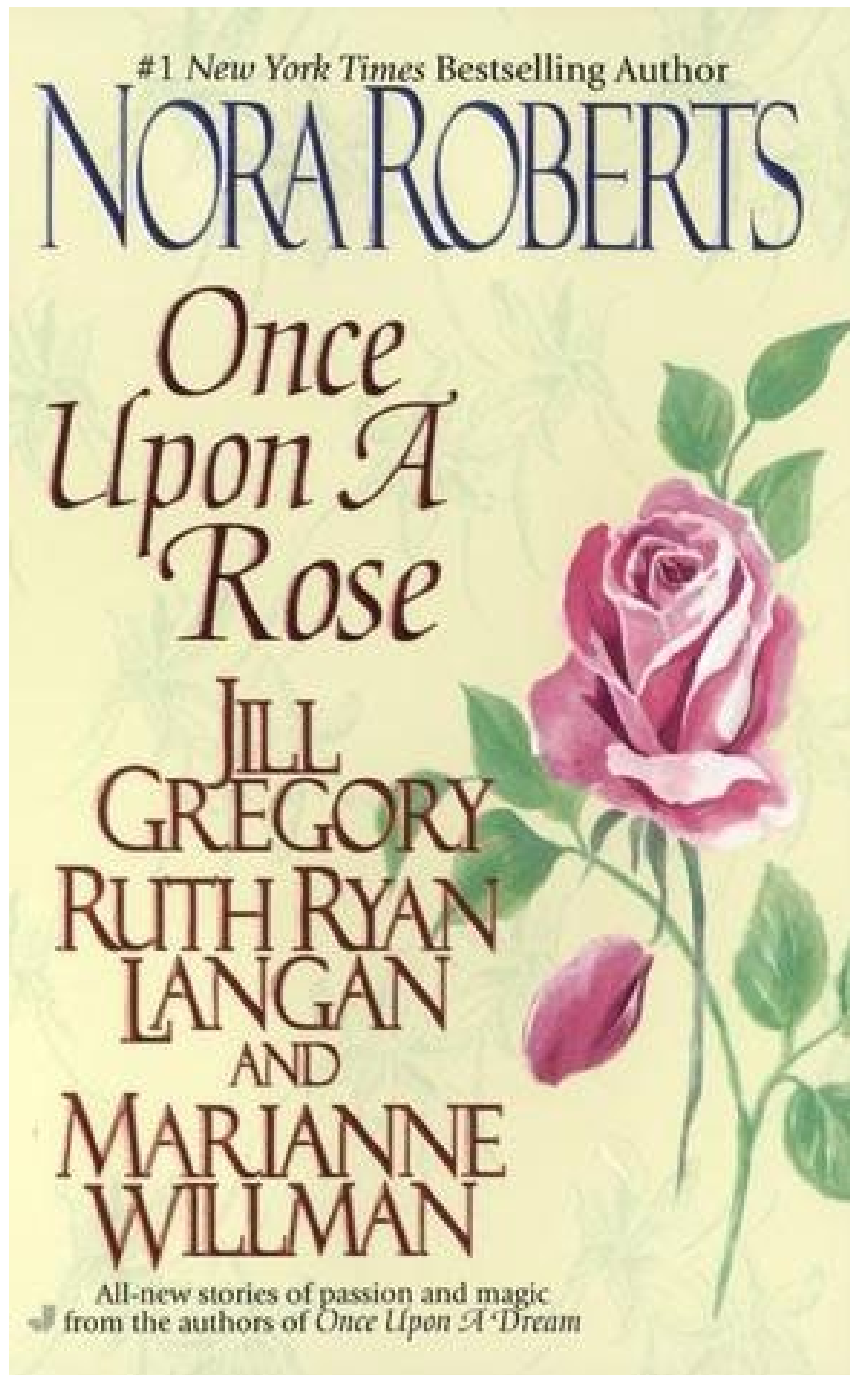


Figure 13. Front cover of Nora Roberts's *Once Upon a Rose*, with Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, and Marianne Willman, 2001, Jove Books.

This cover demonstrates the trend in romance cover design which features a singular object, such as flowers.

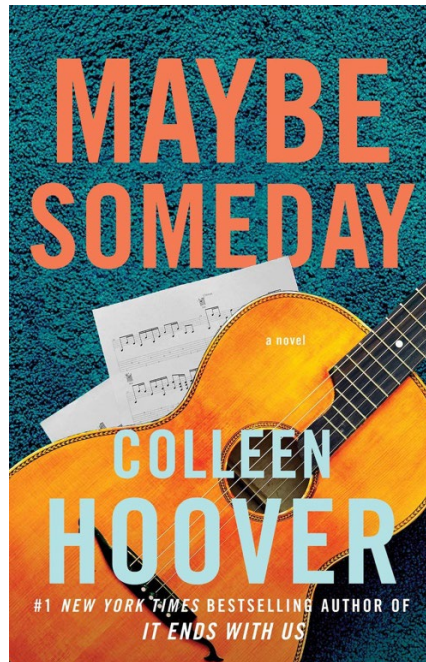


Figure 14. Front cover of Colleen Hoover's *Maybe Someday*, 2014, Atria Books.

This cover is the 2022 reworked edition of *Maybe Someday*. These covers demonstrate the still life trend in romance novel cover design.

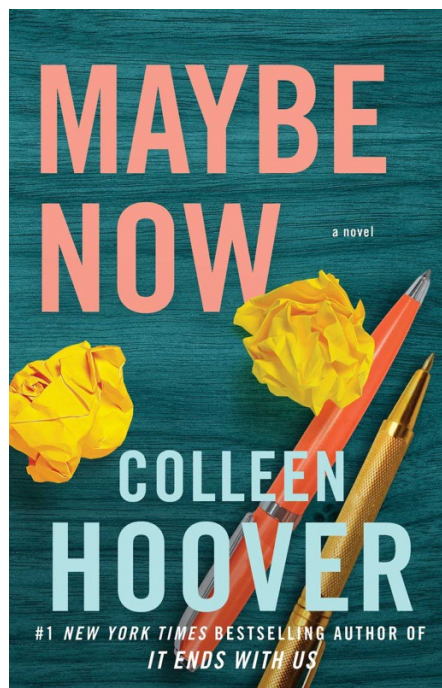


Figure 15. Front cover of Colleen Hoover's *Maybe Now*, 2018, Atria Books.

This cover is the 2022 reworked edition of *Maybe Now*. This cover demonstrates the still life trend in romance novel cover design.

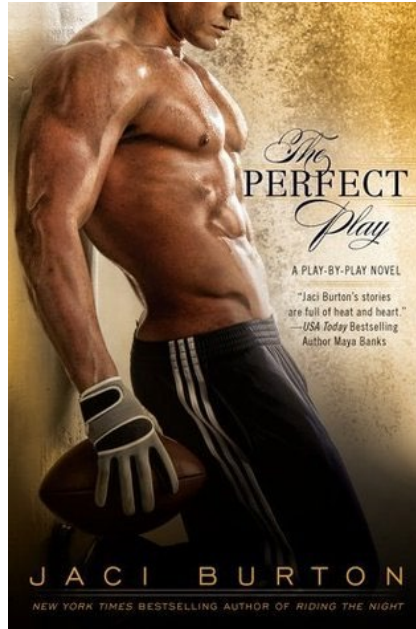


Figure 16. Front cover of Jaci Burton's *The Perfect Play*, 2011, Berkley Heat.

This cover demonstrates the shirtless torso trend in romance cover design. These covers utilize cheaper stock photography to design the novels.

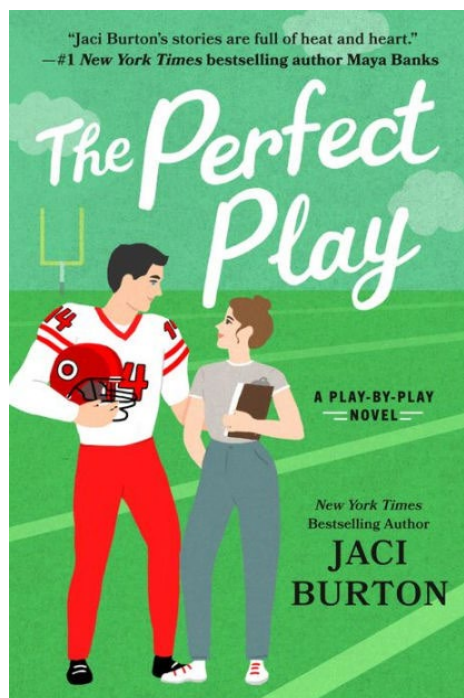


Figure 17. Front cover of Jaci Burton's *The Perfect Play*, 2024, Berkley Romance.

In comparison, this is the 2024 reworked version which utilizes the cartoon cover trend.

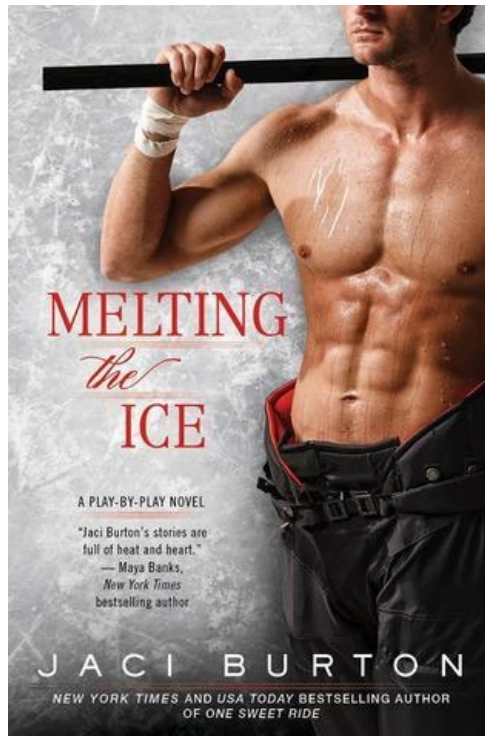


Figure 18. Front cover of Jaci Burton's *Melting the Ice*, 2014, Berkley Sensation.

This cover is another example of the headless and shirtless torso trend utilizing stock photography.

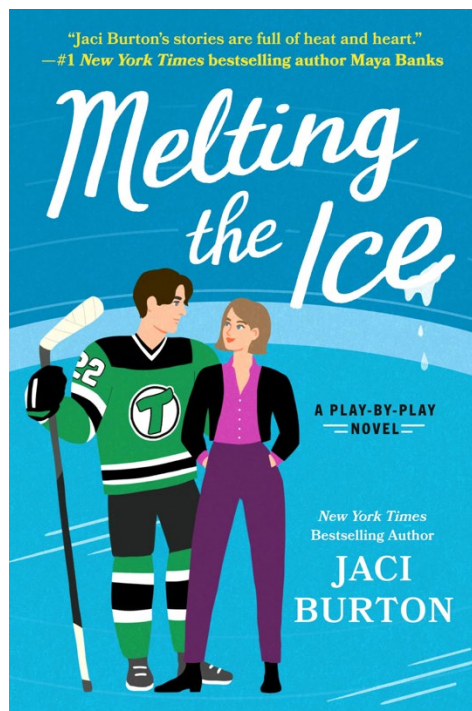


Figure 19. Front cover of Jaci Burton's *Melting the Ice*, 2024, Berkley Romance.

This is the reworked version of the previous figure in the cartoon cover trend.

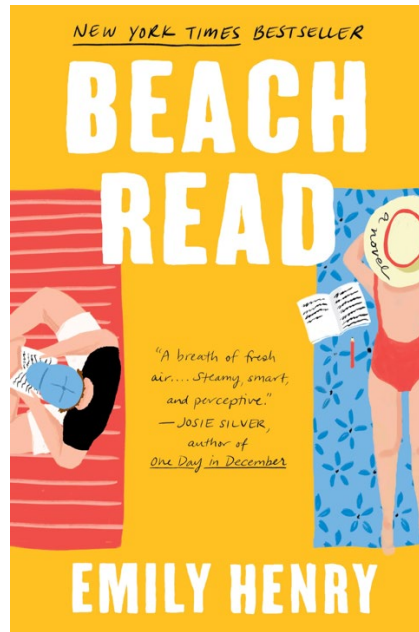


Figure 20. Front cover of Emily Henry's *Beach Read*, 2020, Berkley.

This novel demonstrates the cartoon cover trend, with clean lines, sans-serif font, and a bright, solid-colored background.



Figure 21. Front cover of Casey McQuiston's *Red White & Royal Blue*, 2019, St. Martin's Griffin.

This is another example of the cartoon trend, similarly with clean lines and bright, solid colors.

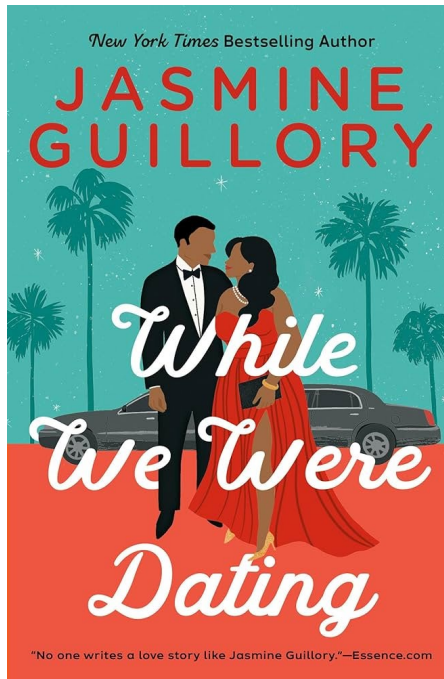


Figure 22. Front cover of Jasmine Guillory's *While We Were Dating*, 2021, Berkley Books.

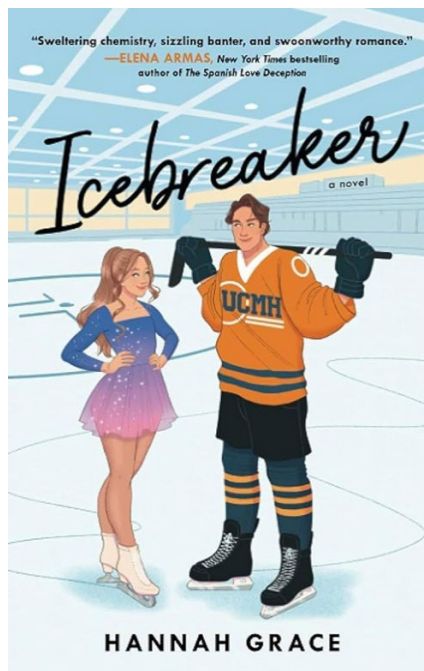


Figure 23. Front cover of Hannah Grace's *Icebreaker*, 2022, Atria Books.

This novel's cover was especially infamous on social media due to its deceptive cover, and content targeted towards mature audiences.

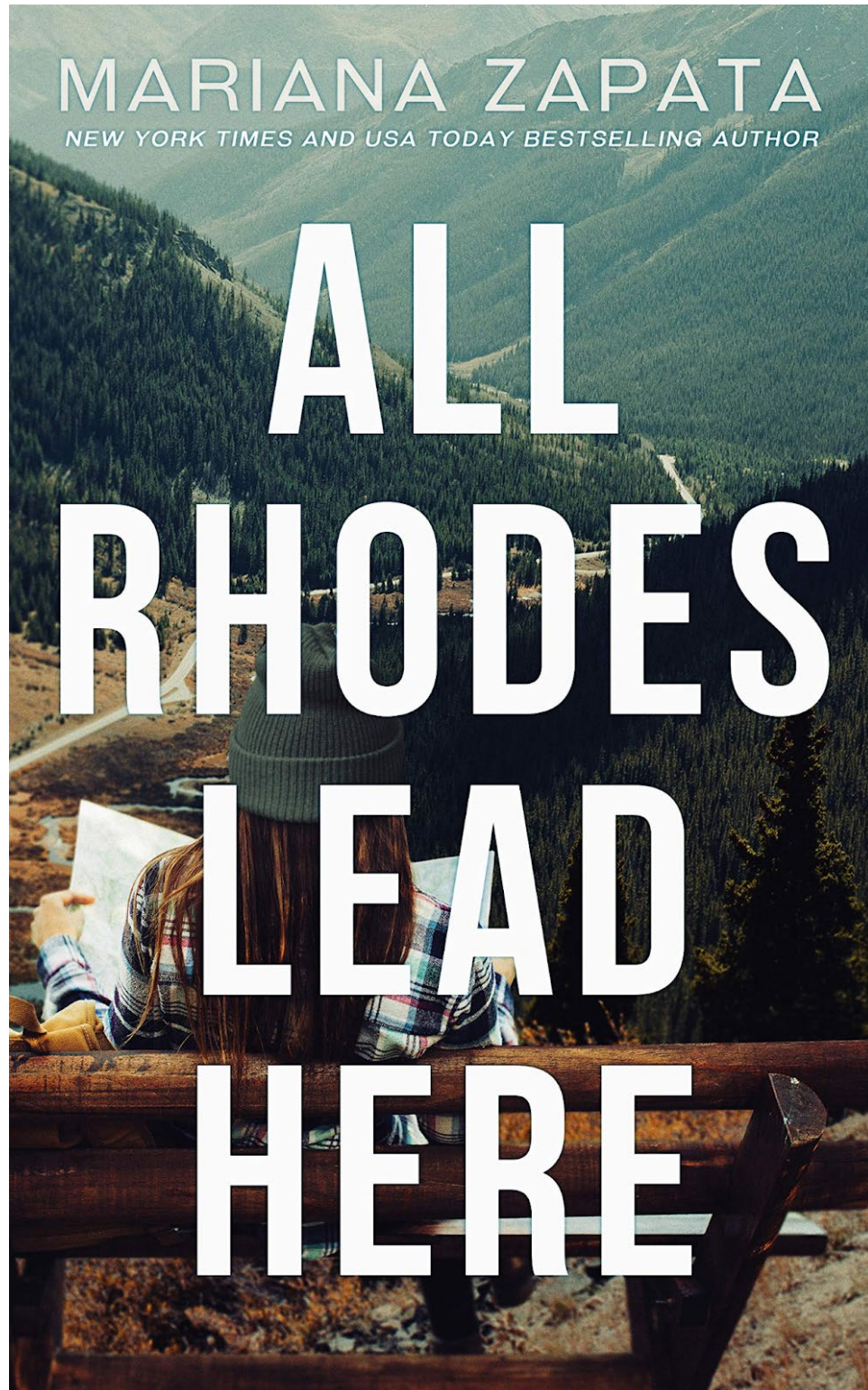


Figure 24. Front cover of Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here*, 2021, self-published.

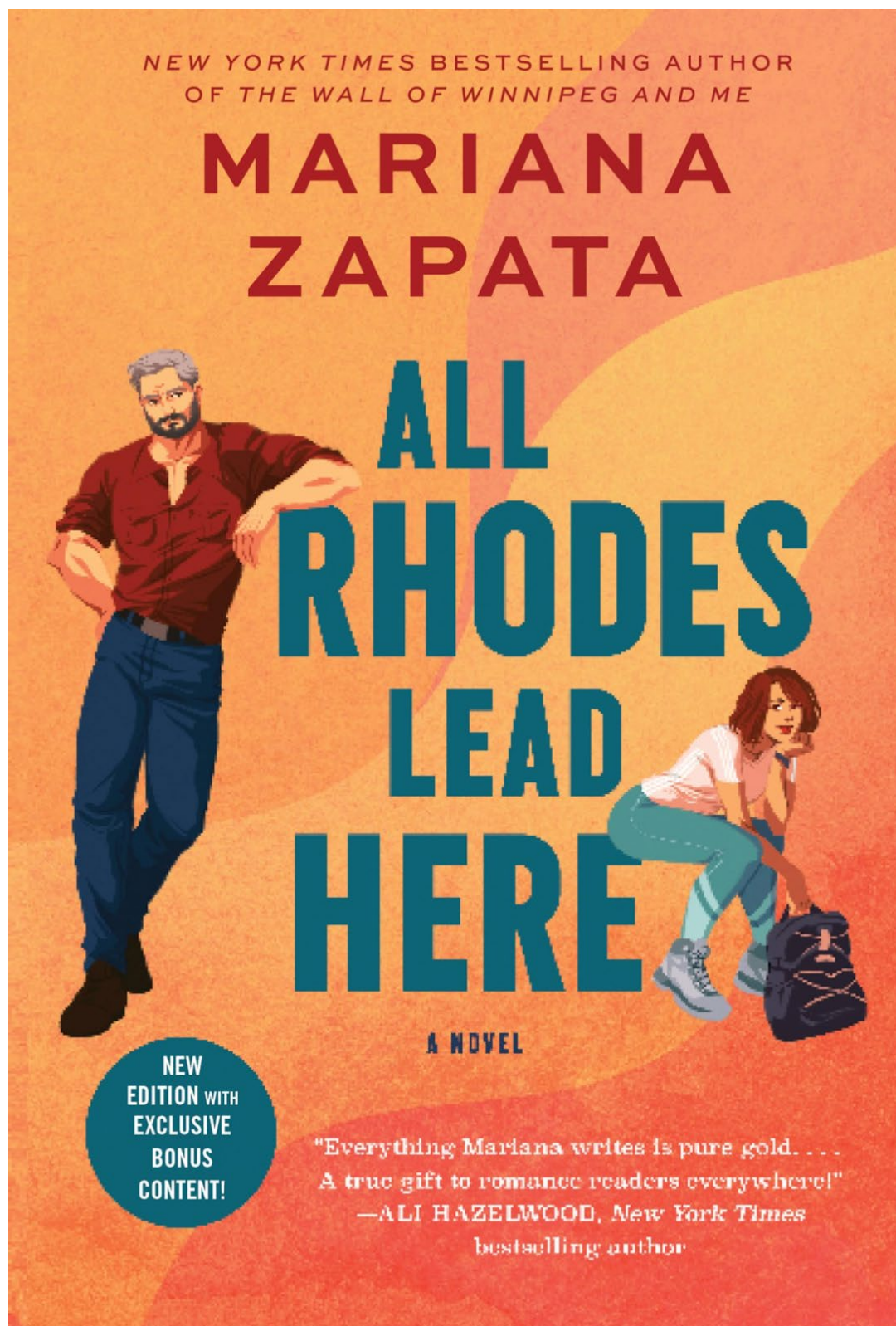


Figure 25. Front cover of Mariana Zapata's *All Rhodes Lead Here*, 2024, Avon Books.

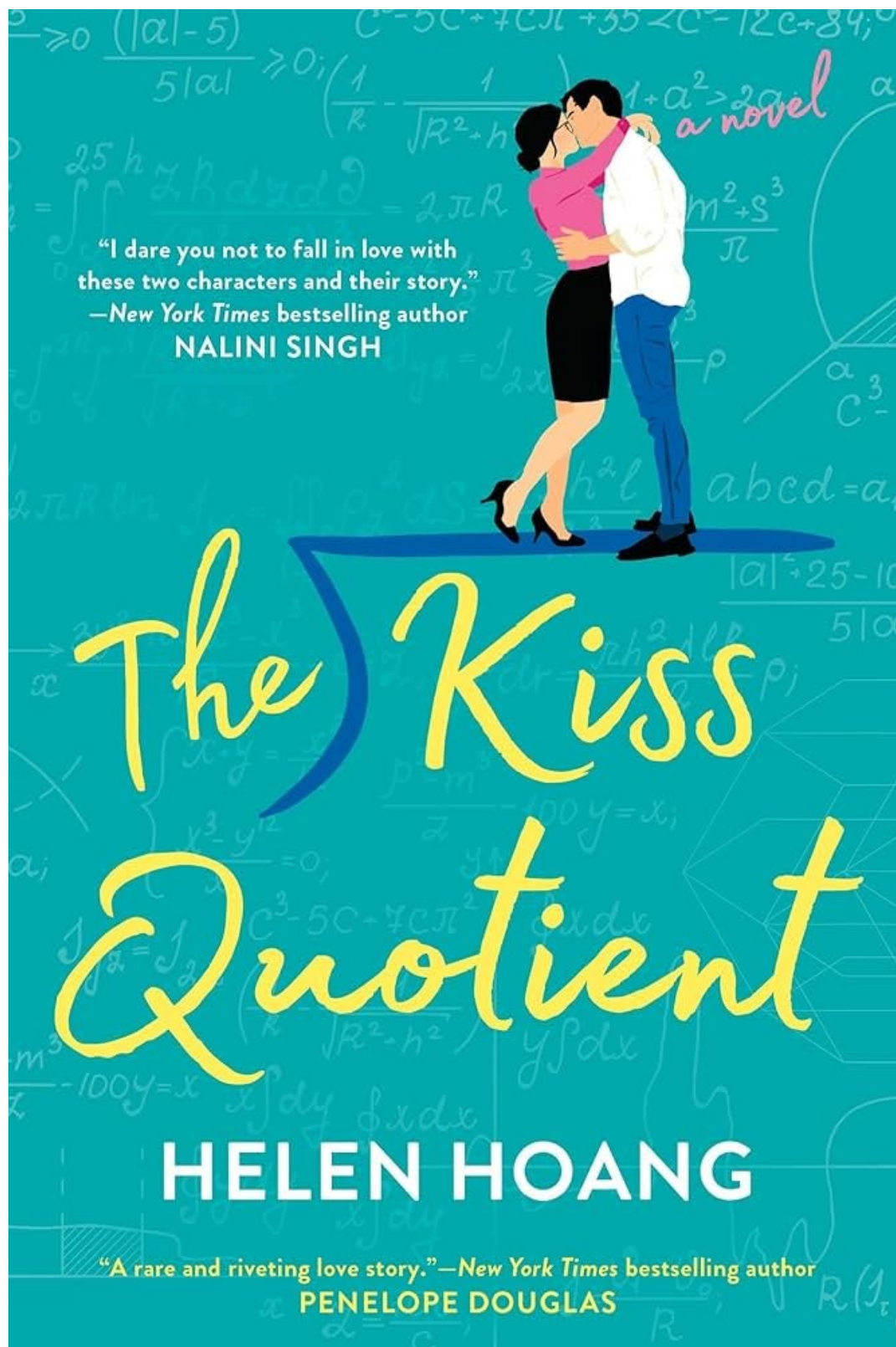


Figure 26. Front cover of Helen Hoang's *The Kiss Quotient*, 2018, Berkley.

Glossary of Key Terms

Bodice-Ripper: a subgenre in the romance genre so named for intense sexual encounters within a historical setting. This subgenre was spearheaded by Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and The Flower* (1972).

#Bookstagram: a subcommunity on Instagram for readers to discuss and share books.

#BookTok: a subcommunity on TikTok for readers to discuss and share books.

#BookTube: a subcommunity on YouTube for readers to discuss and share books.

Clinch: a trend in romance novel cover design which featured illustrations of heterosexual couples in various stages of undress locked in a passionate embrace.

Convergence Culture: Henry Jenkin's discussed convergence culture in his *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006). He discusses three terms in relation to convergence culture: media convergence (how content flows across multiple platforms, including the convergence of old and new media (Jenkins 322), participatory culture (a culture where consumers are participating in media creation (Jenkins 331) and collective intelligence (virtual communities sharing knowledge through large-scale collaboration (Jenkins 321)).

Facebook: created in 2004 by billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook is a social networking service which allows users to share text, photos, videos, etc. and be connected to other users.

Feed: this is the stream of content on social media platforms. Individuals may have their own personal feeds created by the algorithm that presents content to users.

Goodreads: a social cataloging platform utilized specifically for reviewing and discussing books. Created in 2006 and bought by Amazon in 2013, individuals using Goodreads create digital 'bookshelves,' as well as find/create reviews, quotes, and annotations. Amazon's

acquisition of Goodreads allowed for a hybridization of digital and word of mouth recommendations from reading communities in selling and promoting books (Collins, xxii).

HFN/HEA (Happy For Now, Happily Ever After): This term is utilized within the romance community in reference to the successful pairing of romantic protagonists by the end of the novel that is common within the romance novel.

Cartoon Cover: a recent trend in romance novel cover design which features an illustration of one of more of the romantic protagonists. These covers utilize bright colors, primarily sans-serif font and clean lines.

Instagram: a photo and video social media app that was initially released in 2010. Its name derives from the combination of ‘instant camera’ and ‘telegram.’

Paratext: a term which was coined by literary theorist Gerard Genette utilized in reference to the supplementary material which accompany a body of published text, and which is created or validated by the author or publisher of a text in order to present the text to readers. See Genette’s *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*.

Romance Novel: a term which has been continuously redefined and explored throughout scholarship on the romance novel. This paper utilizes Kamblé understanding of the romance novel as a double helix of the romantic and novel forms which allows the romance novel to continually recalibrate itself towards contemporary understandings of what is desirable. See Kamblé’s *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology*, for a deeper investigation into her understanding of the romance novel.

#SpicyTok: a term utilized in romance communities on TikTok in reference to books with high sexual content.

Threads: Originally a text-based extension of Instagram, Threads was launched as its own app in 2023, although it still requires an Instagram account to use.

Thumbnail: A miniature version of a picture/video utilized in organization (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thumbnail>).

TikTok: a short form video platform that was initially released in 2016. TikTok became more widely used after its merger with Musical.ly, another short form video sharing platform, in 2018. Shortly after, the COVID-19 quarantine in the U.S. during 2019-2020 influenced many to increase social media use, which led to TikTok becoming the most downloaded app.

Twitter: Twitter (created in 2006) is a text based social media platform officially known as X (due to a rebrand in 2023), more colloquially referred to as Twitter.

YouTube: a video sharing platform which was founded in 2005 and bought by Google in 2006.

Bibliography

"About the Romance Genre." *RWA: Romance Writers of America*, The Romance Writers of America, www.rwa.org/about-romance-fiction. Accessed 23 Feb. 2025.

"All Rhodes Lead Here." *HarperCollins Publishers*, www.harpercollins.com/products/all-rhodes-lead-here-mariana-zapata?variant=41056039796770. Accessed 23 Feb. 2025.

"All Rhodes Lead Here: A Novel." *Amazon*, www.amazon.com/All-Rhodes-Lead-Here-Novel/dp/0063325896. Accessed 23 Feb. 2025.

Avon Books [@avonbooks]. Photograph of Avon edition of All Rhodes Lead Here. Instagram, 18 Jan. 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C2PrkofM_9o/.

———. Photograph of Avon edition of All Rhodes Lead Here and The Wall of Winnipeg and Me. Instagram, 15 May 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C6_agxMsKJz/.

Birke, Dorothee, and Johannes Fehrle. "#Booklove: How Reading Culture is Adapted on the Internet." *Komparatistik online : komparatistische Internet-Zeitschrift*, edited by Johannes M. Fehrel and Mark D. Schmitt, Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg, 2019, pp. 60-86. avldigital.de, www.komparatistik-online.de/index.php/komparatistik_online/article/view/191/145.

———. "Social Reading? On the Rise of a 'Bookish' Reading Culture Online." *Poetics Today*, edited by Tore Rye Andersen et al., vol. 42, no. 2, Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 149-172, doi.org/10.1215/03335372-8883178.

———. "'Doing' Literary Reading Online: The Case of BookTube." *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*, edited by Astrid Ensslin et al., London/New York: Routledge, 2023. 468-478. doi.org/10.4324/9781003119739.

Christel, Leonie [@thebookleo]. "Why are romance books 'cringe?'" *Youtube*, 4 Feb. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_bJwgvmOhM.

Cohn, Jan. *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-market Fiction for Women*, Duke University Press, 1988.

Collins, Jim. *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*. Duke University Press, 2010. DOAB: Directory of Open Access Books, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391975>.

Denson, Khalilah [@khalilahd]. "Tier ranking all the books i read from 2024 🌟📚." *Youtube*, uploaded by, 19 Jan. 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gPo41g2zIc>.

Edwards, Jack [@jack_edwards]. "A definitive ranking of booktok books, in case tiktok gets banned again." *Youtube*, uploaded by @jack_edwards, 5 Feb. 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9QJnWz2xug>.

- Emmie [@emmiereads]. “Tier ranking every romance book i’ve ever read ❤️ 30+ book rants/review.” Youtube, 16 Sept. 2024,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofFa0BHDzcA>.
- Ensslin, Astrid, et al., editors. *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media*. Routledge, 2023.
- Fuller, Danielle, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo. *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*. Cambridge University Press, 2023,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108891042>.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. 1987. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gleason, William A., and Eric Murphy Selinger, editors. *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* Routledge, 2016.
- Goris, An. “Hidden Codes of Love: The Materiality of the Category Romance Novel.” *Belphegor*, v.13 n.1, 2015, p. 42,
<https://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/616#tocto1n3>.
- Hinton, P.N. "The Advantages and Pitfalls of Illustrated Romance Covers." *Book Riot*, Riot New Media Group, 29 June 2023, bookriot.com/illustrated-romance-covers/.
- Hoang, Helen [@HHoangWrites]. “COVER REVEAL for THE KISS QUOTIENT Mass Market Paperback Edition...” Facebook, 4 Mar. 2021, 9:17 a.m.,
<https://www.facebook.com/HHoangWrites/posts/cover-reveal-for-the-kiss-quotient-mass-market-paperback-editionhello-all-ive-be/992633344601944/>.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2006. Proquest,
ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/reader.action?docID=2081610&ppg=5.
- Kamblé, Jayashree. "Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art." *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?*, edited by William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger, Routledge, 2016, pp. 241-272.
- . *Creating Identity: The Popular Romance Heroine's Journey to Selfhood and Self-Presentation*. Indiana University Press, 2023.
- . “Romancing the University: BIPOC Scholars in Romance Novels in the 1980s and Now.” *Esferas Literarias* 6 (2023): 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.21071/elrl.vi6>.
- . “The Origins of U.S. Mass-Market Category Romance Novels: Black Editors and Writers in the Early 1980s.” *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 46, no.3, pp. 252-265. Wiley Online Library, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jacc.13488>.
- . *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

- Liang, Alice. "What Does a Happily Ever After Look Like." *The Pudding*, Oct. 2023, pudding.cool/2023/10/romance-covers/.
- Lopes, Thais [@tata.lifepages] and BookTourGals [@booktourgals]. Photograph of Aileen Erin's Infestation against a grid of other books. Instagram, 22 Jan. 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DFI3lBzAP2c/>.
- Lott, Morgan. "6 Reasons Cartoon Covers Are Bad for Romance." *Whoa!mance*, 12 May 2020, www.whoamancepodcast.com/all-blog-posts/2020/5/11/6-reasons-cartoon-covers-are-bad-for-romance.
- Markert, John. *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016.
- McKnight-Trontz, Jennifer. *The Look of Love: The Art of the Romance Novel*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.
- Modleski, Tania. "The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, pp. 435-448, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173584>.
- Moblo, Jordan [@jordys.book.club]. Short video of book recommendations featuring covers and short descriptive text. Instagram, 3 Feb. 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFn5HHFywXJ/?hl=en>.
- Murphy, Leslie. "Are Romance Book Covers Starting a New Trend." *She Reads Romance Books*, 4 June 2021, www.shereadsromancebooks.com/romance-book-covers/.
- Murray, Simone. *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*. 1st ed., John Hopkins University Press, 2018. *ProQuest*, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=5339524&pq-origsite=primo
- Mussell, Kay. *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction*, Greenwood Press, 1984.
- Nicholson, Mikayla [@morallygreykay]. Photograph of Ali Hazelwood's *Deep End* and Elle Kennedy's *The Graham Effect*. Instagram, 21 Feb. 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DGWCQwExYzm/>.
- "Our History." *Mills & Boon*, www.millsandboon.co.uk/pages/our-history. Accessed 23 Feb. 2025.
- "Para-, Prefix (1), Etymology." Oxford English Dictionary, *Oxford UP*, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5012021520>.
- Pham, Cindy [@withcindy]. "Does the romance genre have a white supremacy problem?" Youtube, 15 Nov. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTYxx9npRns>.

- Pham, Haley [@haleypham]. "I Read Popular Romance Books *are they worth the hype?*" Youtube, 14 Nov. 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYDaJxV7rA4&t=174s>.
- Pianzola, Federico. *Digital Social Reading: Sharing Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2025, doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14588.001.0001.
- Pockros, Alana. "The Endless Life Cycle of Book Cover Trends: What you see on a cover is the product of intermingling cultural and economic forces." *Eye on Design*, AIGA: the Professional Association for Design, 23 Aug. 2021, eyeondesign.aiga.org/the-endless-life-cycle-of-book-cover-trends/.
- Pressman, Jessica. *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age*. Columbia University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7312/pres19512>.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. 1991, The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Reddan, Bronwyn, et al., editors. *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok*. 1st ed., London: Routledge, 2024. Taylor & Francis Group, <https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9781003458616>.
- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- Reid, Penny. "6 Reasons Cartoon Covers Are Good For Romance." *Penny Reid: Smart Romance*, Penny Reid, 12 May 2020, pennyreid.ninja/2020/05/6-reasons-cartoon-covers-are-good-for-romance/.
- Roach, Catherine. *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story In Popular Culture*. Indiana University Press, 2016.
- Snitow, Ann Barr. "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different." *Radical History Review*, vol. 20, 1979, pp. 141-161, Duke University Press, <https://doi-org.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/10.1215/01636545-1979-20-141>.
- Thomas, Bronwen. *Literature and Social Media*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2020.
- Thompson, John B. *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing*. Polity, 2021.
- Thurston, Carol. *The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity*, University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Tomasena, J. M.. "Negotiating Collaborations: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube's Ecosystem." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2019, SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119894004>.
- Wendell, Sarah, and Candy Tan. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*. Kindle ed., Fireside, 2009.

Zapata, Mariana. *All Rhodes Lead Here*. Avon, 2024.

———. *All Rhodes Lead Here*. Self-published, 2021.

———. [@marianazapata]. Photograph of the word and page count of a word document. *Instagram*, 9 Mar. 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMNtr8rgl0q/?hl=en>.

———. [@marianazapata_]. “Coming soon!” *Twitter*, 15 Mar. 2021, 10:23 AM, https://x.com/marianazapata_/status/1371512334456397833.

———. [@marianazapata]. Photograph of front cover of *All Rhodes Lead Here* (2021). *Instagram*, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcpBYrA7F7/?hl=en>.

———. [@marianazapata]. Photograph of front and back cover of *All Rhodes Lead Here* (2021). *Instagram*, 9 Apr. 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNdGZvEnNWK/>.

———. [@marianazapata]. Photograph *All Rhodes Lead Here* (2021) on Amazon. *Instagram*, 3 Apr. 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNN0obTHiCn/>.

———. "'All Rhodes Lead Here' is **Out Now**!" *Mariana Zapata*, Zapatalnk LLC, 5 Apr. 2021, www.marianazapata.com/post/all-rhodes-lead-here-is-out-now.

———. "Rhodes Audio Book Out Now!" *Mariana Zapata*, Zapatalnk LLC, 25 Feb. 2022, <https://www.marianazapata.com/post/rhodes-audio-book-out-now>.

———. "Rhodes is Back! Out Now!" *Mariana Zapata*, Zapatalnk LLC, 12 Feb. 2024, <https://www.marianazapata.com/post/rhodes-is-back-out-now>.