

## Ripping the Bodice:

### Romance Novels and Perceptions of Rape in America

#### Introduction:

In the United States today, life is shaped by popular culture. Television presents a picture of what society should look like. The radio tells society what it should think and listen too. The Internet influences the opinions people make and how they learn about current events. Popular culture forms how society acts, what it wears, how it eats, and so much more. The extent of the power of popular culture is incredible, entering into every area of life. It therefore becomes important to study the effects that popular culture can have on American society, what those effects are, and how to address and stop those effects.

Romance novels are one of the best-selling genres in the publishing world. This genre is a multi-million dollar a year industry, and it is mainly geared towards women. With such a large following, one must wonder what message romance novels are sending out to their readers. What are these novels saying about romance, about love? What are these romances saying about sex?

Sex is one of the first features one thinks of when one thinks about romance novels. Romance novels typically include multiple sex scenes between the hero and heroine. It would be understandable then, to assume that women's perceptions of sex might be influenced by what they read in these romance novels. Such influence over sex perceptions is fine, especially when the scenes portray sex as a loving act between two people. But, what happens when that is not how sex is portrayed? What happens when

the sex in romance novels is shown as forced? What happens when rape appears in romance novels?

For my honors thesis, I propose to study the question above. That is, I will study how the appearance of rape in romance novels affects the perceptions of rape in America. How does the fact that rape in romance novels ends in love change how one perceives rape in real society? Does it make one think more leniently about rape? Or, conversely, would it make one more aware of rape in society and the contradictions and “gray areas” that surround rape? Such understanding could help in understanding how rape cases should be prosecuted, how rape should be legislated, and much more.

To explore this topic, one needs to have a working knowledge of two different research areas. First, one must have an idea of how the publishing industry works.. What do publishers look for and expect in the romance novels they print? How did this industry develop? Also, one should have a general knowledge on rape. Such a general knowledge would include a basic definition of what constitutes rape, how rape is perceived, and the effects of rape on the individual and society. It is only through knowing the background of these topics that one will be able to address the proposal question .

#### Romance Novels and the Publishing World:

Romance novels have a long history. Some even hypothesize that the origins of the romance genre can be traced all the way back to Pamela, a novel by Samuel Richardson which was the first British novel and first English novel printed in the United States (Modleski, 15). Over the decades, the romance novel has changed and evolved. Along with this change in the novels themselves brought changes in the publishing

industry. However, all these changes made the romance novel industry the successful enterprise it is today.

There are many names associated with early, British romance novels. After Richardson came the novels of Radcliffe, Bronte, and Austen, whose works gained immense popularity. Because of the response of the public to these novels, a new romance genre, the Gothic novel, sprang up. These novels were brought to the United States, where they were well received. Most novels in America tended to be English imports (Modleski, 17), and fell into sub-categories within the genre.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the sentimental novel gained popularity in America. This novel typically revolved around the tale of a innocent, virginal girl who had to fight off the advances of a rake (an overly ardent male protagonist). At the same time, the domestic novel, or tale centered around the workings of woman's role within the home, gained popularity. Often times, these two categories would overlap. The authors of these stories were usually primarily concerned with morality, and used their novels to propagate society's notions of proper female behavior. Females were shown not only how to behave, but also the dire consequences associated with breaking this moral code.

These novels on morality did have to compete with the popularity of the Gothic novel. This form of romance took place in exotic settings, and often dealt with women's fears. Modleski, in her book Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women, expounds the idea that women of this period were afraid of their confinement in home under the dominion of their husbands. To fight against these feelings, the Gothic novels was an outlet in which the female could compare her fears to the more pronounced

fears and life of the heroine. In this way, the Gothic romance helped ease fears and promote domesticity. However, during the nineteenth century, the domestic novel edged out the Gothic novel (Modleski, 22).

Though most of the romance literature was coming in from England, circumstances within the United States allowed for the distribution of these novels. In 1839, the first cheap books were being sold through the mail as newspapers. Books were being made available to more Americans, and the popularity of these books took many by surprise. The industry quickly sprang up to fill the needs of the newly-reading public. However, when the mail system stopped shipping these books as newspapers in 1843, the industry had to change its methods (Radway, 24). A new world of publishing was opening up in America.

In its infancy, the American publishing industry had been dominated by intellectual works. Authors of such works paid for the publishing of these novels themselves, shouldering all risks. Though this continued to be the practice into the twentieth century, publishers were trying new methods of mass producing books that could be sold in different venues. These books, often times shorter than regular novels and produced more cheaply, were known as mass markets. The mass-market industry started in 1937 by American Mercury Books, and was able to duplicate the success of the early newspaper-novels. In 1939, Pocket Books was founded, and was the first publishing company to engage in category publications. Most of the books produced were detective fiction and mystery novels (Radway, 27).

The detective and mystery novels that were published during this period had an effect on the romances that were being written. Those novels tended to vilify women,

causing women to feel threatened and paranoid once again. These fears brought the comeback of the Gothic novel in 1938 with the publishing of Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier. This book began the “Gothic Revival” (Modleski, 21), as once again the Gothic novel was used to both reveal and ease the fears of women. However, the publishing of this novel had a profound effect on the publishing world. The popularity and numerous reprinting of Rebecca caused publishing houses to reassess the marketability of the Gothic romance genre. By the 1950’s, when the popularity of detective novels and mysteries was dying out, many publishers turned their attentions to the romance genre.

At its peak from 1969-1972, the romance industry produced about thirty-five novels a month (Radway, 33). However, in the period of 1972-1974, numbers began to drop. There are different theories into why this happened. Some feel the market just had too many romance novels. Other feel that the visibility of the feminist movement created this decrease. Whatever the reason, the demand for gothic romances dropped off. Publishers began to reevaluate their publishing practices. However, then, in 1972, Avon Books published a novel that would change the romance industry and their publishing practices.

In 1972, Avon published The Flame and The Flower by Kathleen Woodiwiss. Longer than a gothic romance, this book included more explicit sexual passages and near rapes. Through an aggressive publishing campaign usually reserved for best-selling hardback books, The Flame and the Flower was an incredible publishing success. Following Avon’s lead, publishers began to publish similar books in a similarly aggressive manner. Called by different names, including “sweet savage romances” and “erotic historicals,” the bodice ripper genre was born (Radway, 34).

Overtime, publishing houses began to market mass-produced romances in a different way. They continued to work with the bodice rippers, giving them aggressive marketing. However, publishers started developing “line” or “series” romance. These books, sold in grocery and drug stores, book stores, and other venues, worked off the popularity and reputation of the publishing house’s name rather than off the novel title. This practice brought in loyal readership, especially for companies like Harlequin which specialized in romances and romance series exclusively (Radway, 40).

Over the years, the romance industry has also worked to increase its readership. They have created romances for teenage readers, a market untapped until around the 1940’s. These novels, usually centering around the romantic exploits of young girls, lack the sexual content of the other books. These romances tend to send the message that “genital sex” is reserved for adults. They tend to also serve as vehicles to advertise different makeup, clothing, etc. products that appeal to young women.

The romance industry also tries to increase its readership by following political and societal trends. In her book, Becoming a Woman through Romance, Linda Christian-Smith explores the different messages given out by teenage romance novels and what they reflect of the period in which they were written. In periods where the country was more conservative, such as in the period of 1942-1959, the novels reflected these conservative ideas. Sex was absent, women’s main concern was in making themselves beautiful, and life was beautiful. These ideas were again present in the 1980-1982, when the country was returning to a conservative nature under President Reagan. However, during the 1963-1979 period, when the country was more liberal and progressive in its ideas, the novels tended to be more liberal as well. Sex was evidenced

in these novels, women were not as concerned with making themselves beautiful, and lives tended to be more conflicted and disappointing (Christian-Smith, 16-17). In each period, the romance novels were only following the opinions espoused by society in order to attract more readers.

Today, the romance industry is one of the most prolific in terms of titles and authors. It has created different genres, each tailored to specific fantasies or situations. There are sub-categories within sub-categories, guaranteeing that every reader will be able to find what she like. Romance about doctors, lawyers, cowboys, and pirates fill the shelves. Series romance and single-title publications (novels that stand independently of any other book or author) sell by the thousands. In 2001 alone, the romance industry generated \$1.52 billion in sales, not including the lucrative used book sales. That is over 2,000 published titles in that one year alone, and over 51.1 million readers.

(<http://www.rwanational.org/statistics.stm>).

Part of this success is because publishers give readers what they want. Romance novels tend to be heavily patterned, so the reader will know what she is getting before she buys the book. Romances, throughout the different genres, follow the same pattern: hero meets heroine, a conflict arises both between the two protagonists and in their outside lives, the two protagonists solve their problems and fall in love. There must always be a happy ending. And, for all this cliché and patterning, these books sell and sell well.

To aid in this patterning, publishing houses will detail what they will and will not publish in terms of a romance novels. Most of the romance publishers, such as Avon and Harlequin, have websites where a potential author can find the guidelines for getting

published. The instructions for writing a book for the Temptation series for Harlequin Books, to show one example, appears as this on their website:

Length: 60,000 words. Senior Editor & Editorial Coordinator: Birgit Davis-Todd  
Editorial Office: Toronto, Canada. Temptation is sexy, sassy, and seductive! This is Harlequin's boldest, most sensuous series, focusing on men and women living — and loving — today! Almost anything goes in Temptation: The stories may be humorous, topical, adventurous, or glitzy, but at heart they are pure romantic fantasy. Think fast-paced, use the desires and language of women today, add a high level of sexual tension along with strong conflicts, and then throw in a good dash of "what if..." The results should sizzle!  
(<http://eharlequin.com/harl/books/alcove/guides/20h1p11.htm>)

This is only one such example of how publishing houses guide their authors into writing books that will sell. In addition to the publishing houses themselves releasing these guidelines, there are different groups that also make them available. Some groups, like the Romance Writers of America, also have these guidelines available for would-be authors. There are also “How-to” books devoted to writing a romance novel and getting it published. For example, on such book would be How to Write a Romance for the New Market and Get Published by Kathryn Falk. In this guide, Falk and other romance writers have composed short essays on how to write a romance novel, what to include, what publishers want, and more. Some of the advice given out by these published authors is to outline first, use action and descriptive words frequently, and to write from the heart.

Publishing houses have also learned how to market certain books to certain readers in certain areas. Research is done on romance readership, typically by outside groups like the Romance Writers of America. Publishing houses and authors can easily find out not only who is reading, but also what they like and look for in romance novels. In terms of readership, most readers fall into certain categories. Most readers of romance



novels are married females, ages 35-44, living in the South. These are women living in areas or 50,000 or less, who have high school diplomas, and who make between \$50,000 and \$75,000 a year. However, most of these women are not in the labor force. Most romance readers are white, and probably read their first romance before the age of sixteen. (<http://www.rwanational.org/statistics.stm>)

This average readers also enjoys certain aspects of the novel more than others, and looks for these aspects when choosing a new book. The typical reader looks for a heroine that is intelligent, has a strong strength of character, and is attractive. The expectations of the hero are that he be muscle bound, handsome, and intelligent (in that order of preference). Most readers want a romantic suspense story (<http://www.rwanational.org/statistics.stm>) . Readers are interested in different things in novels, and read them for different reasons.

In the early 1980's, Janice Radway conducted a series of focus groups and interviews in the Midwest, trying to discover what women want to read and what women like in their romance novels. In her book, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, Radway discusses her findings. She reveals that most romance readers can attest to the repetitive nature of romances. However, readers actually look for this in their novels. Radway discovered that romance readers read these novels to help them escape, and that they like knowing that everything ends happily. The patterning of the romances allows the readers to know that, even when reading a new novel, the story will end happily. They also said that, despite the patterns, romance novels are very different. The situations and locations can vary drastically, bring a new reading

experience each time. Women read these novels as an escape from their own lives, so they look for adventure and fun when they read.

Radway's research also revealed what these readers look for in their romances. Overly explicit sexual intercourse tend to be a turn off for female readership. Also, a huge misstep on the way to romance, such as the death of a main character in the novel, can cause readers to put down the book. The women in Radway's research were primarily looking for a "reading experience that leaves them feeling hopeful, happy, and content (Radway, 119)." They wanted a heroine who was virginal and selfless, beautiful but not vain, independent and intelligent, and nurturing. And they wanted a hero who was handsome, promiscuous, honest, indifferent, courageous, emotionally reserved, desirous of sex, but how undergoes a full reversal in his attitudes by the end of the book (Radway, 132).

Radway's research also reveals the presence of a strong romance community. During her research, Radway worked closely with a book store employee identified as "Dot." Dot often recommended titles to the romance readers who came into her store. Later, she began publishing a newsletter which had titles of suggested readings, and information about what was coming out and what not to read. Today, romance readers still look for this kind of advisement. However, today people are not only restricted to the advise of their local community. The internet has opened up a whole new avenue for the exchanging of opinions and information.

Most romance publishers have websites which cater to the needs of their readership. A reader looking for a particular title can log on and find and buy that title. In addition to the sales aspect of the sites, there is also a component of fun. Most of the

sites visited will have a series of games (such as Chinese Horoscope Compatibility Tests) which related to love. The sites will also have interactive stories. Readers read a chapter, and then can vote on what should happen next. The publishers will also sponsor contests through the sites, and offer readers previews of chapters for soon-to-be-released novels.

However, the websites have another role. Romance readers often feel looked down upon because of their choice of reading material. The internet sites, both those run by the publishing houses and independent sites, offer a community of people who understand. These sites provide chat rooms where readers can discuss their opinions of books, ask for advice on further readings, and just chat about romances in general. These sites can also be used to help find romance titles that are out of publication. They can also just help find a favorite novel whose title the reader does not remember. These romance communities on the Internet are strong and understanding, and help encourage further romance reading. Reading groups, both those held in private homes and in bookstores, serve a similar purpose.

. Romance readers come in every ethnicity, age bracket, and life style. Romance publishing makes up about 18% of all books sold (though it is unclear if this included the used book sales), 54.5% of all popular paperback fiction sold in North America, and 35.8% of all popular fiction (including paperback, hardcover, and trade sized paperbacks). The publishing industry has a long and complex history of publishing romances. All the different circumstances have shaped the industry into what it is today, and that affects what is published. But what affect does what is published have on perceptions of rape in society?

## Rape:

In the previous section, the research of Janice Radway was discussed. In her interviews with romance readers, Radway discovered what readers will and will not read in terms of romance novels. Most of her interviewees voiced objections to books that included violently forced sex. However, there were instances in which this type of forced sex was accepted. What readers would and would not accept fell into a sort of “gray” area. While the readers did not want “rape sagas,” they were willing to accept novels such as The Flame and the Flower by Kathleen Woodiwiss which included several rapes. This ambiguous stance on rape in romance novels can be seen in American society as well.

Most Americans would agree that rape is one of the most horrendous crimes that can be committed. The psychological and physical effects on the victim can linger for life, and these wounds will never truly heal. Rape can intrude into all areas of life, destroying trust and self-confidence and security. It can even affect the closest of relationships. Rape destroys peace of mind. Some rape victims even remark that death would be kinder than having to live after a rape, and many victims contemplate suicide to end their pain.

The pain of a rape victim can be understood from looking at Cathy Winkler’s account of her own rape. Through an examination of her own rape as a case study, Winkler is able to show just how rape can invade all areas of life, and how it can isolate the victim from society. She describes how rape victims often feel as if they are raped multiple times as they undergo the physical examination and the prosecution process. Winkler’s life was completely changed by her rape- she no longer felt safe on her own or

in the company of others. She had a difficult time relating to former friends and co-workers. In the end, because of her rape, Winkler moved and changed jobs. Such experience are reported by many other victims of rape.

While most American agree that rape is horrible, they do not agree on what rape is. While there are numerous legal definitions, covering all aspects and dimensions of rape, they do not truly reflect how rape is seen by the average American. Americans disagree on just what does and does not constitute rape, and there is great controversy surround the subject. Rape, in the minds of Americans, is not a black and white issue, but actually is made up of many shades of gray.

The definition of rape has changed as the years have gone by, growing to encompass the changing ideas and beliefs of society. Rape is a state crime, and therefore there are no federal laws relating to rape. However, on the whole, most states have very similar definitions. In terms of rape, the definitions usually come in different parts, covering different aspects of rape. There are the codes against statutory rape, sodomy, and rape. For an example of how rape laws appear, the rape codes of Virginia will be used. To view this law, please find it in Appendix I.

These are only the official definitions, how the laws appear on the books. How these laws are enforced by law officials depends upon different factors. Police and prosecutors, as well as others in the criminal justice system, will make their own decisions on whether or not something is rape, regardless of how the laws appear. Situational and contextual aspects of the crime all too often interfere when decisions of arrests, trials, etc. of rapists are being made. Often, cases of rape that fit the legal

definition will go unprosecuted because those in charge of the case feel that the events are too “gray” for a conviction.

Men On Rape by Timothy Beneke was very helpful in understanding how rape is perceived and the affects of different perceptions of rape. Though his interviews with men from different sectors and classes of society, Beneke is able to explore what forms males’ opinions of rape and what they think of different rape laws. Particularly helpful were in Beneke’s interviews with prosecutors and police officers. Through these interviews, it is revealed how these law officials, in the 1980’s, viewed rape laws and how they enforced those laws. These officials, while feeling great sympathy for female victims, stated that they will not make an arrest or bring to trial ambiguous rapes. These rapes included many date rapes, in which there is no collaboration or evidence of attack. The general consensus is that it is too easy for a woman to cry rape. Because of this, all reported rapes must be taken gingerly, and with a grain of salt.

In Beneke’s research, it is also revealed that, in terms of rape, men are confused. Many know that it is wrong, but will make excuses for it along the lines of, “she was asking for it.” Many felt that they were capable of rape. In addition to this, law officials would often use their own ideas of what rape was to decide when and how to proceed in rape cases. One prosecutor even dismissed the notion of marital rape entirely, wondering “where’s the horror? Where’s the shame? (Beneke, 112).” The same DA wishes that the marital rape laws had never been passed. However, he (like many other interviewees) said that, should any female in his family or acquaintance be raped, he would take severe action. These ideas on rape show how “gray” the subject is- there is no consensus, even within the individual mind.

The confusion extends beyond just men, however. And it extends throughout history. In Sex Without Consent: Rape and Sexual Coercion in America , edited by Merrill Smith, a compilation of essays shows the evolution of how rape is perceived. Looking through America's history, this book shows that rape has always been a complicated crime. No one has ever known exactly what is and is not rape, and the ideas are always changing. It also shows that "blame the victim" is not a new phenomenon. This book also deals with the idea that some rapes are given more importance. Rapes of white women by black men are considered to be much worse than any other rape. Black women raped by black men tend to be of little importance, even within the black community. Through the evolutionary look at rape, one is able to see how far the United States has come in terms of what it calls rape. However, it also shows how much further there is to still go.

Extenuating circumstances can and do have a profound influence. Though society as a whole has moved away from blaming the victim in regards to how she is dressed or where she was and at what time, there are times when society seems to feel that the victim was at some fault. Ideas about what constitutes date rape fall into this category. People are just not clear in their own minds to when rape is possible. These areas make rape and its prosecution very complicated.

Date rape can be studied best within college communities because of both the nature of college campuses and the nature of date rape. A time of frequent dating and going out, college campuses are situations which can easily lead to date rape. However, many students and administrators are not clear to just what is date rape. Is it rape when the girl invites the guy into her dorm room? How can rape occur in crowded residents

halls where a scream will bring help running. Because of questions like these, date rape is difficult to prosecute and prove.

Jodi Gold and Susan Villari look at how schools and students view and address rape and sexual assault in their book Just Sex: Students rewrite the Rules on Sex, Violence, Activism, and Equality. Through a series of essays, universities come under the microscope in how they deal with rape on campus. Some, such as Antioch in Ohio, were shown favorably for their institution of consent rules and openness to change. However, a majority of schools were found to be wanting in terms of how they deal or dealt with problems. Schools such as the College of William and Mary and Brown University were found to not be responsive to the needs of their students. Schools are never sure what the correct form of action should be, or whose rights they should be protecting. In most of the cases, the school chose to protect the male student over the female victim. This book showed just how gray the area of sexual assault and rape can be. No one knows who to believe or if what was described was really rape.

Marital rape, or rape within the marriage, is also a complicating aspect to rape. Though all states, as of July 5, 1993, now call marital rape a crime, the prosecution of such acts is different from other acts of rape. Thirty-three states still have prosecution exemptions for rapists who rape within the marriage. Some feel that these exemptions demonstrate that marital rape is not treated as seriously as other forms of rape, though marital rape does account for 25% of all rapes.

(<http://www.vaw.umn.edu/finaldocuments/Vawnet/mrape.htm>)

In Wife Rape: Understanding the Response of Survivors and Service Providers by Raquel Bergen, the author researches spousal rape. She finds that most women who are



marital raped are also beaten by their husbands. However, her research is biased as she uses data gathered at centers for abused women. Still, her recordings of interviews of rape victims is very helpful in showing the mentality of marital rape victims. She is able to show that most of these women suffer from severe psychological abuse, and often blame themselves for the rape and abuse. These women are not really capable of calling what happened to them rape, so how can society?

A further problem with rape is that it is one of the most underreported crimes. Some of this underreporting has to do with the fact that police and prosecutors, as discussed earlier, do not move forward with reported cases. However, there is a problem with rape statistics and the manner in which they are gathered. There are two main sources of crime data: the UCR (Uniform Crime Reports) published by the FBI, and the NCVS (National Crime and Victimization Survey). There have also been independent studies done, trying to get accurate rape statistics. However, all of these methods are plagued with problems which cause the numbers to be off.

UCRs are made up of data compiled by the FBI from statistics sent in from police departments all over the country. The problems with the UCR data is that it only includes rapes that are reported and where reports are actually filed. It is fairly typical for police to talk victims out of making reports, especially when the rape occurs between married couples or couples that are in some sort of relationship. Such occurrences make the UCR statistics on rape low.

NCVS statistics are also typically lower than the actual number of rapes that occur. This statistical model involves interviewing households on all crime that was committed against them in a certain time period. This survey includes incidents of

criminal victimization that is not reported to the police. However, the method of data collection, which is of interviewing the family together, keeps the numbers low. Some crimes, when brought up, will still not be discussed because the victim feels embarrassed or ashamed. Also, if the perpetrator of the crime is present, such as in cases of marital rape, the likelihood of the victim reporting the crime to the interviewer is slight. Also, if a member of the family is not around at the time of the interview, it is up to the other family members to report crimes committed against the absent family member. Often times, families will be unaware of sexual assault, etc, so they cannot report it.

Independent research is often just as flawed, usually because of the questions asked. The questions will be biased or unclear, causing those being surveyed to answer affirmatively when they do not mean to do so. One such study, conducted by Koss, used questions in this manner. Her findings, based on these flawed research questions, showed that one out of four women will be raped. However, this is because she asked misleading questions in regards to drinking and having sex. Many of the women who answered yes to this question were counted as being raped though the “victims” themselves did not believe they had ever been raped. (Sommers, <http://www.leaderu.com/real/ri9502/sommers.html> ).

While rape statistics are difficult to obtain, it is even more difficult to obtain statistics on date and marital rape. Because both are so underreported, and even less likely to be talked about than stranger rape, the numbers of such rapes is also far lower than it should be. In terms of marital rape, most rapes are not reported unless there are extenuating circumstances. Oftentimes, these circumstances come in the form of escaping abusive relationships and staying at shelters. Because of this, the correlation

between women who are raped by their husbands and women who are abused by their husbands is quite high (Bergen). However, this correlation could be illusory, because of the nature of how the statistics are collected.

When dealing with date and marital rape, statistics are also low. Those suffering from these forms of rape have the same problems as women who are stranger raped. However, unlike with stranger rape, women who are raped by an acquaintance or spouse are blamed for what happened. Cultural norms protect males in these instances. These rapes are usually the areas that are the most “gray.” People are not sure what does and does not constitute rape in these situations. Is it rape if the woman says “no” over and over, but finally gives in? What if they have had sex before? What if they have children together? What if, in the course of making out, the woman changes her mind? If heavy petting is involved, is it still permissible to say “no?” These questions, and more, make this area of rape more confusing and ambiguous than any other offense.

#### Research Proposal:

For my honors thesis, I propose to use focus groups, interviews, and content analysis to discover the prevalence of rape scenes in romance novels and the effect that romance novels have on rape perceptions.

Content Analysis: Using the form at the end of this paper, I will read the best-selling romances for August 2000, 2001, and 2002. I will read the best-sellers from these time periods as it is a high travel month in terms of vacation, so people would have bought books for “fun reading” during this time. The books I would use would be single-title romances, as those were read by 37% of all romance readers in 2002, while only

18% of romance readers read only series romance. Therefore, by using these titles in August, one can get an idea of what is popular in terms of romances, and what is typical for the romances.

In terms of the romance books themselves, I will analyze their scenes of sexual intercourse in terms of what they say about sex. I will be looking at when the book takes place (what time period), what the relationship is between the victim and the perpetrator, whether the sexual encounter would be rape and, if so, the circumstances surrounding the rape. It is also important to examine what the outcome of the rape is. Do the victim and rapist end up in love? What is the level of resistance?

Once the content analysis has been gathered, it will be compiled into sub-genres, to better understand when (in what time periods, situations, attackers) rape is permissible within romance novels. This compilation will demonstrate what romance novels are saying about rape and sex. And, by understanding the message that the romance novels contain, it will be easier to identify the effect romance novels have on their readers. If romance readers parrot the idea of “rape leading to love” that appear in romance novels, while non-romance readers do not exposit this idea, it will show that romance novels are influencing the opinions of their readers. By understanding that there is such an influence, and the nature of that influence, it will become easier to circumvent those attitudes.

Surveys/Focus Groups: A series of focus groups and surveys will be conducted, so as to understand several aspects of romance novels and their affects on rape.

Using existing reading groups at local Barnes and Nobles (such as the romance group at the Richmond store) and repeat romance buyers (found by advertising for

romance readers at bookstores) and possibly Internet sites devoted to romance readers, I will conduct research into how rape is perceived by romance readers. To achieve this aim, I will conduct focus groups with two different groups of people: those who read general fiction, etc. (called non-romance readers) and those who read mainly/only romances (known as romance readers). Each of the focus groups will meet and be asked the same type of questions (though the romance groups will be asked what they look for in romances/like or dislike/etc., while non-romance groups will be asked what they think of romances/what they expect to find in romances/etc.). The focus groups will be asked questions on not only what they look for/expect to find in romance novels, but also on their ideas about rape. Then, each of the groups will be given the same four rape vignettes (see attached paper for samples of vignettes) and asked a series of questions on them, such as “was this rape?” “what, if anything, could the woman have done differently?” etc. The vignettes will deal only with spousal or acquaintance rape as most people will feel exactly the same about stranger rape being wrong. Spousal and acquaintance rape, as being “grayer” than stranger rape, will illicit more discussion. Also, the rape that occurs in romance novels is typically between the hero and heroine, thereby making it acquaintance or marital rape.

A focus group approach was chosen for this section of the research because it will lead to greater detail in how people respond to the vignettes. Because the nature of the project is to measure perceptions of rape, it is important to gather as much response as possible. Surveys might not achieve the level of response that is desired.

I would expect that, because of the nature of romance novels, romance readers will look more leniently upon rape. Romance novels tend to have the victim fall in love

with her rapist, or end up enjoying the rape. This would cause rape to appear less horrible than it truly is. Those who do not read romances would be less likely to “romanticize” rape.

The focus groups would be further split in an attempt to see how age affects perceptions. The two sets of focus groups, romance vs. non-romance, would be broken down into age brackets. One age bracket would be 21-30 year olds and the other would be 40-50 year olds. 63% of all romance readers are between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-four. By breaking down the ages in this manner, one will be able to get a better idea of what role age plays in this equation. So, in total, there will be four focus groups, divided by type of readership and age.

Just in terms of age, I had initially thought to find that younger people would be more likely to call something “rape” because of the change in cultural norms regarding gender. However, after testing the focus group on a 23-year old married female, I have changed my hypothesis. I predict that both groups will answer about the same thing- that the situations in question are not clearly rape. However, the reasoning behind these answers will be different. Younger females will feel that women need to be more assertive in claiming their rights. They must say no and take action to support their decision. Older women will be more likely to fall into the “women’s place” and “boys will be boys” arguments. The girls are not raped because they should have known better than to behave as they did, and boys cannot control themselves. I don’t think we will see so much a change in what is called rape as we will see a change in WHY something is or is not rape.

Possible Extras: It may become necessary to interview law professionals, to get a feeling for how rape is perceived by the legal profession today. Also, as the research being conducted does have relevance to how cases are tried (if you know that romance novels make jurors more likely to blame the victim or not find that the victim is raped, a lawyer can adjust tactics or jury selection to address the problem), it might be interesting to see what legal professionals have to say about the findings achieved.