
Romance Fiction: At the Frontline of Digital Publishing

Marina Stavropoulou

Abstract

Romance fiction is one of the leading genres of fiction in digital publishing. Its huge and tech savvy audience means that sales are driven by technologically literate readers. Through this paper the author attempts to answer why does this genre seems to pave the way for other genres in terms of digital innovation and evolution. We can surmise why the e-book format is preferred by romance readers over print volumes. How is it that content can determine the way a book is consumed? A definition of the power reader this genre attracts and how they drive not only sales but also the way the books they consume are published. The rest of the article is concerned with the rise of online digital publishing and self-publishing options for romance authors, as well as a brief history of Harlequin publishing company and how it was affected by the digital revolution.

Keywords: Romance genre fiction: digital revolution; digital publishing; reading behaviour.

Introduction

Romance Fiction is one of the most popular genres in fiction today and one of the top selling in the e-book market. With a share of 39% of the market, romance is beating adult fiction's 34%.

Romance was always a leader in genre fiction, in the sense that its authors and readers always looked ahead for the next provocative, revolutionary "thing" in fiction. Romantic fiction of the 19th century was the origin of what we call today Fantasy; a genre that was once indiscernible from Romance.

Romance readers were early adopters of e-book reading, due to the high volume of reading they were consuming as well as the nature of the material. Romance covers are often more revealing than covers of literary fiction and other genres. E-reading devices allow for a certain discretion of the readers' personal reading choices and an ease of transport for thick volumes. There are also many more price incentives for buying e-books, promotions and discounts that allow for a cheaper read.

"Romance writers have led the ebook revolution" says Mark Coker, founder of the e-book distribution platform Smashwords. Most successful romance authors have started out as bloggers and self-published writers who then gained a following and recognition; which in turn landed them a deal in traditional publishing.

The power readers

Romance has a robust and extremely loyal readership. Romance readers read more than one book per month, a whopping 35% of romance readers has been reading in the genre for twenty years or more (Romance Writers of America 2014).

The question of why romance is so popular is complex and multifaceted. Readers reveal that this practice lets them relax and escape their reality. One could argue that is the goal of fiction in general, be it realistic, magical realism, fantasy and science fiction, or any of the other genres. One prevalent characteristic of romance, though, is the promised and always delivered happy ending. According to the Smithsonian reader's group, the "escape" is meant both figuratively and literally (Radway 1983).

Romance readers are natural natives of contemporary online mediums, be it social networks, blogs, fora and other new media platforms where they instigate vibrant communities that traditional publishers are struggling to replicate and exploit. Initiatives like the *Popular Romance Project* are indicative of the need for a concentrated reading community.

These reader-led communities are driving sales by the millions; this is where authors become known and where the readers demand more of the content they love. "Romance fans are real fans. They feel like the author is a friend and they feel like they are part of a community. They want to feel connected, and social media has completely allowed us to do that," said Amy Pierpont, Editor in Chief of Forever/Forever Yours – a digital only publisher (Barber 2011).

Romance Fiction has a long tradition of cheap paperback editions, a practice that transferred seamlessly in digital publishing as well. While brick and mortar bookstores still dominate the purchasing place of choice for most readers, romance readers have been quick to adopt e-reading as a practice and the advantages it has to offer.

Recent experimental models of book publishing have offered a revolutionary way for romance readers to enjoy their favourite pastime. Subscription models such as Scribd and Oyster – now sold to Google Books – offer an "all you can read" mode of consuming similar to what Netflix does for movies and TV shows. Romance readers took to the model with such gusto that Scribd was forced to change the company's policy concerning romance novels. "Dramatic cuts to [Scribd's] catalog of romance and erotica titles," said Mark Coker (Anderson, 2015). Romance readers were consuming such a huge amount of "free" titles that it no longer was viable for the company to sustain the catalogue. The model changed for all subscribers to three e-book titles and one audiobook a month, so as to minimize the risk of "power readers".

According to the 2013 BISG (Book Industry Study Group) report on *Consumer Attitudes Towards Ebook Reading*, the genre in which most readers prefer the digital over the print version of the same book is by far romance. The question asked was "For those genres you like to read, please indicate whether you prefer to read them in print or in ebook form" (Perry 2013).

Readers that tend to prefer the e-book format over print, usually they do not care for the collecting value of that specific book. The rate with which romance readers consume volumes of romances does not allow for the accumulating practice of storing books on bookshelves.

They treat their books as content containers and, once consumed, they move onto the next. These books are for easy and quick consumption not for a repeated read, books that one would pay for a collector's edition to keep on their living room bookcase.

Online publishing and self-publishing options

The serialised nature of Romance fiction has allowed for many authors to make their writing careers online. Publishing more than one book a year – which is the standard model of publishing in traditional publishing houses – allows the author to become known and remembered in this very social reading community.

Current practices allow authors to self-publish with relative ease without necessarily compromising the quality of the finished work. Kindle Direct Publishing is a program of retailer mega-giant Amazon, allowing for direct independent publishing of e-books to be directly distributed on the retailer's website. They offer great royalties – 70% – and can actually deliver great reach to an international audience. Despite the fact that Amazon has founded its own imprints – in essence becoming themselves part of the traditional publishing sector – the company offers to eliminate the middleman and give the power back to authors.

Other digital publishing solutions include e-book distributor Smashwords, e-book solutions BookBaby, online social publishing platform Wattpad and many more. An author could also self-publish and distribute on digital publisher Kobo's platform and Apple's iBookstore, and Nook Press – for American authors only. Wattpad in particular is an interesting case since it is a non-profit platform where readers can consume as many stories as they want without adhering to a payment plan. It is a social authoring platform which unknown writers use so as to become known and gain a following.

While traditional or trade publishing might offer authors prestige, validation and a certain amount of "stability", independent self-publishing offers the certainty of one's own command of their fate. Independent authors can make all editorial decisions, decide on the cover, blurb,

price and format of the book. What is more no publisher can determine the “worth” of a writer by deciding on publishing their book or not. This decision rests solely on the readers’ shoulders.

One of the great problems of self-publishing is the established distribution network they lack. Traditional publishers have standing agreements and deals with several distributing channels that permit them to have their list of books in most bookstores. Self-published authors have rarely that opportunity, they usually use print on demand solutions and they try to distribute their books themselves at local bookstores. There are of course some limited options for indie authors like Ingram Spark, a self-publishing company for print and digital manufacture and distribution. This is where digital publishing works to their favour. A digital copy can have instant global reach and, while this is true for traditional publishers as well, an indie author can publish anytime anywhere without the limitations the different book markets have posed to book publishers (Penn 2016).

Romance has been especially successful and lucrative for independent self-published authors. Romance readers seem to relish the thought of sampling new and excitingly “juicy” romances, not needing the approval of a publisher to assess a book’s worth according to their preferences.

Harlequin: the definitive romance fiction publisher

Harlequin was founded in 1949 in Canada: a publishing company that specialises in serialised romance and women’s fiction. They started out as a paperback reprinting company, publishing a wide range of books at a low price. They were publishing authors like Agatha Christie and Somerset Maugham. In 1954, under the direction of Mary Bonnycastle, the company started printing titles by the British romance publisher Mills and Boon. In 1971 Harlequin purchased Mills and Boon. In 2014 the company came under the direction of News Corp, parent company to publishing company HarperCollins.

Harlequin was one of the publishers that defined the romance genre at the turn of the century. The company has been at the frontline of revolutionizing romance and moving it forward to a contemporary reading experience. On a second level, they were among the first to embrace the digital publishing revolution and ride the e-book bandwagon. "At Harlequin, for years one of the things we really focused on is providing books to women wherever and whenever they want to shop. Women are so busy already that not having to make a separate trip was a great way for them to buy our books," said Donna Hayes, former Harlequin CEO (Barber 2011).

Carina Press is a digital first imprint by Harlequin that publishes single title adult fiction in the subgenres of contemporary romance, erotic romance, LGBT fiction, New Adult, mystery, science-fiction romance, fantasy romance – to name a few. With this imprint Harlequin attempted to imitate the success of online self-publishing platforms and regain a host of new authors of contemporary romance that seem to prefer their independence.

In recent years, Harlequin seems to be in trouble. As print sales dipped e-book sales have also failed to make up for the loss. The main trouble for the publisher – aside from other competing publishing houses and imprints – occurs due to the rise of self-published romance titles that keep appearing on best seller lists week after week (Greenfield 2013).

"A combination of weaker revenues, higher digital royalty rates and negative foreign exchange impact contributed to the decline in Harlequin results," said David Holland, president and CEO of Torstar – parent of Harlequin (Marketwire 2013). Harlequin seems to be losing the digital publishing to more independent and innovative venues of publishing. In combination with the higher royalties they now have to pay – due to the class action settlement that was approved this spring (Albanese 2016) – and the newly found popularity of online self-publishing solutions, the company has a lot of ground to cover if they want to return to their former glory in the field.

It remains to be seen if the 2014 acquisition of Harlequin by conglomerate Harper Collins will be the starting point of a new era of success for the genre publisher. Following the reader

friendly attitude of Harlequin, Harper Collins might just be what the small publisher needed. Proper structure and funding to thrive but also editorial leeway so they can continue to deliver what their audience expects.

Conclusion

E-books are changing the way we read, the time it takes a reader to finish a book, the price range in which we are willing to purchase, the kind of content we consume. In this ever changing environment romance fiction seems to thrive, albeit not to the liking of traditional book publishers.

Although print does not seem to be abandoning the spotlight soon, romance fiction is the definitive leader in readers' digital reading preferences. We have seen how a vibrant reading community can change the format and method of output for a whole genre. Now that self-publishing has been distanced from the notion of vanity publishing, readers are more accepting and have started to trust independent authors. They realise what traditional publishers refuse to concede: that the approval of a publisher does not instantly equal quality; nor does the lack of it signal the loss of quality. Good books can be found in all categories, and the same is true with bad books as well.

Romance has always been at the bottom of the barrel called fiction. It is often quoted as the genre that readers of literary fiction – or “serious” fiction as it is sometimes called” – have never even tried. Despite its reputation though romance is still thriving, continues to dominate the most popular books lists and to lead the way into the digital era of publishing.

A genre which was often criticized for its misogynistic depictions of women and men, romance nevertheless has obviously helped a lot of women live vicariously through romantic heroines they felt close to: “she identifies with and lives through the heroine, but also because, in the act of reading, her own consciousness is held in an environment that is the mind and psyche of the author, embodied in the text” (Juhasz 1988).

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