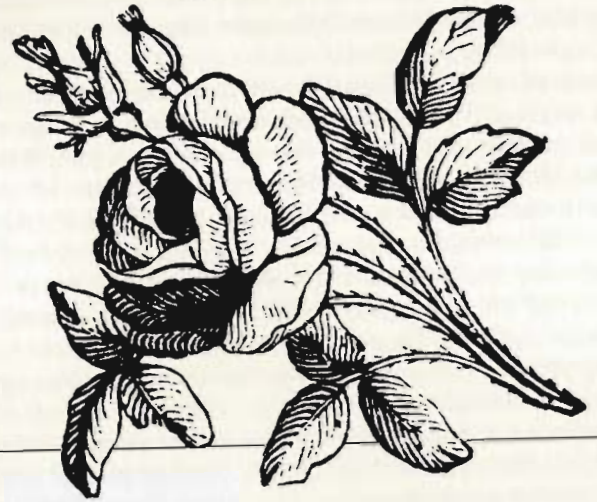
T W O

The Readers and Their Romances



Surrounded by corn and hay fields, the midwestern community of Smithton, with its meticulously tended subdivisions of single-family homes, is nearly two thousand miles from the glass-and-steel office towers of New York City where most of the American publishing industry is housed. Despite the distance separating the two communities, many of the books readied for publication in New York by young women with master's degrees in literature are eagerly read in Smithton family rooms by women who find quiet moments to read in days devoted almost wholly to the care of others. Although Smithton's women are not pleased by every romance prepared for them by New York editors, with Dorothy Evans's help they have learned to circumvent the industry's still inexact understanding of what women want from romance fiction. They have managed to do so by learning to decode the iconography of romantic cover art and the jargon of back-cover blurbs and by repeatedly selecting works by authors who have pleased them in the past.

In fact, it is precisely because a fundamental lack of trust initially characterized the relationship between Smithton's romance readers and the New York publishers that Dorothy Evans was able to amass this loyal following of customers. Her willingness to give advice so endeared her to women bewildered by the increasing romance output of the New York houses in

the 1970s that they returned again and again to her checkout counter to consult her about the "best buys" of the month. When she began writing her review newsletter for bookstores and editors, she did so because she felt other readers might find her "expert" advice useful in trying to select romance fiction. She was so successful at developing a national reputation that New York editors began to send her galley proofs of their latest titles to guarantee their books a review in her newsletter. She now also obligingly reads manuscripts for several well-known authors who have begun to seek her advice and support. Although her status in the industry does not necessarily guarantee the representivity of her opinions or those of her customers, it does suggest that some writers and editors believe that she is not only closely attuned to the romance audience's desires and needs but is especially able to articulate them. It should not be surprising to note, therefore, that she proved a willing, careful, and consistently perceptive informant.

I first wrote to Dot in December 1979 to ask whether she would be willing to talk about romances and her evaluative criteria. I asked further if she thought some of her customers might discuss their reading with someone who was interested in what they liked and why. In an open and enthusiastic reply, she said she would be glad to host a series of interviews and meetings in her home during her summer vacation. At first taken aback by such generosity, I soon learned that Dot's unconscious magnanimity is a product of a genuine interest in people. When I could not secure a hotel room for the first night of my planned visit to Smithton, she insisted that I stay with her. I would be able to recognize her at the airport, she assured me, because she would be wearing a lavender pants suit.

The trepidation I felt upon embarking for Smithton slowly dissipated on the drive from the airport as Dot talked freely and fluently about the romances that were clearly an important part of her life. When she explained the schedule of discussions and interviews she had established for the next week, it seemed clear that my time in Smithton would prove enjoyable and busy as well as productive. My concern about whether I could persuade Dot's customers to elaborate honestly about their motives for reading was unwarranted, for after an initial period of mutually felt awkwardness, we conversed frankly and with enthusiasm. Dot helped immensely, for when she introduced me to her customers, she announced, "Jan is just people!" Although it became clear that the women were not accustomed to examining their activity in any detail, they conscientiously tried to put their perceptions and judgments into words to help me understand why they find romance fiction enjoyable and useful.

During the first week I conducted two four-hour discussion sessions with a total of sixteen of Dot's most regular customers. After she in-

formed them of my interest, they had all volunteered to participate. About six more wanted to attend but were away on family vacations. These first discussions were open-ended sessions characterized by general questions posed to the group at large (see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule). In the beginning, timidity seemed to hamper the responses as each reader took turns answering each question. When everyone relaxed, however, the conversation flowed more naturally as the participants disagreed among themselves, contradicted one another, and delightedly discovered that they still agreed about many things. Both sessions were tape-recorded. I also conducted individual taped interviews with five of Dot's most articulate and enthusiastic romance readers. In addition, I talked informally to Dot alone for hours at odd times during the day and interviewed her more formally on five separate occasions. Along with twenty-five others approached by Dot herself at the bookstore, these sixteen all filled out a pilot questionnaire designed before I had departed from Philadelphia (see Appendix 2).

Upon returning from my visit to Smithton, I read as many of the specific titles mentioned during the discussions and interviews that I could acquire, transcribed the tapes, and expanded a field-work journal I had kept while away. In reviewing all of the information and evaluations I had been given, it became clear that I had neither anticipated all of the potentially meaningful questions that might be asked nor had I always included the best potential answers for the directed-response questions. Accordingly, I redesigned the entire questionnaire and mailed fifty copies to Dot in mid-autumn of 1980 (see Appendix 3). I asked her to give the questionnaire to her "regular" customers (those who she recognized and had advised more than once about romance purchases) and to give no additional directions other than those on the questionnaire and in an attached explanatory letter. She returned forty-two completed questionnaires to me in early February 1981, during my second sojourn in Smithton.

At that time, I stayed with Dot and her family for a week, watched her daily routine, and talked with her constantly. I also spent three full days at the bookstore observing her interactions with her customers and conversing informally with them myself. I reinterviewed the same five readers during this period, checked points about which I was uneasy, and tested the hypotheses I had formulated already. I also talked at length with Maureen, one of Dot's most forthright readers who had recently begun writing her own romances.

It is clear that the Smithton group cannot be thought of as a scientifically designed random sample. The conclusions drawn from the study, therefore, should be extrapolated only with great caution to apply to other romance readers. In fact, this study's propositions ought to be considered hypotheses that now must be tested systematically by looking at a much broader and unrelated group of romance readers. Despite the obvious limitations of the group, however, I decided initially to conduct the study for two reasons.

The first had to do with Dot's indisputable success and developing reputation on the national romance scene. The second was that the group was already self-selected and stably constituted. Dot's regular customers had continued to return to her for advice *because* they believed her perceptions accorded reasonably well with theirs. They had all learned to trust her judgment and to rely on her for assistance in choosing a varied array of romance reading material. They found this congenial because it freed all of them from the need to rely solely on a single "line" of books like the Harlequins that had recently begun to offend and irritate them. It also enabled them to take back some measure of control from the publishers by selectively choosing only those books they had reason to suspect would satisfy their desires and needs. Although there are important variations in taste and habit within the Smithton group, all of the women agree that their preferences are adequately codified by Dorothy Evans.

The nature of the group's operation suggests that it is unsatisfactory for an analyst to select a sample of romances currently issued by American publishers, draw conclusions about the meaning of the form by analyzing the plots of the books in the sample, and then make general statements about the cultural significance of the "romance." Despite the industry's growing reliance on the techniques of semiprogrammed issue to reduce the disjunction between readers' desires and publishers' commodities, the production system is still characterized by a fundamental distance between the originators, producers, and consumers of the fantasies embodied in those romances. Consequently, it must be kept in mind that the people who read romance novels are *not* attending to stories they themselves have created to interpret their own experiences. Because the shift to professional production has reduced self-storytelling substantially, there is no sure way to know whether the narratives consumed by an anonymous public are in any way congruent with those they would have created for themselves and their peers had they not been able to buy them.

Although repeated purchase and consumption of a professionally produced and mass-marketed commodity hints that some kind of audience satisfaction has been achieved, this is not a guarantee that each individual text's interpretation of experience is endorsed by all buyers. In fact, what the Smithton group makes clear is that its members continue to possess very particular tastes in romance fiction that are not adequately addressed by publishers. However, because these corporations have designed their products to appeal to a huge audience by meeting the few preferences that all individuals within the group have in common, they have successfully

managed to create texts that are minimally acceptable to Dot and her readers. Moreover, because the Smithton women feel an admittedly intense need to indulge in the romantic fantasy and, for the most part, cannot fulfill that need with their own imaginative activity, they often buy and read books they do not really like or fully endorse. As one reader explained, "Sometimes even a bad book is better than nothing." The act of purchase, then, does not always signify approval of the product selected; with a mass-production system it can just as easily testify to the existence of an ongoing, still only partially met, need.

Precisely because romance publishers have not engineered a perfect fit between the product they offer and all of their readers' desires, the Smithton women have discovered that their tastes are better served when the exchange process is mediated by a trusted selector who assembles a more suitable body of texts from which they can safely make their choices. This particular reliance on a mediator to guide the process of selection suggests that to understand what the romance means, it is first essential to characterize the different groups that find it meaningful and then to determine what each group identifies as its "romance" before attempting any assessment of the significance of the form. Despite the overtly formulaic appearance of the category, there are important differences among novels *for those who read them* that prompt individual decisions to reject or to read. We must begin to recognize this fact of selection within the mass-production process, make some effort to comprehend the principles governing such selection, and describe the content that gives rise to those principles.[1] The Smithton women comprise only one small, relatively homogeneous group that happens to read romances in a determinate way. While their preferences may be representative of those held by women similar to them in demographic characteristics and daily routine, it is not fair to assume that they use romance fiction in the same way as do women of different background, education, and social circumstance. Conclusions about the romance's meaning for highly educated women who work in male-dominated professions, for instance, must await further study.

The reading habits and preferences of the Smithton women are complexly tied to their daily routines, which are themselves a function of education, social role, and class position. Most Smithton readers are married mothers of children, living in single-family homes in a sprawling suburb of a central midwestern state's second largest city (population 850,000 in 1970).[2] Its surrounding cornfields notwithstanding, Smithton itself is an urbanized area. Its 1970 population, which was close to 112,000 inhabitants, represented a 70 percent increase over that recorded by the 1960 census. The community is essentially a "bedroom" community in that roughly 90 percent of those employed in 1970 worked outside Smithton itself. Although this has changed slightly in recent years with the

building of the mall in which Dot herself works, the city is still largely residential and dominated by single-family homes, which account for 90 to 95 percent of the housing stock.

Dot and her family live on the fringe of one of Smithton's new housing developments in a large, split-level home. When I last visited Smithton, Dot, her husband, Dan, her eldest daughter, Kit, and her mother were living in the house, which is decorated with Dot's needlework and crafts, projects she enjoyed when her children were young. Dot's other two children, Dawn, who is nineteen and married, and Joe, who is twenty-one, do not live with the family. Dot herself was forty-eight years old at the time of the study. Dan, a journeyman plumber, seems both bemused by Dot's complete absorption in romances and proud of her success at the bookstore. Although he occasionally reads thrillers and some nonfiction, he spends his leisure time with fellow union members or working about the house.

Although she is now a self-confident and capable woman, Dot believes she was once very different. She claims that she has changed substantially in recent years, a change she attributes to her reading and her work with people in the bookstore. When asked how she first began reading romances, she responded that it was really at her doctor's instigation. Although he did not suggest reading specifically, he advised her about fifteen years ago that she needed to find an enjoyable leisure activity to which she could devote at least an hour a day. He was concerned about her physical and mental exhaustion, apparently brought on by her conscientious and diligent efforts to care for her husband, three small children, and her home. When he asked her what she did for herself all day and she could list *only* the tasks she performed for others, he insisted that she learn to spend some time on herself if she did not want to land in a hospital. Remembering that she loved to read as a child, she decided to try again. Thus began her interest in romance fiction. Dot read many kinds of books at first, but she soon began to concentrate on romances for reasons she cannot now explain. Her reading became so chronic that when she discovered that she could not rely on a single shop to provide all of the latest releases by her favorite authors, she found it necessary to check four different bookstores to get all of the romances she wanted. Most of her customers commented that before they discovered Dot they did the same thing. Some still attend garage sales and flea markets religiously to find out-of-print books by authors whose more recent works they have enjoyed.

Dot would have continued as one of the legion of "silent" readers had not one of her daughters encouraged her to look for a job in a bookstore to make use of her developing expertise. Although hesitant about moving out into the public world, she eventually mustered the courage to try, soon finding employment at the chain outlet where she still works. She

discovered that she thoroughly enjoyed the contact with other "readers," and, as she developed more confidence, she began to make suggestions and selections for uncertain buyers. In the first edition of her newsletter, she explained the subsequent events that led to the creation of her romance review:

> Soon it became apparent that the women who were regular customers were searching me out for my opinions on their selections. Also, the Area Supervisor of our store had noticed a sharply marked increase in sales of the general category of romances. . . . So the interviews and articles in . . . periodicals began and brought more attention to my socalled expertise.
>
> The idea for a newsletter and rating of new releases every month . . . belongs to my daughter, who felt we could make this available to a much larger group of women readers. As most of them know the prices of books are rising and the covers are not always a good indicator of the content of the book.[3]

With the help of her daughter, Kit, she planned, executed, and wrote the first edition of "Dorothy's Diary of Romance Reading," in April 1980. Despite reservations about taking up the role of critical mediator, she explained in her inaugural editorial that she was persuaded to such an authoritarian act by the intensity of her customers' needs and by the inability of the production system to meet them. "I know many women," she commented, "who need to read as an escape as I have over the years and I believe this is good therapy and much cheaper than tranquilizers, alcohol or addictive T.V. serials which most of my readers say bores them." She added that she intended to separate "the best or better books from the less wellwritten, so as to save the reader money and time." "However," she concluded, "I would never want to take from the ladies the right to choose their own reading materials, only to suggest from my own experience."[4]

Still conscious of the hierarchy implicit in the critic-consumer relationship, Dot continues to be careful about offering evaluative suggestions at the store. Her first question to a woman who solicits her advice is calculated to determine the kinds of romances the reader has enjoyed in the past. "If they are in my category," she explained in one of our interviews, "I start saying, 'OK, what was the last good book you read?' And then if they tell me that, I usually can go from there." Her services, like semiprogrammed publication techniques, are designed to gauge already formulated but not fully expressed reader preferences, which she subsequently attempts to satisfy by selecting the proper material from a much larger corpus of published works. Dot can be more successful than distant publishing firms attempting the same service through market research

because she personalizes selection at the moment of purchase in a way that the absent publishers cannot.

Dot's unusual success is a function of her participant's understanding of the different kinds of romances, acquired as the consequence of her voracious reading, and of her insistence on the individuality of her readers and their preferences. This is especially evident at the stage in her advising process when she finally displays a selection of books for her customers. "Sometimes," she laments, "I have people who say, 'Well, which one do *you* say is the best of these three?'" Her response indicates the depth of her respect for the singularity of readers and romances despite the fact that those readers are usually thought of as category readers and the romances considered formulaic performances:

> I will say, "They are not alike, they are not written by the same author, they are totally and completely different settings and I cannot say you will like this one better than this one because they are totally and completely different books." [But they always continue with] "Which one did you like best?" And I'll say, "Don't try to pin me down like that because it's not right." I won't go any further. They have to choose from there because otherwise you're getting sheep. See, I like it when some of my women say, "Hey, I didn't care for that book." And I say, "Hey, how come?"[5]

Because Dot is ever mindful of her readers' dissatisfaction with some of the material flowing from the New York publishers and simultaneously aware of their desire to maintain and satisfy their own personal tastes, she has created a role for herself by facilitating a commercial exchange that benefits the reader as much as it does the producer. At the same time, Dot continues to perpetuate generic distinctions within a category that the publishers themselves are trying to rationalize and standardize. Hers is a strategy which, if not consciously calculated to empower readers with a selective ability, at least tends to operate in that way. By carefully identifying a book's particular historical setting, by relating the amount of sexually explicit description it contains, by describing its use of violence and cruelty, and by remarking about its portrayal of the heroine/hero relationship, she alerts the reader to the book's treatment of the essential features that nearly all of her customers focus on in determining the quality of a romance.

In addition to recognizing individual tastes and respecting personal preferences, Dot also performs another essential function for her regular customers. Although I suspect she was not always as effective at this as she is now, she capably defends her readers' preferences for romance fiction *to themselves*. One would think this unnecessary because so many of her customers come to her expressly seeking romances, but Dot finds that

many of her women feel guilty about spending money on books that are regularly ridiculed by the media, their husbands, and their children. Dot encourages her customers to feel proud of their regular reading and provides them with a model of indignant response that they can draw upon when challenged by men who claim superior taste. By questioning them rhetorically about whether their romance reading is any different from their husbands' endless attention to televised sports, she demonstrates an effective rejoinder that can be used in the battle to defend the leisure pursuit they enjoy so much but which the larger culture condemns as frivolous and vaguely, if not explicitly, pornographic.

Dot's vociferous defense of her customers' right to please themselves in any way that does not harm others is an expression of her deeply held belief that women are too often the object of others' criticisms and the butt of unjustified ridicule. Although she is not a feminist as most would understand that term, she is perfectly aware that women have been dismissed by men for centuries, and she can and does converse eloquently on the subject. During my second stay in Smithton, she admitted to me that she understands very well why women have pushed for liberal abortion laws and remarked that even though her devoutly held religious convictions would prevent her from seeking one herself, she believes all women should have the right to *choose* motherhood and to control their own bodies. She also feels women should have the right to work and certainly should be paid equally with men. Many of our conversations were punctuated by her expressions of anger and resentment at the way women are constantly "put down" as childish, ignorant, and incapable of anything but housework or watching soap operas.

At first glance, Dot's incipient feminism seems deeply at odds with her interest in a literary form whose ultimate message, one astute observer has noted, is that "pleasure for women is men."[6] The traditionalism of romance fiction will not be denied here, but it is essential to point out that Dot and many of the writers and readers of romances interpret these stories as chronicles of female triumph. Although the particular way they do so will be explored later, suffice it to say here that Dot believes a good romance focuses on an intelligent and able heroine who finds a man who recognizes her special qualities and is capable of loving and caring for her as she wants to be loved. Thus Dot understands such an ending to say that female independence and marriage are compatible rather than mutually exclusive. The romances she most values and recommends for her readers are those with "strong," "fiery" heroines who are capable of "defying the hero," softening him, and showing him the value of loving and caring for another.

It is essential to introduce this here in order to take account adequately of Dot's personal influence on her customers and on their preferences in

romance fiction. Because she is an exceptionally strong woman convinced of her sex's capabilities, when she expresses her opinions about a woman's right to pleasure, Dot not only supports her customers but confers legitimacy on the preoccupation they share with her. I suspect that in providing this much-needed reinforcement Dot also exerts an important influence on them that must be taken into account. She encourages her customers to think well of themselves not only by demonstrating her interest in them and in their desires but also by presenting them with books whose heroines seem out of the ordinary. Therefore, while the members of the Smithton group share attitudes about good and bad romances that are similar to Dot's, it is impossible to say whether these opinions were formed by Dot or whether she is simply their most articulate advocate. Nonetheless, it must be emphasized that this group finds it possible to select and construct romances in such a way that their stories are experienced as a reversal of the oppression and emotional abandonment suffered by women in real life. For Dot and her customers, romances provide a utopian vision in which female individuality and a sense of self are shown to be compatible with nurturance and care by another.

All of the Smithton readers who answered the questionnaire were female. Dot reported that although she suspects some of the men who buy romances "for their wives" are in fact buying them for themselves, all of the people she regularly advises are women. While the few houses that have conducted market-research surveys will not give out exact figures, officials at Harlequin, Silhouette, and Fawcett have all indicated separately that the majority of romance readers are married women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty. Fred Kerner, Harlequin's vice-president for publishing, for instance, recently reported to Barbara Brotman, of the *Chicago Tribune*, that "Harlequin readers are overwhelmingly women of whom 49 percent work at least part-time. They range in age from 24 to 49, have average family incomes of $15,000–20,000 and have high school diplomas but haven't completed college."[7] Harlequin will reveal little else about its audience, but a company executive did tell Margaret Jensen that the Harlequin reading population matches the profile of the "North American English-speaking female population" in age, family income, employment status, and geographical location.[8] For example, he said that 22 percent of the female population and Harlequin readers are between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four. Carol Reo, publicity director for Silhouette Romances, has also revealed that the romance audience is almost entirely female, but indicates that 65 percent of Silhouette's potential market is under the age of forty and that 45 percent attended college.[9] If these sketchy details are accurate, the Smithton readers may be more representative of the Silhouette audience than they are of Harlequin's.[10] Unfortunately, the lack of detailed information about the total American audience

for Harlequins as well as for other kinds of romances makes it exceedingly difficult to judge the representivity of the Smithton group. Still, it appears evident that the Smithton readers are somewhat younger than either Jensen's Harlequin readers or the Mills and Boon audience.

The age differential may account for the fact that neither Dot nor many of her customers are Harlequin fans. Although Dot reviews Harlequins and slightly more than half of her customers (twenty-four) reported reading them, a full eighteen indicated that they *never* read a Harlequin romance. Moreover, only ten of Dot's customers indicated that Harlequins are among the kinds of romances they *most* like to read. The overwhelming preference of the group was for historicals, cited by twenty (48 percent) as their favorite subgenre within the romance category.[11] Because historicals typically include more explicit sex than the Harlequins and also tend to portray more independent and defiant heroines, we might expect that this particular subgenre would draw younger readers who are less offended by changing standards of gender behavior. This would seem to be corroborated by the fact that only two of the women who listed Harlequins as a favorite also listed historicals.

In addition, the Smithton group also seemed to like contemporary mystery romances and contemporary romances, which were cited by another twelve as being among their favorites. Silhouettes are contemporary romances and, like the historicals, are less conventional than the Harlequins. Not only is their sexual description more explicit but it is not unusual for them to include heroines with careers who expect to keep their jobs after marriage. The similarity between Smithton's tastes and the content of the Silhouettes may thus explain why both audiences are younger than that for the relatively staid Harlequins.

Despite the discrepancies in the various reports, romance reading apparently correlates strongly with the years of young adulthood and early middle age. This is further borne out in the present study by the Smithton women's responses to a question about when they first began to read romances. Although fifteen (36 percent) of the women reported that they began in adolescence between the ages of ten and nineteen, sixteen (38 percent) indicated that they picked up the habit between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine. Another ten (24 percent) adopted romance reading after age thirty.[12]

Thirty-two women (76 percent) in the Smithton group were married at the time of the survey, a proportion that compares almost exactly with the 75 percent of married women included in Jensen's group.[13] An additional three (7 percent) of the Smithton women were single, while five (12 percent) were either widowed, separated, or divorced and not remarried.

Moreover, most of the women in the Smithton group were mothers with children *under* age eighteen (70 percent). Indeed, within the group,

only five (12 percent) reported having no children at all. Nine (21 percent) of the Smithton women reported only one child, twelve (29 percent) claimed two children, eleven (27 percent) had three children, and three (7 percent) had four children. Interestingly enough, only five (12 percent) reported children under the age of five, while twenty-four of the women indicated that they had at least one child under age eighteen. Eleven (27 percent), however, reported that all of their children were over age eighteen. Fifteen (36 percent) reported children between ten and eighteen, and another fifteen (36 percent) had at least one child over age eighteen. The relatively advanced age of the Smithton readers' children is not surprising if one takes into account the age distribution of the women themselves and the fact that the mean age at first marriage within the group was 19.9 years.

Once again, the limited size of the sample and the lack of corroborating data from other sources suggest caution in the formation of hypotheses. Nonetheless, it appears that within the Smithton group romance reading correlates with motherhood and the care of children *other* than infants and toddlers.[14] This seems logical because the fact of the older children's attendance at school would allow the women greater time to read even as the children themselves continued to make heavy emotional demands on them for nurturance, advice, and attentive care. It will be seen later that it is precisely this emotional drain caused by a woman's duty to nurture and care for her children and husband that is addressed directly by romance reading at least within the minds of the women themselves.

Given the fact that fifteen (36 percent) of the Smithton readers reported children age ten and under, it should not be surprising to note that sixteen of the women (38 percent) reported that in the preceding week they were keeping house and/or caring for children on a full-time basis. Another nine (21 percent) were working part-time, while still another nine (21 percent) were holding down full-time jobs. In addition, two women failed to respond, two stated that they were retired, one listed herself as a student, and three indicated that they were currently unemployed and looking for work. These statistics seem to parallel those of the Mills and Boon study which found that 33 percent of the sample was represented by full-time housewives, while another 30 percent included housewives with full- or part-time jobs. Both studies suggest that romance reading is very often squeezed into busy daily schedules.

Although Fred Kerner's comment about the average $15,000–$20,000 income of the Harlequin audience is not very illuminating, neither is it at odds with the details reported by Dot's customers. Although four (10 percent) did not answer the question, eighteen (43 percent) in the group indicated a family income of somewhere between $15,000 and $24,999. Another fourteen (33 percent) claimed a joint income of $25,000 to $49,-

999, while four (10 percent) listed family earnings of over $50,000. The greater affluence of the Smithton group is probably accounted for by the fact that Dot's bookstore is located in one of the twelve most affluent counties in a state with 115. The median family income in Smithton, as reported by the 1970 United States census, was almost $11,000, which compares with the state median income of just slightly less than $9,000.

Before turning to the group's reading history and patterns, it should be noted that exactly half of the Smithton readers indicated that they had earned a high school diploma. Ten (24 percent) of the women reported completing less than three years of college; eight (19 percent) claimed at least a college degree or better. Only one person in the group indicated that she had not finished high school, while two failed to answer the question. Once again, as the Smithton readers appear to be more affluent than Harlequin readers, so also do they seem better educated; the Harlequin corporation claims that its readers are educated below even the statistical norm for the North American female population.

One final detail about the personal history of the Smithton women ought to be mentioned here: attendance at religious services was relatively high among Dot's customers. Although eight (19 percent) of the women indicated that they had not been to a service in the last two years, fifteen (36 percent) reported attendance "once a week or more," while another eight (19 percent) indicated attendance "once or a few times a month." Another nine (21 percent) admitted going to services a few times a year, while two (5 percent) did not answer the question. The women reported membership in a wide variety of denominations. Eight (19 percent) of the women indicated that they were Methodists and eight (19 percent) checked "Christian but non-denominational." The next two groups most heavily represented in the sample were Catholics and Baptists, each with five (12 percent) of the Smithton women.

When the reading *histories* of these women are examined, it becomes clear that, for many of them, romance reading is simply a variation in a pattern of leisure activity they began early in life. Indeed, twenty-two of Dot's customers reported that they first began to read for pleasure before age ten. Another twelve (27 percent) adopted the habit between the ages of eleven and twenty. Only seven (17 percent) of the Smithton women indicated that they began pleasure reading after their teen years. These results parallel earlier findings about the adoption of the book habit. Phillip Ennis found in 1965, for instance, that of the 49 percent of the American population who were "current readers," 34 percent consisted of those who started reading early in life and 15 percent consisted of those who began reading at an advanced age.[15]

When *current* reading habits are examined, however, it becomes clear that the women think that it is the romances that are especially necessary

to their daily routine. Their intense reliance on these books suggests strongly that they help to fulfill deeply felt psychological needs. Indeed, one of the most striking findings to come out of the Smithton study was that thirty-seven (88 percent) of Dot's readers indicated that they read religiously every day. Only five of her regular customers claimed to read more sporadically. Twenty-two of the women, in fact, reported reading more than sixteen hours per week, and another ten (24 percent) claimed to read between eleven and fifteen hours weekly.[16] When asked to describe their typical reading pattern once they have begun a new romance, eleven (26 percent) selected the statement, "I won't put it down until I've finished it unless it's absolutely necessary." Thirty more indicated reading "as much of it as I can until I'm interrupted or have something else to do." None of Dot's customers reported a systematic reading pattern of "a few pages a day until done," and only one admitted that she reads solely when she is in the mood. These figures suggest that the Smithton women become intensely involved in the stories they are reading and that once immersed in the romantic fantasy, Dot's customers do not like to return to reality without experiencing the resolution of the narrative.

This need to see the story and the emotions aroused by it resolved is so intense that many of the Smithton women have worked out an ingenious strategy to insure a regular and predictable arrival at the anticipated narrative conclusion. Although they categorize romances in several ways, one of the most basic distinctions they make is that between "quick reads" and "fat books." Quick reads contain less than 200 pages and require no more than two hours of reading time. Harlequins, Silhouettes, and most Regencies are considered quick reads for occasions when they know they will not be able to "make it through" a big book. If, for example, a woman has just finished one romance but still "is not ready to quit," as one of my informants put it, she will "grab a thin one" she knows she can finish before going to sleep. Fat books, on the other hand, tend to be saved for weekends or long evenings that promise to be uninterrupted, once again because the women dislike having to leave a story before it is concluded. This kind of uninterrupted reading is very highly valued within the Smithton group because it is associated with the pleasure of spending time alone.[17] Although a detailed exploration of the importance of this narrative and emotional resolution must be delayed until Chapter 4, where the structure of the romance story and its developing effect on the reader will be considered in detail, let it be said here that the Smithton readers' strategies for avoiding disruption or discontinuity in the story betoken a profound need to arrive at the *ending* of the tale and thus to achieve or acquire the emotional gratification they already can anticipate.

The remarkable extent of their familiarity with the genre is attested to by the number of romances these women read each week. Despite the fact

that twenty-six (62 percent) of Dot's customers claimed to read somewhere between one and four books *other* than romances every week, more than a third (fifteen) reported reading from five to nine romances weekly. An additional twenty-two (55 percent) completed between one and four romances every week, while four women indicated that they consume anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five romances during that same period of time. This latter figure strikes me as somewhat implausible because it implies a reading rate of one hundred romances a month. I think this is unlikely given the fact that far fewer romances were issued monthly by publishers at the time of the study. Of course, the women could be reading old romances, but the figure still seems exaggerated. Nonetheless, it is evident that Dot's customers read extraordinary amounts of romance fiction.

Although their chronic reading of these books might sound unusual or idiosyncratic, the Yankelovich findings about romance reading, as noted before, indicate that romance readers are generally heavy consumers. Most, however, are probably not as obsessed as the Smithton readers seem to be. Unfortunately, the Yankelovich discovery that the average romance reader had read nine romances in the last six months does not tell us what proportion of the group read an even larger number of novels. Although 40 percent of the heavy readers (those who had read more than twenty-five books in the last six months) reported having read a romance, thus suggesting the possibility of a correlation between high levels of consumption and romance reading, the study gives no indication of how many of the romance readers actually read anywhere near the number the Smithton women report, which ranges from twenty-four to more than six hundred romances every six months.[18] I think it safe to say that the Smithton group's reliance on romances is not strictly comparable to that of the occasional reader. Rather, Dot's customers are women who spend a significant portion of every day participating vicariously in a fantasy world that they willingly admit bears little resemblance to the one they actually inhabit. Clearly, the experience must provide some form of required pleasure and reconstitution because it seems unlikely that so much time and money would be spent on an activity that functioned merely to fill otherwise unoccupied time.

The women confirmed this in their answers to a directed-response question about their reasons for reading romance fiction. When asked to rank order the three most important motives for romance reading out of a list of eight, nineteen (45 percent) of the women listed "simple relaxation" as the first choice. Another eight (19 percent) of the readers reported that they read romances "because reading is just for me; it is my time." Still another six (14 percent) said they read "to learn about faraway places and times"; while five (12 percent) insisted that their primary reason is "to escape my daily problems." When these first choices are added to the second and third most important reasons for reading, the totals are distributed as in Table 2.1:

TABLE 2.1

Question: Which of the Following Best Describes Why You Read Romances?

a. To escape my daily problems	13
b. To learn about faraway places and times	19
c. For simple relaxation	33
d. Because I wish I had a romance like the heroine's	5
e. Because reading is just for me; it is my time	28
f. Because I like to read about the strong, virile heroes	4
g. Because reading is at least better than other forms of escape	5
h. Because romantic stories are never sad or depressing	10

On the basis of these schematic answers alone I think it logical to conclude that romance reading is valued by the Smithton women because the experience itself is *different* from ordinary existence. Not only is it a relaxing release from the tension produced by daily problems and responsibilities, but it creates a time or space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires, and pleasure. It is also a means of transportation or escape to the exotic or, again, to that which is different.

It is important to point out here that the responses to the second questionnaire are different in important ways from the answers I received from the women in the face-to-face interviews and in the first survey. At the time of my initial visit in June 1980, our conversations about their reasons for romance reading were dominated by the words "escape" and "education." Similarly, when asked by the first questionnaire to describe briefly what romances do "better" than other books available today, of the thirty-one answering the undirected question, fourteen of the first respondents *volunteered* that they like romance fiction because it allows them to "escape." It should be noted that "relaxation" was given only once as an answer, while no woman mentioned the idea of personal space.

Both answers *c* and *e* on the second form were given initially in the course of the interviews by two unusually articulate readers who elaborated more fully than most of the women on the meaning of the word "escape." They considered these two answers synonymous with it, but they also seemed to prefer the alternate responses because they did not so clearly imply a desire to avoid duties and responsibilities in the "real"

world. Although most of the other women settled for the word "escape" on the first questionnaire, they also liked their sister readers' terms better. Once these were introduced in the group interviews, the other women agreed that romance reading functions best as relaxation and as a time for self-indulgence. Because the switch seemed to hint at feelings of guilt, I decided to add the more acceptable choices to the second survey. Although both answers *c* and *e* also imply movement away from something distasteful in the real present to a somehow more satisfying universe, a feature that appears to testify to romance reading's principal function as a therapeutic release and as a provider of vicarious pleasure, the fact of the women's preference for these two terms over their first spontaneous response suggests again that the women harbor complex feelings about the worth and propriety of romance reading.[19]

The women provided additional proof of their reliance on romance reading as a kind of tranquilizer or restorative agent in their responses to questions about preferred reading times and the habit of rereading favorite romances. When asked to choose from among seven statements the one that best described their reading pattern, twenty-four (57 percent) eschewed specification of a particular time of day in order to select the more general assertion, "It's hard to say when I do most of my reading, since I read every chance I get." Another fourteen claimed to read mostly in the evenings, usually because days were occupied by employment outside the home. In the case of either pattern, however, romances are not picked up idly as an old magazine might be merely to fill otherwise unoccupied time. Rather, romance reading is considered so enjoyable and beneficial by the women that they deliberately work it into busy schedules as often and as consistently as they can.

Rereading is not only a widely practiced habit among the Smithton women but tends to occur most frequently during times of stress or depression. Three-fourths of Dot's customers reported that they reread favorite books either "sometimes" (twenty-one) or "often" (eleven). They do so, they explained in the interviews, when they feel sad or unhappy because they know exactly how the chosen book will affect their state of mind. Peter Mann similarly discovered that 46 percent of his Mills and Boon readers claimed to reread "very often," while another 38 percent reported repeat reading "now and then."[20] Unfortunately, he has provided no further information about why or when the women do so. Although it is possible that they may reread in order to savor the details of particular plots, it is clear that for the most part the Smithton women do not. For them, rereading is an activity engaged in expressly to lift the spirits. The following comment from one of the first questionnaires illustrates nicely the kind of correlation the Smithton women see between their daily needs and the effects of romance reading: "Romances are not depressing and

very seldom leave you feeling sad inside. When I read for enjoyment I want to be entertained and feel lifted out of my daily routine. And romances are the best type of reading for this effect. Romances also revive my usually optimistic outlook which often is very strained in day-to-day living." Although all of Dot's customers know well that most romances end happily, when their own needs seem unusually pressing they often refuse even the relatively safe gamble of beginning a new romance. Instead, they turn to a romance they have completed previously because they already know how its final resolution will affect them. Romance reading, it would seem, can be valued as much for the sameness of the response it evokes as for the variety of the adventures it promises.[21]

Interestingly enough, the Smithton readers hold contradictory opinions about the repetitious or formulaic quality of the fiction they read. On the one hand, they are reluctant to admit that the characters appearing in romances are similar. As Dot's daughter, Kit, explained when asked to describe a typical heroine in the historical romance, "there isn't a typical one, they all have to be different or you'd be reading the same thing over and over." Her sentiments were echoed frequently by her mother's customers, all of whom claim to value the variety and diversity of romance fiction.

On the other hand, these same women exhibit fairly rigid expectations about what is permissible in a romantic tale and express disappointment and outrage when those conventions are violated. In my first interview with Dot, she discussed a particular author who had submitted a historical novel to her publisher. Although the author explained repeatedly that the book was not a romance, the publisher insisted on packaging it with a standard romance cover in the hope of attracting the huge romance market. The author knew this would anger that audience and, as Dot remarked, "she was not surprised when she got irate letters." Clearly, romances may not deviate too significantly if regular readers are to be pleased. They expect and, indeed, rely upon certain events, characters, and progressions to provide the desired experience.

Dot herself often finds it necessary but difficult to overcome her customers' fixed expectations when she discovers a romance she thinks they will enjoy even though it fails to follow the usual pattern. In the case of *The Fulfillment*, for example, which Dot loved and wanted to share with her women, she worked out an entire speech to get them to buy the book and to read it through. The following is a verbatim transcription of her recreation of that speech: "Now this is a good book—but please don't think that it is the run of the mill. It isn't. At one point in this book, you're gonna want to put it down—and you're gonna say, 'Dot didn't tell me this'—and I said, 'Don't put it down. You keep reading.' Every one of them came back and said, 'You were right. I thought why did she give me

this book?' They said, 'I kept reading like you said and it was great.'" The problem with this particular book was the fact that the hero died three-quarters of the way through the tale. However, because the author had worked out an unusually complex plot involving the heroine simultaneously with another equally attractive man in an acceptable way, the women did not find her sudden remarriage distasteful. Without Dot's skillful encouragement, however, most of the women would never have read the book past the hero's death.

Dot also tries to circumvent set expectations in her newsletter. She occasionally tells booksellers and readers about books classified by their publishers as something other than a romance. Erroneous categorization occurs, she believes, because the publishers really do not understand what a romance is and thus pay too much attention to meaningless, superficial details that lead to mistaken identifications. Because Jacqueline Marten's *Visions of the Damned* suffered this fate, Dot attempted to alert her readers to the problem classification. Her way of doing so provides an essential clue to the proper identification of a romance, which the women rely on despite their claim that all romantic novels are different. Of Marten's story, she wrote, "This book, because of cover and title, was classed as an occult. What a mistake! *Visions* is one of the best love stories I've read of late. Get it and read it. I loved it."[22] Although *Visions of the Damned* concerns itself with extrasensory perception and reincarnation, Dot believes that the book's proper plot structure is what makes it a romance. It is not the mere use of the romantic subject matter that qualifies Marten's book as a romance, she explained, but rather its manner of developing the loving relationship. As Dot remarked in a later interview, "Not all love stories are romances." Some are simply novels about love.

If the Smithton readers' stipulations are taken seriously, a romance is, first and foremost, a story about a woman. That woman, however, may not figure in a larger plot simply as the hero's prize, as Jenny Cavileri does, for instance in Erich Segal's *Love Story*, which the Smithton readers claim is not a romance. To qualify as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one. Dot's customers insist that this need not be accomplished by telling the story solely from the heroine's point of view, although it is usually managed in this way. Although five of the women refuse to read first-person narratives because they want to be privy to the hero's thoughts and another ten indicate that they prefer to see both points of view, twenty-three of Dot's regular customers indicate that they have no preference about the identity of the narrator. However, all of the women I spoke to, regardless of their taste in narratives, admitted that they want to identify with the heroine as she attempts to comprehend, anticipate, and deal with the ambiguous attentions of a man who inevitably cannot understand her

feelings at all. The point of the experience is the sense of exquisite tension, anticipation, and excitement created within the reader as she imagines the possible resolutions and consequences for a woman of an encounter with a member of the opposite sex and then observes that once again the heroine in question has avoided the ever-present potential for disaster because the hero has fallen helplessly in love with her.

In all of their comments about the nature of the romance, the Smithton women placed heavy emphasis on the importance of *development* in the romance's portrayal of love. The following two definitions were echoed again and again in other remarks:

> Generally there are two people who come together for one reason or another, *grow to love each other* and *work together solving problems* along the way—united for a purpose. They are light easy reading and always have a happy ending which makes one feel more light-hearted.

> I think [a romance] is a man and woman meeting, the growing awareness, the culmination of the love—*whether it's going to jell or if it's going to fall apart*—but they [the heroine and the hero] have recognized that they have fallen in love [emphasis added].

The women usually articulated this insistence on process and development during discussions about the genre's characteristic preoccupation with what is typically termed "a love-hate relationship." Because the middle of every romantic narrative must create some form of conflict to keep the romantic pair apart until the proper moment, many authors settle for misunderstanding or distrust as the cause of the intermediary delay of the couple's happy union. Hero and heroine are shown to despise each other overtly, even though they are "in love," primarily because each is jealous or suspicious of the other's motives and consequently fails to trust the other. Despite the frequency with which this pattern of conflict is suddenly explained away by the couple's mutual recognition that only misunderstanding is thwarting their relationship, the Smithton women are not convinced when a hero decides within two pages of the novel's conclusion that he has been mistaken about the heroine and that his apparent hatred is actually affection. Dot's customers dislike such "about faces"; they prefer to see a hero and heroine gradually overcome distrust and suspicion and grow to love each other.

Although this depiction of love as a gradual process cannot be considered the defining feature of the genre for all of the Smithton women, slightly more than half (twenty-three) believe it one of the "three most important ingredients" in the narrative. As might have been predicted, when responding to a request to rank order narrative features with respect to their importance to the genre, Dot's customers generally agreed that a

happy ending is indispensable. Twenty-two of the women selected this as the essential ingredient in romance fiction out of a list of eleven choices, while a total of thirty-two listed it in first, second, or third place. The runner-up in the "most important" category, however, was "a slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine," placed by twenty-three of the women in first, second, or third place. Considered almost equally important by Dot's customers was the romance's inclusion of "some detail about the heroine and the hero after they have finally gotten together."[23] Twenty-two of the women thought this one of the three most important ingredients in the genre. Table 2.2 summarizes the ranking responses of the Smithton women.

The obvious importance of the happy ending lends credence to the suggestion that romances are valued most for their ability to raise the spirits of the reader. They manage to do so, the rankings imply, by involving that reader vicariously in the gradual evolution of a loving relationship whose culmination she is later permitted to enjoy in the best romances through a description of the heroine's and hero's life together after their necessary union. When combined with the relative unimportance of detailed reports about sexual encounters, it seems clear that the Smithton readers are interested in the verbal working out of a romance, that is, in the reinterpretation of misunderstood actions and in declarations of mutual love rather than in the portrayal of sexual contact through visual imagery.

Beatrice Faust has recently argued in *Women, Sex, and Pornography* that female sexuality is "tactile, verbal, intimate, nurturant, process-oriented and somewhat inclined to monogamy," traits she attributes to biological predisposition and social reinforcement through culture.[24] Although there are important problems with Faust's reliance on biology to account for female preferences in sexual encounters as well as with her assertion that such tastes characterize all women, her parallel claim that women are not excited by the kinds of visual displays and explicit description of physical contact that characterize male pornography is at least true of the Smithton readers. Dot and her customers are more interested in the affective responses of hero and heroine to each other than in a detailed account of their physical contact. Interestingly enough, the Smithton women also explained that they do not like explicit description because they prefer to imagine the scene in detail by themselves. Their wish to participate in the gradual growth of love and trust and to witness the way in which the heroine is eventually cared for by a man who also confesses that he "needs" her suggests that the Smithton women do indeed want to see a woman attended to sexually in a tender, nurturant, and emotionally open way. It should be added that these preferences also hint at the existence of an equally powerful wish to see a man dependent upon a woman.

TABLE 2.2
Question: What Are the Three Most Important Ingredients in a Romance?

Response	First Most Important Feature	Second Most Important Feature	Third Most Important Feature	Total Who Checked Response In One of Top Three Positions
a. A happy ending	22	4	6	32
b. Lots of scenes with explicit sexual description	0	0	0	0
c. Lots of details about faraway places and times	0	1	2	3
d. A long conflict between hero and heroine	2	1	1	4
e. Punishment of the villain	0	2	3	5
f. A slowly but consistently developing love between hero and heroine	8	9	6	23
g. A setting in a particular historical period	3	4	3	10
h. Lots of love scenes with some explicit sexual description	3	7	3	13
i. Lots of love scenes without explicit sexual description	0	3	1	4
j. Some detail about heroine and hero after they've gotten together	1	7	14	22
k. A very particular kind of hero and heroine	3	4	3	10

Although Dot's customers will not discuss in any detail whether they themselves are sexually excited by the escalation of sexual tension in a romance, they willingly acknowledge that what they enjoy most about romance reading is the opportunity to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her surprise and slowly awakening pleasure at being so closely watched by someone who finds her valuable

and worthy of love. They have elaborated this preference into a carefully articulated distinction between good and bad romances, which differ principally in the way they portray the hero's treatment of the heroine.

A substantial amount of popular and even scholarly writing about mass-produced entertainment makes the often correct assumption that such fare is cynically engineered to appeal to the tastes of the largest possible audience in the interest of maximum profit.[25] However, a certain portion of it is still written by sincere, well-meaning people who are themselves consumers of the form they work in and indeed proponents of the values it embodies. Despite publishers' efforts at rationalization of romance production through the use of carefully calculated "tip sheets to writers," the genre is not yet entirely written by men and women who do it only to make money. Although many of the most successful authors in the field are professional writers, a significant number of them are "amateurs" drawn to the genre by a desire to write the kind of material they love to read. More often than not, it is the work of *these* women that the Smithton readers like best.

In a letter to the readers of Dot's newsletter, for instance, LaVyrle Spencer has explained that her first book "was written because of one very special lady, Kathleen Woodiwiss," whose book, *The Flame and the Flower*, "possessed me to the point where I found I, too, wanted to write a book that would make ladies' hearts throb with anticipation." She continued, "I even got to the point where I told myself I wanted to do it for her, Kathleen, to give her a joyful reading experience like she'd given me."[26] *The Fulfillment* resulted from this inspiration.

Jude Deveraux, another successful author, also commented in Dot's newsletter on Woodiwiss's role in her decision to become a writer. She so enjoyed *The Flame and the Flower* that she dashed out to buy two more romances to re-create the pleasure Woodiwiss's book had provided. "I planned to stay up all night and read them," she explained to Dot's subscribers, but "by ten o'clock I was so disgusted I threw the books across the room. They were nothing but rape sagas." She gave up, turned off the light and thought, "If I read the perfect romance, what would the plot be?" Deveraux spent the night creating dialogue in her head and when she arose the next morning, she began writing. The book that resulted, *The Enchanted Land*, with its independent heroine and thoughtful hero, was mentioned often by Dot's customers as one of their favorites.[27]

Even the incredibly prolific and very professional Janet Dailey confesses that she too began the career that has made her a millionaire, by some obervers' reckoning, because she wanted to write the kinds of books she most enjoyed reading.[28] Convinced by her husband to go ahead and try, she set out to write a romance. Since that day in 1968, millions of readers have informally acknowledged through their repeat purchases of her books that she understands very well what her readers want.

Given the fact that many romance writers were romance readers before they set pen to paper, it seems logical to expect that their views of the romance might parallel those held by their readers. Of course, this is not universally the case because many romances are considered failures by readers. Some otherwise popular books do not please the entire audience, thus bearing witness to the possibility of a discrepancy between writers' and readers' definitions and conceptions. Rosemary Rogers, for example, is universally detested by the Smithton readers who consider her books "trashy," "filthy," and "perverted." Her views of the romance are at least not representative of this group of regular readers.

Despite exceptions like these, it is striking to note that there is a distinct similarity between the Smithton conception of the romance and that implied in comments about the form by writers who are themselves enthusiastic readers. In an article on "Writing the Gothic Novel," for instance, Phyllis Whitney has cautioned aspiring writers, "no feeling, no story—and that's a rule!"[29] She explains that even though explicit sexual description must never appear in a gothic, this prohibition does not mean sexual feeling should not figure in the stories. In fact, she goes on to say, anticipation and excitement *must* "smolder" beneath the surface in scenes that are "underplayed, suggested rather than stated." That way, Whitney elaborates, "the reader's imagination will work for you."[30] She understands that women like the Smithton readers project themselves into the story by identifying with the heroine as she responds to the hero with all of her "strongly passionate nature." Whitney also knows that those women wish to be shown repeatedly that men can attend to a woman in the manner she most desires. To clarify her point she explains finally that "in the true love scenes, there is always an underlying tenderness that, for a woman, can be an exciting factor in sex—James Bond to the contrary."[31] Like Beatrice Faust and the Smithton women, Phyllis Whitney seems to believe that "women want to love and be made love to as they love babies—that is, in a nurturant fashion."[32] Whitney closes with perhaps her most central piece of advice: "I doubt that you can write Gothic novels unless you like reading them. . . . While I am in the process of writing, I am submerged in my heroine and her problems—and having a wonderful time. Me and all those dark-browed heroes! I'm sure this is the first necessary ingredient, though I'm mentioning it last."[33]

Her attitude has been echoed by Jeanne Glass, an editor at Pyramid Publications, a house that attempts to specialize in the kinds of romances the Smithton readers like. She has written that the sex in romances must be "sensual, romantic, breathy—enough to make the pulse race, but not

rough-guy, explicit, constantly brutal." She adds that the predominant flavor must be an "understanding of female *emotions*: hesitancy, doubt, anger, confusion, loss of control, exhilaration, etc."[34]

These comments suggest that some romance writers agree with the Smithton group that a romance is a love story whose gradually evolving course must be experienced from the heroine's point of view. These writers understand that the goal and raison d'être of the genre is its actual, though perhaps temporary, effect on readers like the Smithton women. While explicit description of sexual encounters may be included in some of the genre's variations, the writers agree with their readers that the emphasis in the encounters must be on the love that is being conveyed through sexual contact and not on its physical details.

If readers' and writers' interpretations of their own experiences are taken into account, then, the romance cannot be dismissed as a mere pretense for masturbatory titillation. The reading experience is valued for the way it makes the reader feel, but the feeling it creates is interpreted by the women themselves as a general sense of emotional well-being and visceral contentment. Such a feeling is brought on by the opportunity to participate vicariously in a relationship characterized by *mutual* love and by the hero's quite unusual ability to express his devotion gently and with concern for his heroine's pleasure. The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is *why* the readers find it essential and beneficial to seek out this particular kind of vicarious experience. That can perhaps best be answered by comparing good and bad romances. In explaining what they do when they have determined a particular text's quality, the Smithton women provide clues to both the *deprivation* that prompts their activity and the *fears* that are assuaged and managed in the reading experience.

The reactions of the Smithton women to books they are not enjoying are indicative of the intensity of their need to avoid offensive material and the feelings it typically evokes. Indeed, twenty-three (55 percent) reported that when they find themselves in the middle of a bad book, they put it down immediately and refuse to finish it. Some even make the symbolic gesture of discarding the book in the garbage, particularly if it has offended them seriously. This was the universal fate suffered by Lolah Burford's *Alyx* (1977), a book cited repeatedly as a perfect example of the pornographic trash distributed by publishers under the guise of the romance.

Another nine (21 percent) of the women indicated that although they do not read the rest of the book, they at least skip to the ending "to see how it came out." In responding to the question about why she must read the ending of a book even in the face of evidence that the book is insulting, Maureen explained that to cease following a story in the middle is to remain suspended in the heroine's nightmare while she *is* the heroine. Her

comments were corroborated by every other woman I spoke to who engaged in this kind of behavior. In elaborating upon the problem, Maureen also mentioned the kind of books that most upset her:

Maureen: A lot of your thicker books—it's rape—sometimes gang rape. I could not handle that in my own life. And since I'm living as the heroine, I cannot handle it in a book. And I hate myself for reading them. But if I start it, I have to get myself out of there, so I have to read my way out.

Interviewer: So you must finish a book?

Maureen: Yes, I have to finish it. Even if it's only skimming, one word per page—or sometimes I just read the ending. I have to finish it. But it leaves a bad taste in my mouth forever.

Because nearly all romances end in the union of the two principal characters, regardless of the level of violence inflicted on the heroine during the course of the story, by reading that "happy" conclusion Maureen at least formally assures herself that all works out for the heroine as it should. She cannot simply dismiss the story as a badly managed fiction precisely because she becomes so involved in the tale that she lives it emotionally as her own. She and other readers like her feel it necessary to continue the imaginative pretense just long enough to share the heroine's achievement of mutual love that is the goal of all romance-reading experiences.

This need to read one's way out of a bad situation and to resolve or contain all of the unpleasant feelings aroused by it is so strong in some of the Smithton readers that they read the whole book even when they hate it. In fact, ten (24 percent) of Dot's customers indicated that they *always* finish a book no matter what its quality. Nevertheless, this habit does not testify to a wish or even a need to see women abused. Rather, it is the mark of the intensity with which they desire to be told that an ideal love is possible *even in the worst of circumstances* and that a woman can be nurtured and cared for even by a man who appears gruff and indifferent.

It is necessary to raise this issue of the romance readers' attitude toward the violence that undeniably exists in some romances because several commentators, including Ann Douglas, have recently suggested that women enjoy the experience of reading about others of their sex who are mistreated by men. In "Soft-Porn Culture," Douglas asserts that "the women who couldn't thrill to male nudity in *Playgirl* are *enjoying* the titillation of seeing themselves, not necessarily as they are, but as some men would like to see them: illogical, innocent, *magnetized by male sexuality and brutality*."[35] Although it is hard to disagree with her point about traditional male sexuality, which is still treated as compelling, especially in the Harle-

quins about which Douglas writes, there is good reason to believe that male brutality is a concern in recent romances, not because women are magnetized or drawn to it, but because they find it increasingly prevalent and horribly frightening.

Clifford Geertz maintains that all art forms, like the Balinese cockfight, render "ordinary everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced . . . to a level of sheer appearance, where the meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived."[36] If Geertz is correct, then it seems likely that the romance's preoccupation with male brutality is an attempt to understand the meaning of an event that has become almost unavoidable in the real world. The romance may express misogynistic attitudes not because women share them but because they increasingly need to know how to deal with them.

The romance also seems to be exploring the consequences of attempts to counter the increased threat of violence with some sort of defiance. While the final effect of such a display may be, as Douglas claims, the formulation of the message, "don't travel alone"; "men can't stand it," "men won't let you get away with it,"[37] the motive behind the message is less one of total assent than one of resignation born of fear about what might happen if the message was ignored. Romantic violence may also be the product of a continuing inability to imagine any situation in which a woman might acquire and use resources that would enable her to withstand male opposition and coercion.

When the Smithton readers' specific dislikes are examined in conjunction with their preferences in romance fiction, an especially clear view of the genre's function as an artistic "display" of contemporary cultural habits develops. In particular, when the events and features that the readers *most* detest are taken as indicators of their fears, it becomes possible to isolate the crucial characteristics and consequences of gender relations that prove most troubling to the Smithton women. In Chapter 4, through an examination of "the ideal romance," I shall demonstrate that the same awful possibilities of violence that dominate bad romances are always evoked as potential threats to female integrity even in good romances, simply because women are trying to *explain* this situation to themselves. Because the explanation finally advanced in the good romance remains a highly conservative one of traditional categories and definitions, when events that occur in reality are displayed in the text, they are always reinterpreted as mere threats. However, in those romances where the potential consequences of male-female relations are too convincingly imagined or permitted to control the tenor of the book by obscuring the developing love story, the art form's role as *safe* display is violated. In that case, the story treads too closely to the terrible real in ordinary existence that it is

trying to explain. Then, the romance's role as conservator of the social structure and its legitimizing ideology is unmasked because the contradictions the form usually papers over and minimizes so skillfully render the romantic resolution untenable even for the women who are usually most convinced by it.

Dot first acquainted me with the features of such a "bad" romance during our initial interview when she informed me that her customers can tell the difference between romances written by women and those written by men. She agrees with their dismissal of male-authored romances, she explained, because very few men are "perceptive" or "sensitive" and because most cannot imagine the kind of "gentleness" that is essential to the good romance. When asked to elaborate on the distinction between a good romance and a bad one, she replied that the latter was "kinky, you know, filled with sado-masochism, cruelty, and all sorts of things." She concluded decisively, "I detest that!"

Her readers apparently do too for in response to a question requesting them to select the three things that "should never appear in a romance" from a list of eleven choices, rape was listed by eleven of the women as the most objectionable feature, while a sad ending was selected by an additional ten. The rest of the group divided almost evenly over explicit sex, physical torture of the heroine or hero, and bed-hopping. Despite the apparent range of dislikes, when their rankings are summarized, clear objections emerge. The women generally agree that bed-hopping or promiscuous sex, a sad ending, rape, physical torture, and weak heroes have no place in the romance. Their choices here are entirely consistent with their belief in the therapeutic value of romance reading. The sad ending logically ranks high on their list of objections because its presence would negate the romance's difference and distance from day-to-day existence, dominated as it so often is by small failures, minor catastrophes, and ongoing disappointments. In addition, without its happy ending, the romance could not hold out the utopian promise that male-female relations can be managed successfully.

I suspect bed-hopping is so objectionable in a romance because the genre is exploring the possibilities and consequences for women of the American middle class of adopting what has been dubbed "the new morality." Most students of the romance have observed that after the 1972 appearance of Woodiwiss's unusually explicit *The Flame and the Flower*, romance authors were free to treat their heroines as sexual creatures capable of arousal and carnal desire. Indeed, the extraordinary popularity of Woodiwiss's novel and its rapid imitation by others seem to suggest that large numbers of American women had been affected by feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The strong reader distaste for bed-hopping or promiscuous sex suggests, however, that this change in sexual mores

TABLE 2.3
Question: Which of the Following Do You Feel Should Never Be Included in a Romance?

Response	First Most Objectionable	Second Most Objectionable	Third Most Objectionable	Total
a. Rape	11	6	2	19
b. Explicit sex	6	2	1	9
c. Sad ending	10	4	6	20
d. Physical torture	5	6	7	18
e. An ordinary heroine	1	1	1	3
f. Bed-hopping	4	12	6	22
g. Premarital sex	0	0	1	1
h. A cruel hero	1	5	6	12
i. A weak hero	4	5	7	16
j. A hero stronger than the heroine	0	0	0	0
k. A heroine stronger than the hero	0	1	3	4

was and still is tolerable only within very strict limits. Hence, the "good" romance continues to maintain that a woman acknowledge and realize her feelings *only* within traditional, monogamous marriage. When another text portrays a heroine who is neither harmed nor disturbed by her ability to have sex with several men, I suspect it is classified as "bad" because it makes explicit the threatening implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal domination that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage.[38] Such a portrayal also strays too close to the suggestion that men do not care for women as individuals but, as the saying goes, are interested only in one thing.

In fact, the Smithton women revealed that they suspected as much when they voiced their anger about male promiscuity and repeatedly complained about romances that advance the double standard. "We do not want to be told," one of Dot's customers explained, "that if you love a man you'll forgive him." Neither do they wish to adopt male standards; Dot and her customers would prefer that men learn to adhere to theirs. The Smithton women overwhelmingly believe that sex is a wonderful form of intimate communication that should be explored only by two people who care for each other deeply and intend to formalize their relationship through the contract of marriage. For them, the romance is neither a recommendation for female revolt nor a strictly conservative refusal to acknowledge any change. It is, rather, a cognitive exploration of the

possibility of adopting and managing some attitude changes about feminine sexuality by making room for them within traditional institutions and structures that they understand to be protective of a woman's interests.

Rape and physical torture of the heroine and the hero are obviously objectionable because the readers are seeking an opportunity to be shown a happier, more trouble-free version of existence. Such features are probably also distasteful, however, because the romance, which is never simply a love story, is also an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women. As a result, it is concerned with the fact that men possess and regularly exercise power over them in all sorts of circumstances. By picturing the heroine in relative positions of weakness, romances are not necessarily endorsing her situation, but examining an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it. When a romance presents the story of a woman who is misunderstood by the hero, mistreated and manhandled as a consequence of his misreading, and then suddenly loved, protected, and cared for by him because he recognizes that he mistook the meaning of her behavior, the novel is informing its readers that the minor acts of violence they must contend with in their own lives can be similarly reinterpreted as the result of misunderstandings or of jealousy born of "true love." The readers are therefore assured that those acts do not warrant substantial changes or traumatic upheaval in a familiar way of life.[39]

Woodiwiss's handling of what one reader called "a little forceful persuasion" is acceptable to the Smithton women because they are fully convinced by her attempt to show that the hero's sexual sway over the heroine is always the product of his passion and her irresistibility. Indeed, one publishing house understands this quite well, for in its directions to potential writers it states that rape is not recommended but that one will be allowed under specific conditions if the author feels it is necessary to make a point.[40] Should that rape occur "between the heroine and the hero," the directions specify, it must "never be initiated with the violent motivation that exists in reality" because "a woman's fantasy is to lose control" with someone who really cares for her. "A true rape" can be included only if "it moves the story forward" and if it happens to someone other than the heroine.

Vicious or "true" rape upsets the tenuous balance for most of the Smithton readers because they feel they would not be able to forgive or explain away an overtly malicious act. They cannot understand how a heroine finds it within herself to ignore such an event, forgive the man who violated her, and then grow to love him. As Ann, one of Dot's most outspoken customers, put it, "I get tired of it if they [the heroes] keep grabbing and using sex as a weapon for domination because they want to

win a struggle of the wills. I'm tending to get quite a few of these in Harlequins and I think they're terrible." Her comment prompted excited discussion among those in the interview group who had read the recent Harlequins. All of the women agreed that they found Harlequin's new, more explicit preoccupation with male violence nauseating, and several even admitted that they stopped buying them to avoid being subjected to this form of male power. The following explanation of several Harlequin plots was given by another of Dot's customers:

> Four of the eight in the last shipment—they're married and separated four to eight years and all of a sudden *he* decides that they should have stayed together and *he* punishes her. They're gonna get together and live happily ever after, after *he* punishes her! Right!
>
> That sounds terrible.
>
> Well, they were. He tricks her into coming back or meeting with him or whatever and he has some sort of powerhold over her either emotionally or physically—either he'll take her child away or ruin her father. He's determined to win her back. She's good enough to have him now.[41]

This reader's scorn for a typical pattern of explanation in romance fiction makes it clear that there are limits to what can be justified by evoking the irrationality of passionate love. Although opinions about acceptability probably vary tremendously within the entire romance audience, Dot's readers at least seem to agree about the conditions that must be met. Violence is acceptable to them only if it is described sparingly, if it is controlled carefully, or if it is *clearly* traceable to the passion or jealousy of the hero. On the other hand, if it is represented as brutal and vicious, if it is extensively detailed and carried out by many men, or if it is depicted as the product of an obvious desire for power, these same women find that violence offensive and objectionable. This curious and artificial distinction that they draw between "forceful persuasion" and "true rape" is a function of the very pressing need to know how to deal with the realities of male power and force in day-to-day existence.

I suspect their willingness to see male force interpreted as passion is also the product of a wish to be seen as so desirable to the "right" man that he will not take "no" for an answer. Because he finds her irresistible, the heroine need not take any responsibility for her own sexual feelings. She avoids the difficulty of choosing whether to act on them or not. Although female sexuality is thus approvingly incorporated into the romantic fantasy, the individual ultimately held responsible for it is not the woman herself but, once again, a man.

If the qualities of a bad romance reveal the fears and concerns that are troubling to the women who read them, the characteristics they identify with good romances point to the existence of important needs and desires that are met and fulfilled by the perfect romantic fantasy. According to Dot and her customers, the relative excellence of a romance is a function of its treatment of three different aspects of the story. These include the personality of the heroine, the character of the hero, and the particular manner in which the hero pursues and wins the affections of the heroine. If these individuals and relationships are not presented properly, not even ingenious plotting will rescue the novel from "the garbage dump."

On first discussing romances with the Smithton readers, I was struck by the fact that individual books were inevitably registered in their memories as the stories of particular *women*. When specific titles were volunteered to illustrate a point, they were always linked with a capsule plot summary beginning with a statement about the heroine and continuing with the principal events of what was, to the speaker, her tale. Because of her perceived centrality in the romance and because of their admitted tendency to project themselves into the heroine's being, the Smithton readers hold particularly exacting expectations about the qualities the heroine should have and the kinds of behavior she should exhibit.

So consistent are their feelings about heroines, in fact, that no discrepancy appears between their orally reported preferences and those acknowledged on the anonymous questionnaires. Dot's customers inevitably responded to my query about the characteristics of a good heroine with the statement that she must have three traits: intelligence, a sense of humor, and independence. On the questionnaire, nineteen (45 percent) of the women selected intelligence from a list of nine other possibilities as the characteristic they *most* liked to see in a heroine, while nine (21 percent) picked a sense of humor. The only other traits to score significantly were femininity and independence. When the group's rankings are totaled, intelligence joins independence and a sense of humor as the three traits that score significantly higher than all of the others. It seems especially important to note that three-fourths of the group selected intelligence (79 percent) and a sense of humor (74 percent) at least once, whereas independence was chosen by almost half (48 percent) of the Smithton women. Femininity, with its connotation of demure deference was, however, still a choice of fourteen of the Smithton readers.

It may seem curious to insist here on the importance of the heroine's intelligence and independence to the Smithton women when so many "objective" students of the genre have commented on her typical passivity and quivering helplessness.[42] This harsh analytical judgment, however, is often founded on an assessment of the heroine's ultimate success in solving a mystery, making her desires known, or in refusing to be cowed by the hero. The *results* of her actions, in short, are always measured on a

scale whose highest value is accorded the autonomous woman capable of accomplishing productive work in a nondomestic sphere. While the romantic heroine understandably compares badly with this ideal woman, it is important to note that neither Dot nor her readers find such an ideal attractive nor do they scrutinize and evaluate the heroine's success in effecting change or in getting others to do what she wants in order to assess her character. The heroine's personality is, instead, inevitably and securely established for them at the beginning of the tale through a series of simple observations about her abilities, talents, and career choice. Because the Smithton women accept those assertions at face value, they search no further for incidents that might comment on or revise her early portrayal. Not only do they believe in the heroine's honest desire to take care of herself, but they also believe in the mimetic accuracy of the extenuating circumstances that always intervene to thwart her intended actions. The Smithton women are, in sum, significantly more inclined than their feminist critics to recognize the inevitability and reality of male power and the force of social convention to circumscribe a woman's ability to act in her own interests. It must also be said that they are comfortable with the belief that a woman should be willing to sacrifice extreme self-interest for a long-term relationship where mutually agreed-upon goals take precedence over selfish desire.

The point I want to make here is that when analysis proceeds from within the belief system actually brought to bear upon a text by its readers, the analytical interpretation of the meaning of a character's behavior is more likely to coincide with that meaning as it is constructed and understood by the readers themselves. Thus the account offered to explain the desire to experience this particular fantasy is also more likely to approximate the motives that actually initiate the readers' decisions to pick up a romance. While the romantic heroine may appear foolish, dependent, and even pathetic to a woman who has already accepted as given the equality of male and female abilities, she appears courageous, and even valiant, to another still unsure that such equality is a fact or that she herself might want to assent to it.

The Smithton women seem to be struggling simultaneously with the promise and threat of the women's movement as well as with their culture's now doubled capacity to belittle the intelligence and activities of "the ordinary housewife." Therefore, while they are still very conservative and likely to admit the rightness of traditional relations between men and women, at the same time they are angered by men who continue to make light of "woman's work" as well as by "women's libbers" whom they accuse of dismissing mothers and housewives as ignorant, inactive, and unimportant. Their desire to believe that the romantic heroine is as intelligent and independent as she is asserted to be even though she is also shown to be vulnerable and most interested in being loved is born of their apparently unconscious desire to realize some of the benefits of feminism within traditional institutions and relationships—hence, the high value attached to the simple *assertion* of the heroine's special abilities. With a few simple statements rather than with truly threatening action on the part of the heroine, the romance author demonstrates for the typical reader the compatibility of a changed sense of the female self and an unchanged social arrangement. In the utopia of romance fiction, "independence" and a secure individual "identity" are never compromised by the paternalistic care and protection of the male.

Although Chapter 4 will explore the particular strategies employed by Smithton's favorite romance authors to avoid the real contradictions between dependency and self-definition, I would like to quote here from a lengthy and exuberant discussion carried on in one of the interviews when I asked Dot, her daughter, Kit, and Ann to describe the "ideal" romantic heroine. Rather than list a series of abstract traits as others generally did, these women launched into a fifteen-minute, communally produced plot summary of Elsie Lee's *The Diplomatic Lover* (1971). The delight with which they described the heroine and what they perceived to be her constant control of her situation is as good an example as any of the desire they share with feminists to believe in the female sex's strength and capabilities and in themselves as well. When I asked them why they liked the book so much after they told me they had xeroxed the text for their own use (the book is now out of print), the extended reply began in the following way:

Dot: It's just classic.
Ann: She *decides* that she wants to lose her virginity and picks *him*.
Kit: Well, he's really nice looking; he's a movie star and he's . . .
Dot: Well, the thing is, actually, because she is in a modern workaday world. She's in Washington, D.C., in the diplomatic corps.
Kit: And *she* makes the decision, you know.
Dot: And she's the only one [in the diplomatic community] who's a virgin and her name is Nanny.
Ann: Yes.
Dot: And they call her Nanny-No-No because she's always saying no, no, no!
Ann: She knows, she's read all the textbooks; but she's just never found anyone that set her blood to boiling.
Dot: And she's known him for years.
Ann: But he walks into the room at this one party and all of a sudden

. . .

Kit: *She* makes the decision! It's her birthday.
Ann: She mentally licks her chops.
Kit: She's twenty-three. She decides, "Well, this is it!"
Ann: Yes.
Dot: But you know it's not distasteful. There's nothing . . . it was unusual.
Kit: It was very intimate.
Dot: It's not bold.[43]

In the midst of recounting the rest of the tale, they proudly exclaimed that Nanny "spoke six languages," was "a really good artist," and "did not want to marry him even though she was pregnant" because she believed he was an "elegant tomcat" and would not be faithful to her. These untraditional skills and unconventional attitudes are obviously not seen as fulfilling or quite proper by Lee herself because they are legitimated and rendered acceptable at the novel's conclusion when the hero convinces Nanny of his love, refuses to live without her, and promises to take care of her in the future. Here is the group's recitation of this moment:

Dot: He starts stalking her and this is visually . . .
Kit: It's hysterical.
Dot: You can see it.
Kit: She's backin' off.
Dot: She's trying to get to the stairway to get to her room.
Kit: And make a mad dash.
Ann: She's what they call a "petite pocket Venus type."
Dot: Yes, and he's stalking her and she's backing away and saying, "No, I won't marry you!"
Ann: "I ain't going!"
Kit: "No, just forget that!"
Dot: "No, I don't need you!"
Ann: "And he says I'll camp on your doorstep; I'll picket; unfair to, you know . . ."

As in all romances, female defiance is finally rendered ineffectual and childlike as well as unnecessary by Lee's conclusion. Nonetheless, if we are to understand the full meaning of the story for these women, it is essential to recognize that their temporary reveling in her intelligence, independence, self-sufficiency, and initiative is as important to their experiencing of the book as the fact of her final capture by a man who admits that he needs her. Indeed, after recounting the resolution of this tale, Dot, Kit, and Ann relived again her "seduction of him" by marveling over the moment "when she asks him, and he's drinking and he about chokes to death!"

In novels like *The Diplomatic Lover*, which the Smithton women like best, the happy ending restores the status quo in gender relations when the hero enfolds the heroine protectively in his arms. That ending, however, can also be interpreted as an occasion for the vicarious enjoyment of a woman's ultimate triumph. Dot's readers so interpret it because the heroine, they claim, maintains her integrity on her own terms by exacting a formal commitment from the hero and simultaneously provides for her own future in the only way acceptable to her culture.

The Smithton readers' interest in a strong but still traditional heroine is complemented by their desire to see that woman loved by a very special kind of hero. As noted earlier, these women will read many romances they do not especially like, even when the hero mistreats the heroine, because the experience of the happy ending is more important to them than anything else and because it successfully explains away many individual incidents they do not condone. Nevertheless, they prefer to see the heroine desired, needed, and loved by a man who is strong and masculine, but equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness, and concern for her pleasure. In fact, when asked to rank ten male personality traits as to desirability, not one of the Smithton readers listed independence in first, second, or third place. Although this might be explained by suggesting that the women felt no need to single this characteristic out because they assumed that men are, by nature, independent, their interview comments suggest otherwise. Throughout their discussions of particular books, they repeatedly insisted that what they remembered and liked most about favorite novels was the skill with which the author described the hero's recognition of his own deep feelings for the heroine and his realization that he could not live without her. While the women want to feel that the heroine will be protected by the hero, they also seem to want to see her dependency balanced by its opposite, that is, by the hero's dependence on her. In this context, the Smithton women's constant emphasis on the importance of mutuality in love makes enormous sense.

I do not want to suggest here that male protectiveness and strength are not important elements in the romantic fantasy; they are. Remember, sixteen (38 percent) of the women indicated that they think a weak hero is one of the three most objectionable features in a romance. In addition, almost 25 percent of Dot's customers agreed that out of nine traits strength is the third most important in a hero. Still, neither strength nor protectiveness is considered as important as intelligence, gentleness, and an ability to laugh at life, all of which were placed significantly more often by the readers in one of the three top positions on the questionnaire.

TABLE 2.4
Question: What Qualities Do You Like to See in a Hero?

Response	Most Important	Second Most Important	Third Most Important	Total
a. Intelligence	14	11	5	30
b. Tenderness	11	8	7	26
c. Protectiveness	3	4	7	14
d. Strength	3	3	9	15
e. Bravery	1	4	2	7
f. Sense of humor	8	5	6	19
g. Independence	0	0	0	0
h. Attractiveness	2	5	3	10
i. A good body	0	2	2	4
j. Other	0	0	0	0
Blank			1	1

However, because Dot and her customers rarely initiated discussion of the romantic hero and just as seldom volunteered opinions about specific male characters, it has been difficult to develop a complex picture of their ideal or of the motivation prompting its formation. Even when their responses are displayed in a graph, certain mysteries persist.

The principal difficulty involves the marked preference for an "intelligent" hero. Although it is hard to say why intelligence was ranked so high by the Smithton women, it is possible that the choice is both consistent with the high value they place on books, learning, and education and their own upward mobility as well as a way of reaffirming male excellence and agentivity without also automatically implying female inferiority. The word did appear in discussions of the ideal hero, but the women offered little that would explain its prominence in their questionnaire responses. A few oral comments seemed to hint at the existence of an expectation that an "intelligent" man would be more likely to appreciate and encourage the extraordinary abilities of the ideal heroine, but this link was not volunteered consistently enough to warrant its formulation as the motive behind the fantasy. Equally hard to explain is the emphasis on a sense of humor, although I suspect the interest in this trait masks a desire to see a hero who is up to a "verbal duel" with the heroine. Not only does this create the air of "lightness" so important to the Smithton women, but it also helps to show off the heroine's tart-tongued facility to advantage.

This vagueness about the actual content of the hero's personality persisted throughout many commentaries that tended to center instead on his ability to establish the proper relationship with the heroine. The Smithton

women are less interested in the particularities of their heroes as individuals than in the roles the most desirable among them perform. Gentleness and tenderness figure often in their accounts of favorite novels not so much as character traits exhibited by particular men but as the distinguishing feature of the attention accorded the heroine by all good heroes in the outstanding novels. The focus never shifts for these readers away from the woman at the center of the romance. Moreover, men are rarely valued for their intrinsic characteristics but become remarkable by virtue of the special position they occupy vis-à-vis the heroine. The romantic fantasy is therefore not a fantasy about discovering a uniquely interesting life partner, but a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way.

In distinguishing the ideal romance from Rosemary Rogers's "perversions," one of the five customers I interviewed at length wondered whether her editor had been male because, she reasoned, "it's a man's type book." When pressed to elaborate, she retorted, "because a man likes the sex in it, you know, Matt Helm and all that type." The distinction she sees here between sex and romance was continually employed by the Smithton women to differentiate pornography, which they associate with men, from their own interest in "insightful love," which they wish men could manage. As Joy said of the recent Harlequins, "all they worry about is sex—that's the first thing on their minds. They don't worry about anything else." She continued, "they don't need that; they need humor and love and caring." Similarly, in one of our final discussions, Dot also elaborated on the differences between pornography and romance and between men and women and, in doing so, identified in a wistful tone the particular characteristic she and her customers believe all men should possess:

> I've always thought that women are more insightful into men's psyches than men are into women's. Well, men just don't take the time. They just don't. And it's always been interesting to me that psychiatrists are probably . . . 85 to 90 percent of the psychiatrists in this country are men and I'm sure they know the book. I'm sure they know the textbook. But as far as insightful, I think that is one of the most rare commodities that there is . . . is an insightful man. . . . I don't think men look deep. I think they take even a man at face value. Whatever they see—that's what the man is.

What the Smithton women are looking for in their search for the perfect romantic fantasy is a man who is capable of the same attentive observation and intuitive "understanding" that they believe women regularly accord to men. We will see in Chapter 4, in a more thorough examination of the Smithton group's favorite romances, that the fantasy generating the

ideal romantic story thus fulfills two deeply felt needs that have been activated in women by early object-relations and cultural conditioning in patriarchal society. On the one hand, the story permits the reader to identify with the heroine at the moment of her greatest success, that is, when she secures the attention and recognition of her culture's most powerful and essential representative, a man. The happy ending is, at this level, a sign of a woman's attainment of legitimacy and personhood in a culture that locates both for her in the roles of lover, wife, and mother.

On the other hand, by emphasizing the intensity of the hero's uninterrupted gaze and the tenderness of his caress at the moment he encompasses his beloved in his still always "masculine" arms, the fantasy also evokes the memory of a period in the reader's life when she was the center of a profoundly nurturant individual's attention. Because this imaginative emotional regression is often denied women in ordinary existence because men have been prompted by the culture's asymmetrical conditioning to deny their own capacities for gentle nurturance, it becomes necessary to fulfill this never-ending need in other areas. Nancy Chodorow has suggested, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, that one way for women to provide this essential sustenance for themselves is through the mothering of others. By taking care of a child in this intense emotional way and by identifying with her child, Chodorow reasons, a woman is able to nurture herself, albeit vicariously. However, Chodorow does not comment at any length about whether this vicarious care and attention prove a perfectly adequate substitute. The ideal romance, at least as it is conceived by the Smithton women, argues effectively that it is not. Its stress on the emotional bonding between hero and heroine suggests that women still desire to be loved, cared for, and understood by an adult who is singularly capable of self-abnegating preoccupation with a loved one's needs.

In the next chapter we will discover that it is the constant impulse and duty to mother others that is responsible for the sense of depletion that apparently sends some women to romance fiction. By immersing themselves in the romantic fantasy, women vicariously fulfill their needs for nurturance by identifying with a heroine whose principal accomplishment, if it can even be called that, is her success at drawing the hero's attention to herself, at establishing herself as the object of his concern and the recipient of his care. Because the reader experiences that care vicariously, her need is assuaged only as long as she can displace it onto a fictional character. When that character's story is completed, when the book must be closed, the reader is forced to return to herself and to her real situation. Although she may feel temporarily revived, she has done nothing to alter her relations with others. More often than not, those relations remain unchanged and in returning to them a woman is once

again expected and willing to employ her emotional resources for the care of others. If she is then not herself reconstituted by another, romance reading may suggest itself again as a reasonable compensatory solution. Therefore, the romance's short-lived therapeutic value, which is made both possible and necessary by a culture that creates needs in women that it cannot fulfill, is finally the cause of its repetitive consumption.

details about the Fawcett venture have been drawn from this article.

77. Quoted by Maryles, ibid., p. 69.

78. Maryles, "S & S to Debut Silhouette with $3-Million TV Ad Campaign," p. 51.

79. Ibid., pp. 51–52.

80. Kakutani, "New Romance Novels," p. C13.

81. Yankelovich, Skelly and White, *The 1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading*, p. 48.

82. Compaine indicates that, as of 1978, $65 million worth of paperback book business was accomplished in food stores alone (*The Book Industry in Transition*, p. 89). A significant proportion of this sale must be attributed to the romance.

83. Davis, "The Cinderella Story," p. 43.

84. Harlequin advertisement, *Publishers Weekly*, 18 April 1980, pp. 26–27.

CHAPTER 2

1. In the course of completing this study of the Smithton readers, I have learned of at least five other such groups functioning throughout the country. Most seem to be informal networks of neighbors or co-workers who exchange romances and information about these books on a regular basis. I have also been told of a group similar to Dot's clustered about a Texas bookseller and have received information about the California-based "Friends of the English Regency," which also publishes a review newsletter and holds an annual Regency "Assemblee" at which it confers the "Georgette" award on favorite Regency romances. There is no way to tell how common this "reading club" phenomenon is, but it is worth investigation. If these clubs are widely relied upon to mediate the mass-production publishing process by individualizing selection, then a good deal of speculation about the meaning of mass-produced literature based on the "mass man" [*sic*] hypothesis will have to be reviewed and possibly rewritten.

2. These and all other figures about Smithton were taken from the *Census of the Population, 1970*. I have rounded off the numbers slightly to disguise the identity of Smithton.

3. Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," April 1980, pp. 1–2.

4. Ibid., p. 2

5. All spoken quotations have been taken directly from taped interviews. Nearly all of the comments were transcribed verbatim, although in a few cases repeated false starts were excised and marked with ellipses. Pauses in a speaker's commentary have been marked with dashes. I have paragraphed lengthy speeches only when the informant clearly seemed to conclude one topic or train of thought in order to open another deliberately. Lack of paragraphing, then, indicates that the speaker's comments continued apace without significant rest or pause.

6. Snitow, "Mass Market Romance," p. 150.

7. Brotman, "Ah, Romance!," p. B1.

8. Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," p. 289.

9. Quoted in Brotman, "Ah, Romance!," p. B1.

10. See also Mann, *A New Survey*, passim.

11. Readers were instructed to identify the particular kind of romance they liked to "read the most" from a list of ten subgenres. The titles had been given to me by Dot during a lengthy discussion about the different kinds of romances. Although I expected the women to check only one subgenre, almost all of them checked several as their favorites. The categories and totals follow: gothics, 6; contemporary mystery romances, 5; historicals, 20; contemporary romances, 7; Harlequins, 10; Regencies, 4; family sagas, 1; plantation series, 3; spy thrillers, 0; transcendental romances, 0; other, 2.

12. It should be pointed out, however, that these findings could also indicate that romances were not heavily advertised or distributed when the majority of women in this sample were teenagers. Thus, the fact that so many have picked up the romance habit may be as much a function of the recent growth of the industry as of any particular need or predisposition on the part of women at a particular stage in their life cycle. Still, as I will make clear in this and subsequent chapters, romances do address needs associated with the role of mothering for *this* particular group of readers.

13. Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," pp. 290–91.

14. Jensen also reports that all of the married women in her sample have children and that three-quarters have children still living at home (ibid., p. 291).

15. Cited in Yankelovich, Skelly and White, *The 1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading*, p. 325.

16. This compares with the eight-hour weekly average claimed by book readers who read fiction for leisure as reported in Yankelovich, Skelly and White, ibid., p. 126.

17. Although the Smithton women also commented, as did Jensen's informants, on the ease with which "light reading" like Harlequins and Silhouettes can be picked up and put down when other demands intervene, all of Dot's customers with whom I spoke expressed a preference for finishing a romance in one sitting. Jensen does not say whether her readers would have preferred to read in this way, although she does comment rather extensively on the fact that it is the material circumstances of their jobs as housewives and mothers that most often necessitate what she calls "snatch" reading. She refers to an alternate pattern of reading several books, one after the other, as the "binge." This is not exactly equivalent to the Smithton readers' practice with fat books, but some of them did mention engaging in such behavior as a special treat to themselves. See Jensen, "Women and Romantic Fiction," pp. 300–301 and 312–14.

18. Yankelovich, Skelly and White, *The 1978 Consumer Research Study on Reading*, pp. 141, 144.

19. The Smithton readers' patterns of explanation and justification will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 3.

20. Mann, *A New Survey*, p. 17.

21. For further discussion of this curious failure to trust that a new romance will end happily despite extensive prior acquaintance with the genre, see Chapter 6.

22. Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," April 1980, p. 1.

23. I included this choice on the final questionnaire because in many of the

interviews the women had expressed a distaste for romances that end abruptly with the declaration of love between the principal characters.

24. Faust, *Women, Sex, and Pornography*, p. 67.

25. Richard Hoggart is one of the few who disagrees with this argument. See his comments in *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 171–75. Jensen has also acknowledged that many Harlequin authors "apparently share the backgrounds, attitudes, and fantasies of their women readers" ("Women and Romantic Fiction," pp. 118–19).

26. Quoted in Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," May 1980, p. 2.

27. Quoted in Evans, "Dorothy's Diary," Newsletter #4, 1980, p. 2. (This issue is not dated by month.)

28. Berman, "They Call Us Illegitimate," p. 38.

29. Whitney, "Writing the Gothic Novel," p. 10.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 11.

32. Faust, *Women, Sex, and Pornography*, p. 63.

33. Whitney, "Writing the Gothic Novel," p. 43.

34. Quoted by Glass, "Editor's Report," p. 33.

35. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," p. 28 (italics added).

36. Geertz, "Deep Play," p. 443.

37. Douglas, "Soft-Porn Culture," p. 25.

38. On the connection between patriarchy and marriage, see Hartmann, "The Family as Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle," especially pp. 366–76.

39. None of the Smithton women commented on whether they had ever been hit, pushed around, or forced to have sexual relations against their will, although several did tell me that they know this goes on because it happens to their friends. In summarizing current studies on wife abuse, Rohrbaugh has commented in *Women: Psychology's Puzzle* that "many researchers in this field agree with Judge Stewart Oneglia's estimate that '50 percent of all marriages involve some degree of physical abuse of the woman'" (p. 350). Rohrbaugh also points out that "studies that define wife abuse as anything from an occasional hard slap to repeated, severe beatings suggest that there are 26 million to 30 million abused wives in the United States today" (p. 350). If these figures are accurate, it seems clear that a good many romance readers may very well need to be given a model "explanation" for this sort of behavior.

40. I would like to thank Star Helmer for giving me a copy of Gallen Books' "tipsheet" for contemporary romances.

41. The italics have been added here to indicate where Ann placed special emphasis and changed her intonation during her remarks. In each case, the emphasis conveyed both sarcasm and utter disbelief. Two of the most difficult tasks in using ethnographic material are those of interpreting meanings clearly implied by a speaker but not actually said and adequately conveying them in written prose.

42. See, especially, Modleski, "The Disappearing Act," pp. 444–48.

43. Again, the italics have been added here to indicate where special emphasis was conveyed through intonation. In each case, the emphasis was meant to underscore the distance between this heroine's behavior and that usually expected of women.

CHAPTER 3

1. See chap. 2, n. 5, for the method of citing spoken quotations in this chapter and elsewhere in the text.

2. These coupon ads appeared sporadically in national newspapers throughout the spring and summer of 1980.

3. Neels, *Cruise to a Wedding*, p. 190.

4. Maryles, "Fawcett Launches Romance Imprint," p. 70.

5. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 196.

6. Harding, "The Notion of 'Escape,'" p. 24.

7. Ibid., p. 25.

8. For discussions of the growth of the reading public and the popular press, see Williams, *The Long Revolution*, pp. 156–213, and Altick, *The English Common Reader*, passim.

9. As Escarpit has observed in *The Sociology of Literature*, p. 91, "there are a thousand ways to escape and it is essential to know from what and towards what we are escaping."

10. Escarpit, ibid., p. 88. Although Dot's observations are not couched in academic language, they are really no different from Escarpit's similar observation that "reading is the supreme solitary occupation." He continues that "the man [*sic*] who reads does not speak, does not act, cuts himself away from society, isolates himself from the world which surrounds him. . . . reading allows the senses no margin of liberty. It absorbs the entire conscious mind, making the reader powerless to act" (p. 88). The significance of this last effect of the act of reading to the Smithton women will be discussed later in this chapter. For a detailed discussion of the different demands made upon an individual by reading and radio listening, see Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*, pp. 170–79.

11. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 36.

12. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, p. 179. See also Oakley, *Woman's Work*, pp. 60–155; McDonough and Harrison, "Patriarchy and Relations of Production," pp. 11–41; Kuhn, "Structures of Patriarchy and Capitalism," pp. 42–67; Sacks, "Engels Revisited," pp. 207–22; and Lopata, *Occupation Housewife*, passim.

13. In addition to Lopata, see Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*; Myrdal and Klein, *Women's Two Roles*; Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*; Steinmann, "A Study of the Concept of the Feminine Role."

14. With respect to this view of woman as a *natural* wife and mother, Dorothy Dinnerstein has observed in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* that women are treated as "natural resources to be mined, reaped, used up without concern for their future fate" (p. 101).

15. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 36.

16. Ibid.

17. It is worth remarking here that the feeling that housework ought to be done according to some abstract standard is apparently common to many women who work in the home. For a discussion of these standards, their origins in the generally unsupervised nature of housework, and the guilt they produce in the women who invariably feel they seldom "measure up," see Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, pp. 100–112.