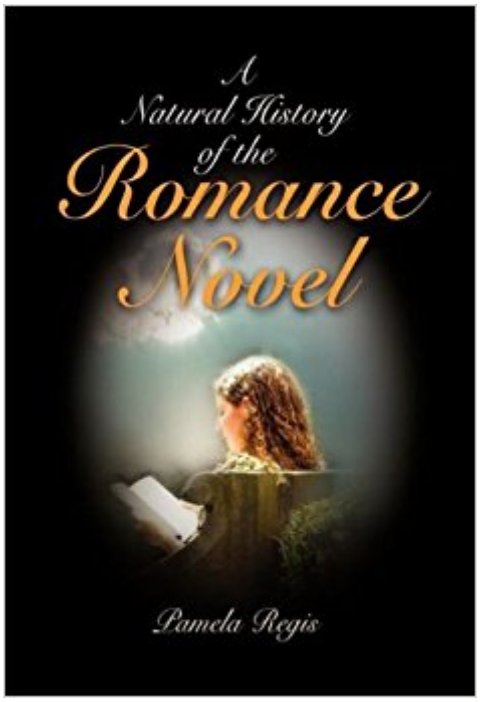
# A Natural History Of The Romance Novel



## Synopsis

The romance novel has the strange distinction of being the most popular but least respected of literary genres. While it remains consistently dominant in bookstores and on best-seller lists, it is also widely dismissed by the critical community. Scholars have alleged that romance novels help create subservient readers, who are largely women, by confining heroines to stories that ignore issues other than love and marriage.Pamela Regis argues that such critical studies fail to take into consideration the personal choice of readers, offer any true definition of the romance novel, or discuss the nature and scope of the genre. Presenting the counterclaim that the romance novel does not enslave women but, on the contrary, is about celebrating freedom and joy, Regis offers a definition that provides critics with an expanded vocabulary for discussing a genre that is both classic and contemporary, sexy and entertaining.Taking the stance that the popular romance novel is a work of literature with a brilliant pedigree, Regis asserts that it is also a very old, stable form. She traces the literary history of the romance novel from canonical works such as Richardson's Pamela through Austen's Pride and Prejudice, BrontÃ«'s Jane Eyre, and E. M. Hull's The Sheik, and then turns to more contemporary works such as the novels of Georgette Heyer, Mary Stewart, Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts.

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## Customer Reviews

This is a great book about romance novels, what they are, what they are not, and how they can be traced from Richardson and Austin clear through to the 20th century. A serious study and jumping off point for anyone wanting to do scholarly research.

Pamela Regis' book, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, is a remarkable example of circular reasoning in literary analysis. She sets up a very specific definition of the concept "romance novel" -- namely "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines."In Chapter 4, The Definition Expanded, she then narrows this definition by defining eight aspects which she perceives as necessary to the form: Society Defined, The Meeting, The Barrier, The Attraction, The Declaration, Point of Ritual Death, The Recognition, and The Betrothal.It should be noted that in this context, she presumes that the "betrothal" will occur between the hero and heroine, thus eliminating from the "romance novel" category an immensely popular work such as Anthony Hope's 1895 The Prisoner of Zenda, which followed the trope of love between hero and heroine sacrificed to the more imperative needs of honor and duty.Given these tight limits on what the author is willing to consider to be a "romance novel," she focuses on tracing the form from Joseph Richardson's 18th century epistolary blockbuster, Pamela, through Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and other selected 19th century authors, picking up Georgette Heyer in the first half of the 20th century, and continuing through Janet Dailey, Jayne Ann Krentz, and Nora Roberts.From the perspective of the historian rather than the literary critic, the major deficiency of the book lies in its lack of attention to authors who, in their own time, were blockbuster bestsellers. While she explains why Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca and Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind do not meet the criteria she has adopted for being "romance novels" (Chapter 5, The Genre's Limits), she still ignores completely quite a number of writers who were, in their own day, multi-title blockbusters in the romance field, such as George Barr McCutcheon, although devoting a full chapter to his contemporary E.M. Forster's 1908 A Room with a view.A better title than "Natural History" of the romance novel would have been "Literary Analysis" of the romance novel.

If an indignant member of the 'If you have any criticisms of romantic novels or their defenders, then

it must be because you have never read any/don’t understand the genre’ school wishes to post an angry comment on my objections to the arguments advanced in Pamela Regis’ book, then please don’t. I have read many romantic novels and even sometimes, write them.Three stars, because I donÃ¢Â Â™t believe in giving low star ratings because I disagree agree with a writerÃ¢Â Â™s arguments. I don’t normally write such scathing reviews, but this book’s soft treatment of rapist heroes really dismayed me and I thought the author did the genre no favours by putting forward illoigical arguments.With this book, though, I was really tempted to give a low star rating, if only because the author falls over backwards to justify the heroine of Ã¢Â Âˆ PamelaÃ¢Â Â™ in her idiotic choice of marrying her one time would be rapist Mr B. In this, she makes the following astounding statement: - Ã¢Â Âˆ The story can be called oppressive, I think, only if one believes that marriage is an institution so flawed that it cannot be good for a woman.Ã¢Â Â™Excuse me! What sort of an argument is this? (Steam bursts from my earsÃ¢Â Â|) I can’t dispute that Professor Regis does think that, but it’s a ridiculous assertion. The story can be called oppressive because it romanticizes the relationship between a would be rapist and his victim in the most distasteful way. The story can be called oppressive, because the heroine is wholly oppressed by Mr B both before he puts the relationship on a nominally respectable basis, and afterwards, when he controls her every behaviour.Not only that, but Regis has unfortunately neglected her research. I have come across a letter quoted from Richardson in another work which totally disproves that Pamela in any way finds ’affective individualism’ or ’companionate marriage’ even if she does obtain, through that distasteful alliance, ’property rights’.All right. I will return to that in a moment, and the quote from Samuel RichardsonÃ¢Â Â™s correspondence, which shows why even the author the arch patriarch Puritan Samuel Richardson disagreed with Ms Regis over that.On the book in general. The text is concise; it makes for an interesting read. It was writtten, of course, circa 1999, and so naturally seems dated. It was written before so many romance writers went on the offensive about the literary value of the romance novel. Therefore, if some of the arguments seem unoriginal now, then I assume that they were more so at the time. On the structure, the author outlines this at the beginning. ThereÃ¢Â Â™s an bit on the critics and the romance novel, and Ms Regis considers that these criticisms didnÃ¢Â Â™t have a broad enough base. Very possibly that is true; I do think, however, that the critics have generally had more experience of reading romance novels generally than might appear, as I think there are probably very few women in Western Europe or the US who havenÃ¢Â Â™t read a few when they were growing up Ã¢Â Â“ whether they are prepared to admit it or not. Anyway, leaving that aside as irrelevant here, Regis promises some thoroughgoing research Ã¢Â Â“ and then limits her own research, too. Lack of time, perhaps?She argues that the feminist

criticsÃ¢Â Â™ complaint that the Marriage as Happy Ending extinguishes the heroineÃ¢Â Â™s freedom and confirms the values of patriarchy, is untrue because through making the marriage choice, the heroine in the notorious HEA in all romance novels finds independence, both emotional and monetary. In her choice of the hero, Regis inists that he heroine finds 'freedom'.This freedom is in fact, never defined except as 'affective individualism' a rather pretentious and vague term.She argues that regarding the feminist critics' charge that in reading romances the reader is reconciled to patriarchy through the mechanism of the fantasy HEA, that the romance novel isnÃ¢Â Â™t powerful enough to Ã¢Â Âˆrelegate woman to patriarchy and marriageÃ¢Â Â™ because readers are free to skip text, reject it, etc.If so, then surely it is not powerful enough either to serve the function which she ascribes to it Ã¢Â Â“ to encourage women to think in terms of emotional fulfillment, choice and independence, as she argues later on. There's a strong contradiction here. How on earth did am academic come to make such a logical error?She sets out the eight features (and three extra ones) that she suggests are essential to the romance novel, and then goes on to analyse a number of novels which are argued to be classic examples of romances using this definition. She picks Ã¢Â Âˆ'Pride and PrejudiceÃ¢Â Â™ Ã¢Â Âˆ'Jane EyreÃ¢Â Â™ etc from the nineteenth century, novels by Georgette Heyer and Mary Stuart from the twentieth century and then moves her area of interest over to the US and analyses the works of successful romance writers, the pre-plagiarist era of Janet Dailey, the work of Nora Roberts and so on.When I came on the chapter 'The limits of romance', I hoped that we might come to some true literary criticism; but no, there is none in the book. The novels of Janet Dailey are treated with the same uncritical admiration as the work of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte.As Noah Berlatsky says, 'RegisÃ¢Â Â™ difficulty is that she wants to defend all romance. She is fighting for the honor of romance as a genre, or as a whole. She never, once, in the entire book, admits that any single romance, anywhere, might be formulaic, or badly written. ' It can certainly be argued from her first premise that if one accepts the eight points she outlines as the definition of a romance novel, then works of literature acknowledged as great can be defined as romance novels. It also imposes a rigid formula on a genre which is already criticized as being too formulaic, and trapped into unreality and light fiction through the necessity of the fantasy Happy Ever After.Through this definition, too, various books which many people do regard as exceptionally good examples of the genre are excluded - ie, 'Rebecca'.Unfortunately, for a book which is meant to be a work of literary criticism, there is no more criticism in it than might be found in some work of positive thinking from a New Age guru. Pamela Regis at no point makes one critical remark about the writing of any of the authors Ã¢Â Â“ from Richardson to Nora Roberts. Her Ã¢Â ÂˆanalysisÃ¢Â Â™ consists of praise for all of the writers,

applying the eight factors to these novels, and saying that they all depict the heroines finding emotional satisfaction at the ending in their invariable choice of the hero - which she equates with 'affective individualism' and 'freedom'. I don't quite see how it can be argued that there can be much freedom for the heroine within a formula which by definition gives her no choice - she must accept the hero.This is why arguably, making an 'HEA a condition of a romantic novel' does a great disservice to the romance novel as an literary form, and a conditional happy ending would be a much more flexible option. With impossible heroes, there's a lot to be said for 'HFN'. The same is true of the fantasy aspect which precludes realistic sordid or inconvenient sordid details. I know that most romance readers would disagree with that. The author, in fact, puts herself in an impossible position; in arguing that there have been some romances written which are great literature, pointing to the Ã¢Â Âˆcanonical Ã¢Â Â™ texts of Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, but never admits that comparison means just that. If there have been excellent romances written, then by definition there have to have been some far from excellent ones churned out. But as a defender of romance, this is an admission that she cannot make. All that she can do, is to maintain a deafening silence on the topic.This 'closing ranks' out of defensiveness and equating all criticism with negative criticism is an attitude of the romance reading and writing community which contradicts the desire of its members for their genre to be taken seriously. Criticism by definition cannot all be positive.For some reason, Pamela Regis makes no mention of the late Victorian/Edwardian best seller, Charles Garvice. Perhaps he is too much of an embarrassment to acknowledge as an ancestor of modern romance: but perhaps she would have been able to discuss his work with the same obliviousness to its notorious defects as she does that infamous novel by E M Hull, Ã¢Â Âˆ The Seik Ã¢Â Â™.This, of course, features a rapist Ã¢Â Âˆhero Ã¢Â Â™. Pamela Regis does quote some sharp criticism of this, and admits that it is 'politically incorrect'. Then two women writers who somehow manage to find Ã¢Â Âˆfemale liberation Ã¢Â Â™ in this story of women who becomes so attached to her violator that she chooses to attempt to kill herself rather than live without him. This wish to destroy herself is equated by the author with 'affective individualism' .I would call it 'Stockholm Syndrome' myself.Quoting a defence of the prevalence of rapist heroes in romances written before the 1970Ã¢Â Â™s on the grounds that it was the only way to make readers accept the heroine Ã¢Â Â™s engaging in pre-marital sex, she goes on to find the heroine strong and independent.This brings me on to her depiction of Pamela, the heroine of the original best selling romantic novel who is happy to marry the man who has abducted her and subjected her to at least one rape attempt and many sexual assaults.I Ã¢Â Â™ve read this, and its tedious sequel, Ã¢Â Âˆ Pamela in Her Exalted Condition Ã¢Â Â™ (and also, Clarissa, but that Ã¢Â Â™s irrelevant

here) and I do not know how anyone who has, could seriously argue that Pamela obtains any sort of independence through her marriage with Mr B. In fact, I am sorry to have to conclude that Ms Regis is relying on most of her readership not having read the long and tedious Pamela (and believe me, it is very tedious), let alone the dull sequel, to make the assertions that she does about the supposed liberating potential of PamelaÃ¢Â Â™s marriage to Mr B.When their relationship is put upon a nominally respectable basis, Regis is at pains to point out that Mr B makes Pamela over some money in the marriage settlements, holding this as evidence of her future independence. He also begins at once to lecture her upon wifely duty and obedience Ã¢Â Â“ a theme to which he frequently returns in Ã¢Â Âˆ‚Pamela in Her Exalted ConditionÃ¢Â Â™. She is not even allowed to suckle her babies, as he thinks that this will take up too much of the time she should be spending on entertaining him.Regarding Pamela's achieving any sort of freedom through her particular Happy Ever After with Mr B, her is the quote Samuel Richardson himself. This is a quote from one of RichardsonÃ¢Â Â™s letters of 1749. This says: -Ã¢Â Âœ‚It is apparent by the whole tenor of Mr BÃ¢Â Â™s behaviour, that nothing but such an implicit obedience, and slavish submission, as Pamela showed to all his injunctions and dictates, could have made her tolerably happy, even with a reformed rake.Ã¢Â Â™This quote from RichardsonÃ¢Â Â™s Ã¢Â Âˆ‚Selected LettersÃ¢Â Â™ comes from page 90 of Terry EagletonÃ¢Â Â™s book, Ã¢Â Âˆ‚The Rape of ClarissaÃ¢Â Â™ and is surely a refutation of Pamela RegisÃ¢Â Â™ claim that Pamela in any way achieves independence of any sort through her marriage with Mr B.But how Ms Regis could make the assertion that I quoted in the beginning of my review in defence of Pamela marrying the man who has attempted to rape her, is truly astounding. The story can be defined as oppressive because it celebrates the union of a would be rapist and his victim in one of the most distasteful 'HEA''s one can imagine.I find the defence of the HEAÃ¢Â Â™s in romance novels that they all lead to great happiness for the heroine in her achievement of Ã¢Â Âˆ‚affective individualismÃ¢Â Â™ in her choice to marry the hero, plus financial independence, unconvincing.Regis admits to the Ã¢Â Âˆ‚frankly individualisticÃ¢Â Â™ nature of these, but she finds the ideology of individualism above critcicism anyway, perhaps forgetting that all ideologies are an aspect of the thinking of a particular historical epoch.It is arguable that the romance novel as it stands is a form of literature peculiarly suited to a form of society (advanced capitalism) and its ideology of individualism, just as the Grail legends expressed the ideology of feudalism. Pamela Regis goes in for some vague talk about the Ã¢Â Âˆ‚transformation of societyÃ¢Â Â™ by their coming together, but this is unsubstantial.For many uncritical fans of the genre Ã¢Â Â“ and the literary critic Pamela Regis writes as one, the fantasy element of the HEA is its chief delight. I am of the persuasion that a move to a more

realistic, conditional HEA would be one of the factors that would lead to its acceptance as literature.



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