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**Newsline**

THURSDAY OCTOBER 13, 2011

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## Books

# Better than sex: Romance novels offer lessons in love, courtship

Think romance novels still feature timid virgins and bodice-ripping alpha males? So last century, says Sarah Wendell, co-founder of popular romance review blog smartbitches trashybooks.com. She is also the author of *Everything I Know About Love, I Learned From Romance Novels* (Sourcebooks, \$14.99). She spoke with USA TODAY's **Deirdre Donahue**.



By James Leynse

**No fantasy:** "Romance heroes are found in real moments of caring," Wendell says.

**Q: What can escapist fiction teach us about finding real-life love?**  
A: Romances communicate that women should be the heroines of their own lives and that happy endings take work—there is no easy way to happiness. It doesn't just show up. Romances teach that you are lovable and worthy of a happiness exactly the way you are and shouldn't have to change drastically to please someone else.

**Q: But don't women read romances because they don't have a boyfriend or husband?**

A: That's the rumor, alas. But it's untrue. The Romance Writers of America surveys of their readership show that romance readers are not only educated and successful women from every possible background, but that many of us are in happy long-term relationships. (Wendell, 36, is married and has two children.)

**Q: Aren't romances just porn in print form for women?**

A: Much of the coverage of romance novels focuses on the idea that they're all about sex. They're not. They're about courtship! More importantly, some are very explicit, and some contain a few kisses and some incredible emotional intimacy. But there are not many venues in which women can safely explore their own sexuality without judgment. Having the freedom to explore private thoughts in the space of a genre that celebrates female sexuality is unique, because there aren't many safe spaces like that.

**Q: Why do you write non-fiction when you could make millions cranking out romance novels? They're all the same, aren't they?**

A: People think you can roll over and sneeze out a romance. I have tried to write fiction, so I understand what an amazing and powerful achievement a great romance novel is. . . .

Romance novels are about courtship and a happy ending. If you ask a couple, "How did you meet?" no two stories are the same. It's the same with romance novels. I've been reading romance since high school, and it never gets old.

**Q: Dukes, billionaires, pirates — how can a mere mortal man compete with these fictional superstuds?**

A: Romance readers do not expect real men to be carbon copies of romance heroes — we don't expect anyone to ride in on a horse wielding a sword and solving all our problems. Romance heroes are found in real moments of caring. When my husband makes my coffee for me in the morning and puts a piece of foil over the top so it stays warm for me, that's a romance hero moment.

**Q: Why do people mock romances?**

A: Nora Roberts said it best when she pointed out that romances are "a hat trick of easy targets: They contain emotions, relationships and sex." True that.



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AFTER**

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