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Consent is Sexy:
A Look into the Influence the 'me too.' Movement had on the Romance Genre
Through Smart Bitches Trashy Books

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Master of Arts in Book Publishing
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Research Question

How have the founders and staff of the influential romance genre website Smart Bitches Trashy Books written about consent and sexual violence in romance since it started in 2005 and as the 'me too.'

Movement started in 2006 then grew alongside their community, culminating in 2017?

Abstract:

Romance has been a mainstream genre for centuries that has evolved and redefined itself throughout its existence. Often, especially in the last fifty years, readers of romance, and the genre itself, face the stigma of only being for bored housewives and therefore less legitimate than other fiction works. This is due to several factors: how controversial the content can be when it comes to consent in intimate moments, that the storyline can disturb the status quo of a patriarchal society, and that the female protagonist and her needs are considered more important than her male counterpart. Because of this stigma, a counter-response has formed within the romance community validating the genre and its readers' intelligence which is often attacked. One example of this counter-response is Smart Bitches Trashy Books created by founders Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan who wanted to offer a safe space for readers to express their love and also critiques of the romance genre. One of the larger conversations that occurs within the Smart Bitches Trashy Books community is that of consent in romance and how the history of the genre is very flawed when it comes to this matter.

Since the 'me too.' Movement, started in 2006 by Tarana Burke, regained popularity in 2017, many readers have taken a hard look at just how much the romance genre has really evolved when it comes to the matter of obvious consent and sexual violence. Formed in 2005, Smart Bitches Trashy books was created just one year before and thus became a great marker for the evolution of the romance genre in terms of consent since the 'me too.' Movement began. This paper examines the development of the topic in the romance genre through the writings of the staff of Smart Bitches Trashy Books as the 'me too.' Movement grew alongside it.

Introduction

Even with romance being one of the most popular and profitable genres of the 21st century¹ it still faces critiques on content, and many of the consumers deal with the stereotype of being “undereducated and undersexed.”² Many readers of romance often feel embarrassed to call themselves such, yet nearly every person reads novels with romance in them in some form or another. The founders, Candy Tan and Sarah

¹ “About the Romance Genre,” *Romance Writers of America*, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx, accessed December 8, 2020.

² Candy Tan and Sarah Wendell, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance* (New York: Fireside, 2009).

Wendell, saw a massive problem with this generalization of the community and created Smart Bitches Trashy Books to give the space to share their passion with others. Together the two wrote about what they love about the genre along with the prominent flaws in many romance novels such as lack of consent, abusive relationships, or terrifying heroes that readers were meant to adore. Over the years, the Smart Bitches Trashy Books website expanded, creating a podcast, hiring other writers, and interviewing some of the genre's most popular authors, including Nora Roberts. Through it a community for romance lover's developed, offering many a space to debate, critique, and gush over these books.

One of their most notable and common topics, especially when reviewing publications, is consent in romance novels. Some of the earliest articles are centered around the topic of sexual violence in romance and how more readers are critiquing the lack of consent that has been involved in past publications than ever before. While the founders address this point and openly call it a major flaw, they also make a point to offer historical context when it comes to rape or dubious consent within the romance genre. This paper will be looking at what years this specific topic was a more common part of conversation within reviews, and articles written by the staff members. Based off the data collected, I was able to gather what years the terms “rape culture”, “consent”, and “#MeToo” were used most prominently. The community members' use of the three terms in the comments will not be noted as a part of the research.

Once compiled, the information will be compared to the timeline of the 'me too.' Movement, specifically when it gained its highest point of popularity in 2017 with the use of #MeToo. From this point, I will be able to analyze the correlation between the major movement against sexual violence with the actions of the Smart Bitches Trashy Books. By using the website, and some of their reviews for books, as a model we will be able to see the impact the 'me too.' Movement has had on this major community within the romance genre.

Methods

My essay is almost entirely focused on Smart Bitches Trashy Books and how they have pushed against the narrative of dubious consent or rape in romance novels. For that reason, most of my research will analyze the data culled from the website. My research method will be a mix of qualitative and quantitative research, including an interview with Sarah Wendell, reading the founders' past publications, and analyzing the rate at which certain terms are used in their articles throughout the years. The founders of this website have created a safe space for other romance lovers to discuss, review, and even critique the genre and its flaws through multiple outlets such as articles, podcasts, and books.

Most of my research involves an analysis of the most-frequent-word the language around terms such as “rape culture”, “consent,” and “#MeToo” and how those terms aid in normalizing these topics of

discussion and open the space for critique. This will be shown through a graph later in this paper that shows the collected data for the terms from March 2005 through 2020. The data on these three terms will be collected by looking through the reviews and blog posts on the website. Another resource for this paper will be reading *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance*, written in 2009 by the founders. The book offers their philosophy and methods for removing the stigma. Along with this I will be interviewing one of the co-founders, Sarah Wendell, to home in on the philosophy of Smart Bitches Trashy Books. The questions will be centered around the conversation that has occurred in the community and if the staff has perceived changes in the romance genre since the second wave of the 'me too.' Movement in 2017.

Finally, there will be further research into the history and growth of the 'me too.' Movement founded by Tarana Burke in 2006. After the hashtag MeToo started circulating amongst celebrities in 2017, many started to pay attention to the movement started by Burke that was created in order to give survivors of sexual violence a safe space to heal from their trauma. According to the history page on the 'me too.' Movement website, their “local grassroots work had now become a global movement—seemingly overnight.”³ This sparked a massive change all over the world—including how many romance stories began to be written. By studying the organization's website, listening to Burke's past interviews and lectures I will be able to gather the information necessary for answering the posed question.

Limitations

Due to the way the Smart Bitches Trashy Books website is set up, it is impossible to know if all of the articles that included the three key terms were collected. This makes it difficult to have a completely comprehensive report on the matter. Along with this, while Smart Bitches Trashy Books is a rather large community with a diverse audience, it cannot serve as a perfect model for the entire romance genre which is too vast to capture.

A Brief History on the Romance Genre, Smart Bitches Trashy Books, and the 'me too.' Movement

Romantic stories can be found as far back as the times of Ancient Greece, but it is mostly agreed that it became a part of the mass-market in the late 18th to early 19th centuries. Many researchers believe *Pamela*, written in 1740 by Samuel Richardson, was the start of the mass-market version of romance with the novel.⁴ Following this novel, Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters published their works offering more insight into the minds of the hero's female counterpart, also known as the heroine. Their works had a

³“History and Inception” MeToo, December 7, 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

⁴“Romance Novels,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_novel, accessed December 7, 2020.

major influence on the romance genre and gave other female authors an opportunity to break into the publishing industry.⁵

During the 19th century and Victorian Era, the romantic novel was often chaste and those with more sexual or explicit content weren't a part of the mass-market until the 1930s. With the rise of the Harlequin empire in the United States throughout the 20th century, the romance genre started being sold in places such as grocery stores, airports, and gas stations. This then led to the rise of the "bodice-ripper" which often contained dubious consent, if not rape or another extreme sexual violence. The first book to ever be considered a "bodice-ripper" was *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss published in 1972, which contained multiple attempted rapes, a rape, an unwanted pregnancy, and ended with a marriage between the heroine and her attacker.⁶ This novel was wildly popular amongst romance readers and became a major example of the Old Skool era, according to the Smart Bitches Trashy Books founders, Candy Tan and Sarah Wendell.⁷

When Wendell and Tan started the Smart Bitches Trashy Books website in 2005, they would often place the books they read in one of two categories, Old Skool or New Skool. Now that they have over 400,000 viewers monthly that reach across 181 countries, these phrases have become common vocabulary within the community.⁸ According to their co-written book, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance*, Old Skool publications predominantly occurred from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, whereas New Skool novels started to develop in the 1980s and are still made today. The two explain that Old Skool novels had a few major characteristics including rape, brutal heroes, a young and virginal heroine, and a sudden realization of love towards the end that differ them from the successors.⁹ This is the category of romance novel that is most commonly addressed when discussing the problems of sexual violence in the genre.

New Skool is what readers often see published today. Many common elements of this category involve independent and sexually experienced heroines, less threatening or abusive heroes, and often more scenes from the hero's point of view.¹⁰ While there still can be many flaws within a New Skool novel, it generally does not allow the hero to be a rapist or someone who openly abuses the heroine. More often than not, the heroine will have consensual sex with the hero and is able to maintain boundaries

⁵ "Romance Novels." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romance_novel. Accessed December 7, 2020.

⁶ "The Flame and the Flower." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Flame_and_the_Flower. Accessed December 7, 2020.

⁷ Tan, Candy and Wendell, Sarah. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance*. New York: Fireside, 2009.

⁸ Sarah Wendell (co-founder of Smart Bitches Trashy book) in discussion with the author. January 19, 2021.

⁹ Tan, Candy and Wendell, Sarah. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance*. New York: Fireside, 2009.

¹⁰ Tan, Candy and Wendell, Sarah. *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance*. New York: Fireside, 2009.

within that realm. It is important to note that while there has been a vast improvement in addressing consent within the genre, there are still many recently published titles that cause concern when it comes to sexual violence. These are often addressed by the writers of Smart Bitches Trashy Books in book reviews and articles. When asked about her thoughts on the matter, Wendell stated in an interview that the discussion around rape in romance is “not something that can be avoided because...romance is about emotional and physical intimacy.”¹¹

New Skool romance novels fall more in line with the ideals of the 'me too.' Movement which advocates for the end of rape. It wasn't until the #MeToo started trending in 2017 and men like Harvey Weinstein were being called out for the violent actions against women, did we really begin to see a major push for enthusiastic and obvious consent in the romance genre.

The 'me too.' Movement was founded by Tarana Burke in 2006 due to her own experiences with sexual violence and other women's as well. Her main goal is to provide a space for those in need of healing and to process their traumas. She also wanted to build “a community of advocates determined to interrupt sexual violence wherever it happens.”¹² For eleven years the group worked solely to support and aid those who've experienced these traumas in any way they could, but in 2017 the local organization became a global advocate when multiple female celebrities began using the MeToo hashtag to tell their stories of being abused by powerful men in the entertainment industry. Since then, hundreds of thousands have opened up about their own ordeals.¹³ This movement has had a major ripple effect that reached nearly every corner of society and still continues today. This has only become more and more prevalent with each new publication in the romance genre and with each reaction it stokes from their readers.

Consent in Romance

Concerns of rape or coercion of physical intimacy between a hero and heroine in romance novels still exist today, and rightfully so. While it has become less prominent, there are still multiple titles that have dubious consent written into the plot. The writers for Smart Bitches Trashy Books have pointed out many of these books to their audience and offered trigger warnings to those who could be impacted by these plots. While these books are generally frowned upon by the writers and community, there is one thing that does make an exception, and that is rape fantasies.

If I am to discuss rape and consent in romance novels, sexual fantasies that can be perceived as triggering for other readers must be addressed. Rape fantasies can come into play with some romance novels, especially ones that have content centered around the BDSM community or waver between

¹¹ Sarah Wendell (co-founder of Smart Bitches Trashy book) in discussion with the author. January 19, 2021.

¹² “History and Inception” MeToo. December 7, 2020. <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

¹³ Burke, Tarana. “Founder of #MeToo Movement, Tarana Burke | Full Address and Q&A | Oxford Union.” Oxford Union, February 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50wz6Xm9VYs&feature=youtu.be>.

classic romance and erotica. This has been a topic of conversation before in the Smart Bitches Trashy Books community. One staff member even interviewed Lilah Pace, the author of a book that contained a couple that enjoyed rape fantasies. In this, Pace explained that these books must be handled differently than other romance novels and how there still *must* be obvious consent before a partaker acts upon the fantasy. The two also examined how there is often a moral quandary of balancing people with sexual preferences and consent in these novels.¹⁴ When discussing including content on the website that may be toxic to some people but pleasurable to others, Sarah Wendell stated that she “trusts people to make healthy decisions for themselves and what they read.” If this type of story or trope is what the reader enjoys then Wendell feels she has no right to police what others are reading.¹⁵

It must be made very clear that uncoerced and enthusiastic consent is an essential part of a romance novel. With the exception of books that are explicitly about consensually fulfilling rape fantasies, or other forms of BDSM, that sexual violence is not something that is wanted within the romance genre. The perspective of the Smart Bitches Trashy Books community is that there is no difference between manipulated consent and rape.

Data Collection

The data gathered is made up of the number of times the Smart Bitches Trashy Books used the terms “rape culture,” “consent,” and “#MeToo,” in their staff-written articles each year. This was collected through the articles and reviews written by the staff of Smart Bitches Trashy Books since it first began in 2005. This data was collected in November 2020, and the latest article was published to the website on October 19, 2020. The articles where data was collected from consisted of reviews, blog posts, interviews, and responses to community questions. From this, over two hundred pieces of data were collected that offer the reader sufficient evidence pertaining to the research question. I was able to gain further context for the data collected through an interview with Sarah Wendell on January 19, 2021. She answered questions regarding the three key terms, growth of the website’s platform, and how the ‘me too.’ Movement has impacted the romance genre.

Mentions and Use of Key Terms

Each time a term was used, the title, author, date it was published, number of times the term was used, and the context words around it were recorded in order to ensure quality data. By doing this I was able to analyze the shift in workspace when a new writer is brought onto Smart Bitches Trashy Books, note the

¹⁴Amanda. “An Interview with Asking for It Author Lilah Pace–With Giveaways!” Smart Bitches Trashy Books. June 2, 2015 <https://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2015/06/an-interview-with-asking-for-it-author-lilah-pace/>.

¹⁵ Sarah Wendell (co-founder of Smart Bitches Trashy book) in discussion with the author. January 19, 2021.

events surrounding the time the article was published, and gather what the writer wanted to portray in the article. This allows the context of the term used to be understood beyond that article itself.

While collecting data, I quickly realized that the term “consent” could be and was used in multiple contexts on the Smart Bitches Trashy Books website. It was used in terms of physical intimacy between characters but also when it came to personal choices made by character and plagiarism. Ultimately, the choice was made to include the ones that had to do with anything a character may have or haven’t consented to in a book and to disregard the term anytime it involved something similar to plagiarism or infringement.

The terms “rape culture” and “consent” were often used as trigger warnings for any readers that may be sensitive to the content within the article. While this is technically not a part of the article it still applied to the research when it came to how the Smart Bitches Trashy Books writers wanted to talk about the subjects. It became another way to offer insight into their philosophy and emotions with the sensitive topics. This was not seen with the phrase “#MeToo” and thus did not need to be considered.

Findings

After gathering fifteen years’ worth of data from the Smart Bitches Trashy Books, it was easy to discern that the website was impacted deeply by the ‘me too.’ Movement. This is made evident by the increases in the usage of the three keywords around 2015 that then jumped even further in 2017 and peaked in 2019. There was also an obvious decrease of term use from 2009 to 2010 that may have occurred for a few different reasons. The overall total the terms were written was 385 across 194 articles from 2005–2020. “#MeToo” was said a total of eighteen times, “rape culture” was written twenty-six times, and “consent” was used 336 times. It is important to note that there is no indication of “#MeToo” being utilized before 2019 and that is solely due to the hashtag not being created until 2017.

As seen in the Figure 1 below, from 2005–2012 there are very few mentions of any of the three key words. The word that is used the most at this time is “consent” at a peak of eleven within five articles. During this time, we also see the lowest level of word usage in 2009, which has zero posts that use “consent,” “rape culture,” or “#MeToo.” It is possible that the reason that this year has the least number of posts is due to a change in the organization of the website authors or other projects that were occurring at the time. This will be further discussed in the Analysis portion of the paper.

There was a sudden increase in 2013 with keyword usage. The year before had used the terms a total five times in four different articles, but they are written nineteen times amongst nine articles in 2013. From here there is a steady increase in uses that only drop in 2016 and 2018 by less than ten words.

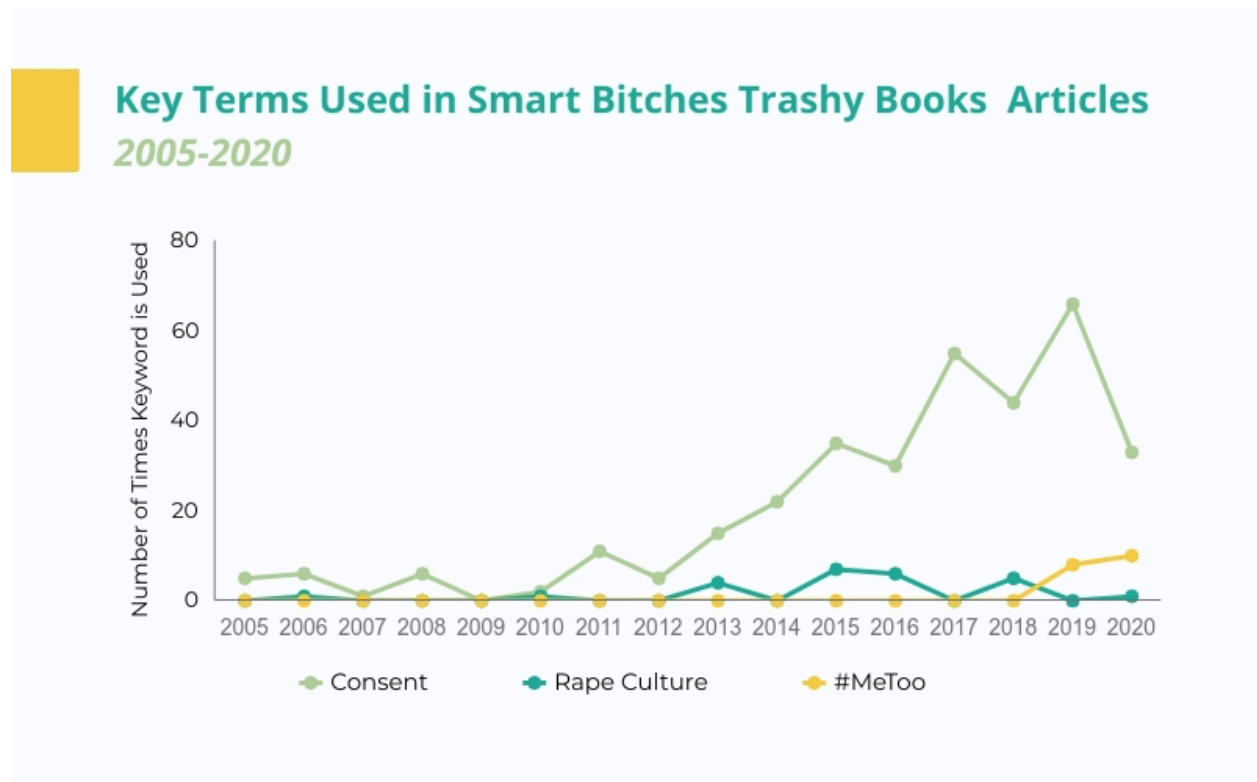
The peak of term usage is in 2019 with the terms being used a total of seventy-four times amongst thirty-six different articles that were published on the site. This is also the first year when “#MeToo” was

seen on Smart Bitches Trashy Books. Generally, the keyword was found when the movement was brought up in a review, in a book that was being reviewed, or if the author was bringing up the change in writing about consent that has occurred due to the movement. During 2019, “#MeToo” was used eight times, “rape culture” was seen seven times, and “consent” was written sixty-six times.

Using the term “rape” as one of the keywords for this paper was a part of the initial plan but collecting the data for the term was beyond the scope of my research. Instead, I chose to count how many times the term appeared in the 194 articles that were collected while I collected data for the three keywords. The total amount of times “rape” was used in these articles was 216. Its lowest year was in 2009 with zero and the peak was in 2015 with ninety-three.

For more details on keyword usage from 2015–2020, please see the figure below.

Figure 1:



Analysis

It is possible that the reason that the year of 2009 has the least number of posts is due to this being around the time that the founders would have been in the process of publishing their book *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: A Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels*. Before 2011, the articles that contained the three keywords were only written by the founders, thus suggesting that there were fewer writers for the

website—or at least fewer writing on the topic of consent. Another explanation could be that this was also a year before the co-founder, Candy Tan, left to pursue her career in law.¹⁶ This stands to reason that there would have been a time of transition in 2009. With one of the main contributors for Smart Bitches Trashy Book writing less, it can be assumed that there would be less articles produced. This can be compared to 2021 where they are posting upwards of 5 articles a day.

In 2013, Smart Bitches Trashy Books began hiring more writers and reviewers for their website that focused on various tropes and plotlines. This allowed for more readers, whose preferred books may not have been discussed before, to enter the community. There was also a major shift in the types of romances that were being discussed. While the genre mainly focuses on the heterosexual couple, there has been more and more diversity in the relationships being written about—including LGBTQ+, biracial, and couples that involve someone with a disability. As more of these types of books get written there is more of a questioning of the typical heterosexual couple that is portrayed in the plots. Is this really a healthy relationship? Is he consenting to this? Is she being coerced?

With #MeToo becoming extremely popular in October 2017, there was a tidal wave of claims from many individuals about sexual harassment and assault. This has continued into the following years with at least thirty high-profile allegations made in 2018.¹⁷ Wendell states that there has been a huge shift in the way authors write about consent and what a character's motivation for engaging in physical intimacy is. She is also starting to see more pushback from readers who now have the vocabulary to talk about consent and sexual violence. There is the overwhelming call to authors that *consent is sexy*, and the readers want to see enthusiastic participation.¹⁸

To many in the romance genre community the impact of #MeToo and the growing popularity of Tarana Burke's 'me too.' Movement on the writing that they see in books has been astronomical. Many of the issues that were seen in romance novels were now being discussed because it allowed for a "common language [for the] common issues that need to be unpacked," between the two realms, according to Wendell. For the review and article writers of Smart Bitches Trashy Books, there has been a "better set of terms and better set of warnings" offered to them because the movement, and the discussion it's caused, has spread everywhere in our society.¹⁹

When asked if the 'me too' Movement led to a shift in the way articles are written for Smart Bitches Trashy Books, Wendell said that it was not a conscious decision. The change was caused more by the establishment of "a common contextual language for the discussion of all of the issues that are

¹⁶ "About the Smart Bitches" *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*. <https://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/about/>.

¹⁷ "#MeToo: A timeline of events", *The Chicago Tribune*, Last modified February 4, 2021. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html>.

¹⁸ Sarah Wendell (co-founder of Smart Bitches Trashy book) in discussion with the author. January 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Sarah Wendell (co-founder of Smart Bitches Trashy book) in discussion with the author. January 19, 2021.

contained under that heading.” There were suddenly two very different topics, romance books and being a survivor of sexual violence, with the ability to be discussed in the same conversation. As a result, more opportunities for Smart Bitches Trashy Books to connect with their community on a deeper level occurred. To quote Sarah Wendell, “Romance reflects humanity at its essential core desire...to love and be loved,” and love is offered to the world by the Smart Bitches Trashy Books and ‘me too.’ Movement.

Conclusion

Although this study is not an all-encompassing example of the shift in the romance genre due to the ‘me too.’ Movement, it does offer a reasonable representation of it. It was clear that Smart Bitches Trashy Books, and the romance genre in general, has been deeply impacted by Tarana Burke’s movement based on the data gathered. This website is beloved by many, because it has shifted and evolved with the genre while still maintaining its silliness and wit. As it has grown over the years and further opened the discussion on consent in romance so has the genre. It can only be assumed that romance readers and authors will continue to push its boundaries even further to create an even more diverse and empathetic genre for all readers who simply love love.

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