

Romance, Rewritten:  
What Today's Romances Say About Us

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*Romance, Rewritten* is a data-driven exploration of how popular romance novels have evolved between 2009 and 2024. Built as an interactive website, the project uses web-scraped data from RomancelO and Goodreads to analyze the top 250 romance books checked out from the Seattle Public Library each year. Through three narrative “chapters”—tropes, characters, and content warnings—it investigates how readers and writers are reshaping the genre.

The project tracks the rise of specific tropes like “forced proximity” and “grumpy/sunshine,” showing how tagging culture and platforms like TikTok are transforming how stories are pitched and perceived. It also explores shifting archetypes: *Alpha Male* heroes are being replaced by *Warm and Gentle*, emotionally available love interests, while heroines are increasingly being tagged as *Strong & Independent*. Finally, it looks at the rise of content warning tags for death, mental health, and abuse, as a sign of growing reader awareness and demand for emotional transparency.

*Romance, Rewritten* ultimately highlights how shifts in tagging behavior reflect not just potential changes in romance novels, but changes in readers themselves. The stories we tell and how we talk about them reveal what we’re hoping to find in love today.

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## Project Rationale

### Subject Matter & Motivation

I’ve always been a big reader; I grew up devouring books and was deep into fanfiction throughout high school. But my interest in romance didn’t really take off until around 2020, when I read *The Hating Game* by Sally Thorne. I followed it up with *Red, White, & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, and I was hooked on the genre.

Tropes have always been central to romance, but in recent years—especially through online discourse—I’ve noticed a shift in how they’re used and talked about. Today, nearly every book comes with a label: “enemies to lovers,” “second chance,” “slow burn.” That got me wondering: have romance novels always leaned this heavily on tropes, or is this a newer marketing trend driven by platforms like TikTok and Goodreads?

As Kolmes and Hoffman (2020) describe it, romance offers “surprise in comfort”—a familiar formula with enough variation to keep it emotionally resonant. Tropes help deliver on those expectations. By tracking which tropes rise in popularity over time, we can get a better sense of how reader preferences are evolving within that structure. But tropes are only one part of the story, and the stories we gravitate toward often reflect something deeper. What does it mean when more readers are choosing books with strong, independent heroines or steering away from dominant alpha male leads? Or when mental health themes are tagged more often than ever before?

Romance novels aren't just entertainment; they're a way for readers to engage with and make sense of cultural narratives. As Lee (2008) puts it, they offer insight into "how women negotiate fantasy lives within patriarchal culture." This project builds on that idea by asking what the current trends in romance reveal about changing expectations around gender, emotion, and identity.

Despite the genre's popularity, there's a noticeable gap in recent research that tackles these questions from a data-driven perspective. Much of the existing literature focuses on characterization or objectification in historical contexts, with most work published well before 2020. This project aims to help fill that gap.

## Audience

This project is especially relevant to my primary audience: young, primarily female, Gen Z romance readers, and is designed to give context to the current landscape of romance. I'm intending this to be a way for readers to expand their knowledge of romance and compare current trends to those of 15 years ago, helping expand their "internal archive" of the genre.

At the same time, it also speaks to a broader audience of romance fans who are curious about how the genre is evolving. Whether you've been reading romance for decades or just started last year, there's value in seeing how trends, tropes, and characters have shifted, especially in recent years.

## Data Collection & Analysis

To conduct this analysis, I drew from three primary data sources: RomancelO, Goodreads, and the Seattle Public Library.

The Seattle Public Library data source was selected to provide a yearly view of what people are actually reading. Comprehensive sales data is difficult to obtain—Amazon's weekly data only extends back to around 2011, the New York Times focuses solely on fiction, and neither source offers detailed information specific to the romance genre. In contrast, SPL's publicly available checkout data extends back to 2005, is well-documented, consistent, and provides a clear record of readership trends over time. While it primarily reflects traditionally published authors and lacks representation from the self-publishing space (such as Kindle Unlimited), it is one of the most reliable datasets available for this purpose.

RomancelO and Goodreads were used to capture user-generated data, including reviews, ratings, and tagging behavior. These platforms offer insight into how readers themselves describe and engage with romance novels, making them especially valuable for identifying trends in tropes, character archetypes, and thematic elements.

## Collection Process

To identify the most-read romance novels over time, I used the Seattle Public Library's publicly available checkout data. I filtered for items where the subject included "Romance" (e.g., Historical Romance, Paranormal Romance) and then cleaned the dataset in Tableau. This included removing non-romance items (e.g., Arthurian romance), filtering out non-book media like DVDs or CDs, and standardizing author and title formatting. I also consolidated multiple formats (e.g., audiobooks, large print, eBooks) under a single title to get more accurate checkout counts.

I exported the top 200 books per year, later expanding to the top 250 for broader coverage. I then used Python to scrape data from Goodreads and RomanceIO. This involved querying for each book's unique ID and scraping metadata like tags, reviews, and ratings. If a book couldn't be matched automatically, I manually searched for the correct ID. In some cases—particularly with older titles—I excluded anthologies or unmatched books and replaced them with the next-highest title on the list.

To make the tag data easier to interpret, I grouped user-generated tags into broader categories across tropes, character archetypes, and subgenres. This allowed for clearer and more consistent trend analysis without losing meaningful nuance.

The scraping took place between February 4 and March 20, 2025. Because both Goodreads and RomanceIO rely on user-submitted tags, the dataset reflects a specific moment in time. While tags rarely disappear, they may continue to evolve, so future scrapes could yield slightly different results.

## Challenges & Limitations

A central question throughout the project was whether the available data was sufficient, and whether it was overly skewed toward recent publications. The most challenging aspect was determining if the trends I observed, particularly the increase in tropes, reflected actual changes in publishing and reader preferences or were simply a result of recency bias in the data sources.

Striking the right balance between capturing real change and avoiding recency bias was a key challenge. To evaluate whether newer books were genuinely more "tropey" or just more heavily tagged, I looked at the average number of trope tags per book across the time period. As expected, there was a noticeable increase in trope tags after 2020. However, to check whether this reflected a broader tagging trend, I also looked at other categories such as genre and setting tags. These remained relatively stable over time, suggesting that the rise in trope tagging is more specific and not just a result of newer books being more tagged overall.

Whether tags truly reflect the content of the books or are simply a reflection of shifting language is much difficult to determine, but that tension between actual occurrences and changing vocabulary became a central part of my project

After reviewing the completeness and quality of the data, I chose to exclude the years 2005–2008. These years contained a lot of missing or sparse metadata, particularly in user-generated tag data, and didn't offer enough consistency to support reliable conclusions. By focusing on the period from 2009 onward, the dataset remained rich enough to analyze while minimizing the risk of distortion from incomplete early records.

## Analysis & Key Findings

I began this project with one central question: Are tropes becoming more common in romance novels? The answer became clear early on that many tropes increased dramatically in recent years, especially after 2020. Out of the 25 tropes I tracked, 14 have doubled in frequency since 2019. However, it is very difficult to determine if this increase in frequency is from the tropes occurring more often in the content, or if people are just becoming more familiar with this language around tropes and thus using these trope tags more liberally as their familiarity with them increases.

As I continued analyzing the data, I became especially interested in how hero and heroine archetypes have changed. For heroes, the most notable trends were a sharp increase in “Warm & Gentle” male leads starting around 2018–2019, and a decline in dominant “Alpha Male” characters, which peaked in popularity around 2011, with a small resurgence post-2020. These shifts often tracked alongside genre trends, with decreases in historical and paranormal romance and a rise in contemporary and fantasy subgenres. This rise in emotionally available, gentle male leads aligns with broader cultural shifts. As Kluger (2023) notes, post-2016 romance heroes tend to be “less forceful than their predecessors” and emphasize the heroine's consent and pleasure—reflecting the genre's response to the #MeToo movement and changing ideas of masculinity.

For heroines, most character tags remained relatively steady, except for one standout: “Strong & Independent” heroines saw a dramatic rise over the past five years, becoming one of the most frequently used tags in the dataset.

When looking at content warnings, most tags remained relatively stable over time, except for three major themes: Death & Grief, Abuse, and Mental Health. These saw noticeable increases in the past few years. It's difficult to say definitively whether these themes are appearing more frequently in books themselves or if readers have simply become more aware and proactive about tagging sensitive content, though it's likely a mix of both.

These three areas—tropes, character archetypes, and content warnings—ultimately became the core structure of the project. A key challenge throughout was striking the balance between identifying real shifts in content and recognizing the evolving behavior of readers and taggers.

## Design & User Experience

One of the biggest challenges was choosing the right platform. I tested tools like Tableau and even (very briefly) explored using Svelte & Scrollama, but ultimately needed something that was easy to build in and integrated with Figma to make it easier to build. I ultimately ended up building a website in Vev, which allowed me to guide users through key findings while also giving them space to explore parts of the data on their own.

I created a moodboard inspired by emojis and the visual culture surrounding romance books today. I leaned into bright, playful colors to reflect the emotional tone of the genre and the kind of aesthetic commonly seen on platforms like BookTok. I also tried to bring in imagery of romance books wherever possible, using a bookshelf as a frame for my trope charts, and covers on the heroine charts. To ground the visuals in actual storytelling, I also included quotes from inside the books, picking lines that felt emotionally resonant or tied clearly to a specific theme or chapter.

I tried to find the right balance between explanatory and exploratory visuals. As such, three main charts were designed in Illustrator to give me full control over the aesthetic and narrative clarity, while the rest of the charts were created using Flourish to allow users a bit more exploration. These anchor each of the site's three chapters:

- Trope Chart – A bookshelf-style scrollytelling graphic showing the rise of popular tropes.
- Hero Chart – A multi-line chart tracking the decline of alpha males and the rise of warm/gentle heroes.
- Heroine Chart – A waffle chart made from book covers that highlights the surge in “Strong & Independent” heroines.

All visuals were designed to be clear, engaging, and accessible, especially for younger romance readers familiar with BookTok and visual book culture. Throughout, I prioritized clarity and storytelling over complexity to keep the project digestible and visually compelling.

## User Research & Feedback

I conducted usability testing with four users from my target audience: all in their 20s, all regular romance readers. They gave feedback on clarity, ease of use, and how well they understood the main takeaways.

One key insight was that while the charts were generally understandable after a moment, they needed clearer titles and labels to better connect them to the narrative. That feedback led me to revise both the labeling and the surrounding explanations.

Another section on the influence of fanfiction was originally much shorter, but after conversations with two testers who brought up its relevance, I expanded it significantly.

## Next Steps & Conclusion

There are still a lot of open questions after my analysis. For example: Would the findings hold up with a larger dataset: would the trends look the same with 1,000 books per year instead of 250? In my testing, the results didn't change much between batches of 50, 200, and 250 books, but I can't say for sure that would continue with larger samples. It also raises the question: Does a book's popularity (its checkout rank) affect how it's tagged?

One of the largest challenges with this project is distinguishing between actual content trends and tagging behavior. Are certain themes more common now, or are readers just more likely to tag them? That's hard to untangle without reading the books themselves, something that's not scalable without major help from machine learning (and even then, that brings up questions of ethics and copyright!)

Another major gap is self-published books, especially Kindle Unlimited titles. These weren't well represented in the dataset, but they make up a huge part of the current romance landscape and would be important to include in future work.

A more doable next step would be to analyze review content. I scraped the top five Goodreads reviews for each book, but didn't have time to dig into them. That could reveal how readers actually talk about these themes in their own words.

While romance novels may not directly reflect their cultural moment, they offer clues about shifting norms and desires. As Arvanitaki (2022) writes, "The novel may not be a barometer of social history... but it can chart the limits and shifts in social discourse."

I can't claim that romance content has definitively changed, but *Romance, Rewritten* does show that the way readers tag and talk about these books is evolving. That alone is meaningful. Whether these shifts reflect what's being written or just what readers are noticing, they reveal something real about what audiences are looking for in love stories today.

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