



Romance in the Fields of the Lord

Adventists write, publish, and read romance novels. What kind of heroes and heroines do they idealize?

by Carolyn Shultz

ADVENTISTS WRITE, PUBLISH, AND SELL ROMANCE novels. The four Chloe Celeste Chronicles (*Love's Tender Prelude*, *Winter's Silent Song*, *Sweet Strings of Love*, and *Love's Cherished Refrain*) and the four Chloe Mae Chronicles (*Flee My Father's House*, *Silence of My Love*, *Claims Upon My Heart*, and *Still My Aching Heart*) by Kay Rizzo, published by Pacific Press, are just a few examples of fast-selling novels in Adventist Book Centers.

Such novels from Adventist authors and publishers are part of a vast Christian romance novel market: One series by June Masters Bacher has sold more than one million copies; Jane Peart's *Brides of Montclair* series has sold more than 400,000. The even broader, secular romance novel market sells millions of books each year. Just one label, the well-known Harlequin Romances, produces at least 12 titles a month.

Rizzo's two quartets are set in late 19th- and

early 20th-century America, and feature the daughter and granddaughter of a Pennsylvania oil pipeline inspector. Unlike many popular "inspiration romances" published by evangelical presses such as Thomas Nelson, Harvest House, and even Zondervan, Rizzo's novels do not feature "secular Lotharios . . . forever tempting young Christian maidens" or worldly wise, lustful suitors who, once converted by the heroine's steadfast virtue, become the answer to her prayers.¹

Rizzo modifies the secular romance patterns in positive ways. Representing, perhaps, the best of the Christian romance genre, her stories employ uncomplicated sentence structure and vocabulary, and formulaic characters and plots. Her plots are often packed with dramatic episodes and crises in unusual or exotic places.

Christian romance novels assure readers that—at least for beautiful, talented, resourceful women who trust in him—God will provide a handsome, loving husband. Furthermore, while these novels often quote God's promises in the Psalms to the lonely, the sad,

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and the frustrated, especially Psalm 37:4 ("Delight . . . in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart"), both the heroine's and the reader's attention are focused mainly on the hero. Union with him becomes the driving force of the novel; the formula does not allow the heroine to find God but not a husband.

Critics of popular romance novels are indebted to two well-known researchers. Tania Modleski, professor of literature and film at the University of Southern California, analyzed the Harlequin romances themselves; Janice A. Radway, professor of literature at Duke University, studied the readers of romances in a large Midwest city she calls "Smithton."² A majority of the approximately 20 characteristics of secular romances identified by Modleski and Radway can also be found in Christian romance novels, including Rizzo's. Both secular and Christian romances present an attractive heroine who, through marriage, achieves emotional validation as well as (usually) financial security and social standing. The main differences involve some traits of the hero. Though in all romances he is usually handsome and rich, in the secular romances he is also sexually experienced, initially rude, often

contemptuous, and sometimes brutal to the heroine.

Radway theorizes that secular romance readers return again and again to these novels. They need frequent "fixes," because their own experience, even if it includes being happily married, does not satisfy the psychological needs their culture and upbringing have trained them to seek. Adventist romances, with their regular additions of new titles and series, no doubt perpetuate similar hungers.

Stunning Young Heroines

From the 20 "best" romance novels picked by her Smithton romance readers, Radway deduced the characteristics of the "ideal" romance heroine. Surprisingly, the Smithton readers preferred unusually intelligent or fiery-tempered heroines, marked by early childhood rebelliousness, such as dressing as boys. These heroines pursue unusual careers, such as anthropologist or concert pianist. They are often outspoken and spunky. Thus, heroines may initially reject or supersede typically "feminine" traits.³ Similarly, Rizzo's Chloe Mae has a feisty Irish temper and is a "medicine woman," with a thorough knowledge of herbal remedies. Her daughter, the equally spunky Chloe Celeste (CeeCee), is both a fine violinist and a nurse.

Modleski observes that the Harlequin formula for a heroine is to show her achieving happiness only by undergoing "a complex process of self-subversion during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts, her pride, and—nearly—her life."⁴ Rizzo's heroines modify the formula to some extent. Both Chloe Mae and her daughter remain strong-minded and practice the healing arts, at least intermittently, after marriage.

Two other important characteristics of a romance heroine, whether secular, Christian, or Adventist, are her youth and beauty. She is



usually in her late teens to early 20s, virginal, and unusually attractive.⁵ She is not necessarily a classic beauty, but possesses such features as “glorious tresses” (magnificent curly red hair in the case of the two Chloes) or “smoldering eyes.”⁶ The heroine’s beauty plays a key role in arousing the hero’s desire for her, and is also “a sign both to the hero and to the reader that the heroine is sensual and capable of carnal passion. . . .”⁷ However, the heroine is unaware of the effect of her beauty and innocent of the meaning of her own responses to the hero’s reactions. Rizzo’s Chloe Mae, in response to a broad hint from the widower McCall that not only his son will miss her if she leaves his Kansas ranch for California, reports that, “A shiver skittered up my spine.”⁸ She attributes the shiver solely to the cold weather.

Rizzo wrote both Chloe quartets of romances in the first person, incurring the danger of the heroine’s appearing vain about her beauty. She sometimes attempts to soften the effect by focusing the heroine’s gaze on her clothes more than on herself:

The satin rustled when I held the dress up in front of me to admire in the mirror. The vibrant green satin deepened my fiery red hair to a rich auburn hue. . . . I held the brooch up to the neck of my new dress, admiring the silver filigree.⁹

Sometimes other characters assume the task of conveying the heroine’s stunning looks. For example, in *Claims Upon My Heart*, a Paris boutique clerk exclaims to CeeCee, “Mademoiselle . . . I have never seen such incredibly beautiful hair.”¹⁰ However, since the first-person heroine narrator must duly note and record these compliments, one is left with the problem of her appearing vain or disingenuous.

Many romance novels are written from the heroine’s point of view, but usually in the third person, which allows the woman to be surveyed and assessed as a physical object. In *Valiant Bride*, by the Christian romance novelist Jane Peart, the narrator describes

Noramary’s appearance in a manner a first-person narrative would preclude:

The door opened slightly and around its edge peered an enchanting face. The coloring was perfection—the pink and porcelain complexion bestowed on country-reared English girls by a benevolent Creator. Masses of dark curls framed her forehead and fell in disarray about her shoulders. Her eyes were deep blue and darkly lashed; her smile, radiant.¹¹

For a heroine to thus describe herself would be to betray the sins of vanity and self-absorption, which may explain why “much of the humor in early satires of women’s novels like Jane Austen’s *Love and Freindship* [Austen’s spelling] arises from the simple substitution of the ‘I’ for the usual anonymous narrator.”¹² Henry Fielding could excoriate Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), the “first” English novel, Modleski observes, precisely because its heroine tells her own story and thus cannot simultaneously appear ignorant of her charms and describe their effect on Squire B.¹³

Surprisingly, romance heroines show great courage and resourcefulness; they are not simply decorative. In fact, Radway stresses how consistently the “Smithton” women perceived their favorite secular romance heroines



as strong and in control.¹⁴ Likewise, Rizzo's James tells Chloe Mae that her saving his horse's life and her bravery when a horse spooked, stranding her in a runaway wagon—not just her beautiful red hair “illuminated by the sunlight”¹⁵—have won his heart. Romance heroines, whether secular or Christian, reflect at least obliquely their readers' desires “to believe in the female sex's strength and capabilities and in themselves as well.”¹⁶

From Villains to Worthy Foils

Another structural technique common to both secular and Christian romances is the use of foils or villains. In the secular romances, Radway reports that “the suggestion that some men see women solely as sexual objects is made only fleetingly in order to teach the heroine the true worth of the hero.”¹⁷ A vestige of this pattern occurs in Rizzo's *Still My Aching Heart*, when Chloe Mae is briefly courted by a secretly married man. He is quickly exposed, though, and she is never seriously involved with him.

A significant difference in the Christian novels is the replacement of a truly villainous suitor with an attractive, more or less worthy, male foil. The absence of crude villains in these Christian romances suggests that Christian readers and authors feel no desire to portray men as potential woman-haters motivated solely by lust. In Rizzo's Adventist romances, the attractive, good rival for the heroine's affections, a “very shadowy” figure in the secular romances,¹⁸ becomes a more substantial character. He is usually the same age as the heroine, though sometimes he can be several years older, and he appreciates her character as well as her person. He is, however, less mature, less devout, or not as physically attractive as the hero.

Christian romances also follow the secular ones in often including a flawed female foil,

suggesting that both types of romance readers see other women as more threatening than sensitive men to the heroine's happiness. Romances—secular and Christian—reflect a social perspective that regards successfully competing in the marriage market as a woman's most prized achievement. Furthermore, any traits the heroine (or reader) may find unacceptable, or be unable to admit, can be embodied in, and ultimately defeated in, the female foil. For example, in Rizzo's second quartet, Ashley is a living lesson to her cousin CeeCee of the unhappiness awaiting beautiful but flirty and careless young girls. When Lucille, for a short time a more serious competitor for Thad's love, refuses to take religion seriously, she fades from the picture.

Rich, Older, Godly Heroes

The romance heroine's search for identity on the threshold of adulthood dovetails with her developing relationship to a hero. Typically, these romance heroines are orphans, or at least as the stories begin, they are removed from their families and familiar surroundings. Readers sense that characters need to find their niche in society and the assurance that they deserve to be loved. Not surprisingly, the romance heroine finds her identity in becoming Mrs. So and So.

The plot of both the secular and Adventist romances usually traces a conflict between the heroine's growing love and desire for the hero and his apparent indifference or antipathy. In secular romances, the heroine is initially indifferent or hostile to the hero because she believes his interest in her is purely physical; he then “retaliates by punishing the heroine.”¹⁹

By contrast, in Rizzo's romances, as in most Christian romances, the hero and heroine are mutually attracted from the first meeting. Usually conflicts arise, not from antipathy, but from previous engagements, or from the

hero's estrangement from God. Thus, the heroine's emotional and physical attraction to the hero conflicts with duty to family, to previous commitments, or to what is perceived as God's plan for her life. In Rizzo's novels, both Chloes struggle with their own ability to trust God at all times, and with the fact that the men they love doubt either God's love or his existence.

How does the Christian romance heroine know what to do? How does she discover where her true duty lies? She recalls Bible texts, often from the Psalms. For example, when Rizzo's Chloe Celeste despairs over Thad's spiritual indifference, she remembers an appropriate text: "That night . . . the Holy Spirit spoke to me through the words I'd been reading that morning . . . : 'Delight thyself also in the Lord, and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'"²⁰

The Christian romance heroine prays and does her duty as she has been taught to see it, and waits for God to intervene if she is going down the wrong path. Happily, even though she or the hero may struggle to submit to God's will when it apparently does not coincide with their desires, in the end those desires and God's will prove identical.

This brings us to the depiction of the hero. In traditional Harlequins or other secular romances, he is usually 10 to 15 years older than the heroine, strong-minded, yet capable of tenderness. He is sexually experienced, wealthy, and initially scornful. Rizzo's heroes can also be several years older than the heroine, wealthy, and from equal or higher social status than the heroine. But Rizzo varies

this profile by depicting a hero who is, from the beginning, upright, kind, and not sexually experienced (unless he's a widower). In Rizzo's Chloe Mae quartet, Chloe's first husband is a Harvard graduate and older son of a wealthy Bostonian; her second is the son of the oil executive for whom her father worked. In the second quartet, Chloe Celeste's parents have just moved into a San Francisco mansion with 11 bedrooms and seven baths.²¹ Thus, although her love, Thaddeus Adams, is a ministerial student and the son of a grocer, the couple need not fear poverty.

Modleski notes that in Harlequin romances, a "large amount of anger" is expressed by the heroine "almost to the very end of the story."²² The hero's brutality and the futility of her resistance—he may, for instance, laugh at her rage and tell her how cute she is when angry—elicit feelings with which readers identify.²³

Contrary to her secular counterparts, and unlike even one Christian romance writer's advice that the hero should appear "aloof, cynical, domineering,"²⁴ Rizzo's heroes are not initially cold or cruel, nor do her novels dichotomize physical and emotional attraction. To her credit, Rizzo's heroes do not treat the heroine cruelly. They do, however, show determination and physical strength. At one point James, for example, has surmised in spite of her protests that Chloe Mae's ankle is broken and plops her into a snowdrift. When she refuses to let him help her, McCall announces, "We can do this one of two ways. I can carry you, gentlemanly, in my arms as I was doing, or I can throw you over my shoulder like a sack of grain. It's your choice."²⁵

Romance readers attempt to recover in a relationship with a husband the complete security of the original mother-daughter bond. When the woman's need for nurturing goes unfulfilled, she turns for that nurturing to romance heroines.

In the Rizzo romances, the hero is never verbally or physically abusive, and only apparently withdrawn or indifferent. The heroine's anger is also muted or shown to be unreasonable. The heroine suffers mainly from anxiety about whether her desires for a particular man coincide with God's will, and, if so, how and when God will effect the desired outcome.

A no doubt unintended and unique aspect of Christian romances is the virtual substitution of the hero for God. In the end, heroes are full of unconditional love, ready to protect and shelter the heroine for the rest of her life. Of course, heroines pray for God's guidance and quote to themselves his promises never to forsake the confused and forlorn. But the pole and center of their emotional lives, the object of their most fervent thoughts (and presumably of the reader's fantasies), is the hero.

Golden Marriages

Both secular and Christian romances assume and affirm that marriage within a patriarchal culture provides women's highest happiness. Romance heroines discover that their love has brought out (in the case of secular heroes) or strengthened (in Christian heroes) the hero's best character traits. Indeed, Radway's "Smithton" readers enjoy a strong, talented heroine who doesn't need to pursue a career, yet gains a sense of power through the knowledge of "the hero's dependence on her," of "his realization that he could not live without her."²⁶

One of the strengths of Rizzo's novels is her ability to depict a couple as equally mature. A passage from the end of Chloe Mae's story exemplifies the maturity and honesty she and Cy, her second husband, have achieved:

I had one last bombshell to drop. "Remember I told you how Mrs. McCall [Chloe Mae's former mother-in-law] is eager to have CeeCee visit? The

dear lady would be delighted to have CeeCee to herself while we spent a week at my cottage on Cape Cod."

"James's cottage?"

I turned slowly to face him and met his gaze. "Our cottage, as soon as we're husband and wife. Will you find it difficult to accept that I own land and am comfortably set?"

His brown eyes studied mine for several moments. "No, I don't think so."

In a low, nervous voice, I said, "You'd better be sure."

The tender smile he gave me erased my fears. "Chloe, when I promise before God to love you for better or worse . . . I will vow to love you and all the extras you bring with you—CeeCee, Jamie, your former husband, your previous in-laws . . . Memories that don't include me, even wealth I didn't provide. And I know you will promise the same to me. It won't be easy blending our pasts in order to build a new future, but with God's help, we can do it."²⁷

Of course, Chloe Mae and Cy are middle-aged by now, but the fact that Rizzo deals with older lovers both embarking on a second marriage is a commendable departure from the usual romance plots.

Rizzo, and some other Christian novelists, do modify the secular romance formula in several positive ways. Rizzo, for instance, takes Chloe Mae through her first marriage, which ends with her husband's death in a mining accident, through a second romance, and on to a second marriage; Rizzo also extends Chloe Celeste's story to include her and Thad's eventual mission service in China. In addition to omitting a "true" villain and an abusive hero, Rizzo sometimes presents educated, capable heroines who practice a profession.²⁸ She also avoids presenting love as manipulative or sex as purely lustful, showing both love and sex as mutually desirable experiences.

On the other hand, these novels uphold and reinforce the paradigm of romantic love and

marriage as necessary components of life—especially for women. The fact that there are no romance novels written for men speaks for itself. Particularly in Christian communities, the roles of wife and mother are still the ones which primarily confer on women ultimate “legitimacy and personhood.”²⁹

Furthermore, romance heroines of any stripe are not too fat or too thin, too tall or too short; they invariably possess beautiful eyes, skin, and/or hair, a graceful carriage, and a pleasing voice. The hero is tall and good-looking, sporting a “strong jaw,” or “chiseled good looks,” and a broad chest. An article offering advice to writers of inspirational romances notes, though, that “variations [in appearance] are now acceptable and recommended,” as long as authors keep characters “physically appealing to the reader . . . sexy, attractive, and vulnerable. . . .”³⁰

Radway argues that romance fiction “functions always as a utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy through which women try to imagine themselves as they often are not . . . that is, as happy and content.”³¹ Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, she theorizes that romance readers attempt to recover in a relationship with a husband the complete security of the original mother-daughter bond.³² However, men reared in families in which nurturing is almost exclusively the mother’s role tend to define mascu-

linity as “all that is not female.”³³ Thus, the woman’s needs for nurturing in the marriage relationship go largely unfulfilled, and she turns for that nurturing to romance heroines.

Obviously, the enormous popularity of romance novels, including Christian novels written from the early 1980s on, suggests that they are catering to some real psychic needs. Rizzo’s romances from Pacific Press manage sometimes to go beyond the stereotype of the powerless female. But modern popular romances, both Christian and secular, could profit from Jane Austen’s astute eye. In works like *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen’s portrayal of human foibles and her witty satire mockingly illuminate the very stereotypes she depicts. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë daringly develops a plain, poor, unrelentingly frank and determined heroine, who refuses to embrace either the God of Reverend Brocklehurst and his Sunday school tracts, or the God of St. John Rivers who exacts service at the price of personal happiness.

The challenge for Adventist romance novelists is to follow such classics in creating heroines that depart even further from female stereotypes. If Christian romances can push beyond and question more of the popular romance genre’s stereotypes, they may find a new, appreciative audience among both women and men.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Kenneth L. Woodward, “Inspirational Romances,” *Newsweek* (February 20, 1984), p. 69.

2. Tania Modleski, professor of literature and film at the University of Southern California, and Janice A. Radway, professor of literature at Duke University, are probably the best-known social/literary critics to study the structure of mass-produced romance novels for women and to analyze what makes them so attractive to their audiences.

Radway’s 30 subjects were mostly married, middle-class women with children under 18, reporting household incomes of \$15,000 to \$50,000, with most ranging between \$15,000 and \$25,000 (early 1980s figures). Most (38 percent) were full-time housewives and/or

mothers, while 21 percent were working full-time outside the home, and another 21 percent were working part-time. These women were mostly in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, and the mean age at first marriage was 19.9 years. Nearly all had finished high school; 24 percent had finished less than three years of college, and 19 percent claimed at least a college degree or more. About 55 percent were regular churchgoers. Most began reading romances in their teens or 20s (see Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 1991]). As far as I know, there are no demographic studies of Christian romance readers, though *Newsweek* reported in a February 1994 article

entitled "Inspirational Romances," that "up to 85 percent of the patrons of Christian bookstores are women between the ages of 25 and 45" (Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 69). I think Adventist readers of Christian romances would probably be similar in most ways to Radway's Smithton women.

3. Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 1991), pp. 123-125.

4. Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Originally Archon Book, 1982; reprinted by Routledge, 1990), p. 137.

5. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 126.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., pp. 126, 127.

8. Kay Rizzo, *The Chloe Mae Chronicles: Claims Upon My Heart* (Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1993-1994), p. 31.

9. Ibid., p. 121.

10. Ibid., p. 99.

11. Jane Peart, *Brides of Montclair Series: Valiant Bride* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985-1993), p. 11.

12. Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, p. 56.

13. Ibid., p. 54.

14. Ibid., p. 79.

15. Rizzo, *Claims Upon My Heart*, p. 31.

16. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 79.

17. Ibid., p. 133.

18. Ibid., p. 131.

19. Ibid., p. 134.

20. Rizzo, *Claims Upon My Heart*, p. 184.

21. Wealth supplies part of the escapist fantasy of both secular and Christian romances, allowing the reader vicariously to experience upper-class Virginia or San Francisco society, for instance; or even, in the case of the Chloe Celeste Chronicles, to encounter deposed Russian nobility fleeing the Bolsheviks.

22. Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance*, p. 44.

23. Ibid., p. 42.

24. Yvonne Lehman, "Writing the Inspirational Romance," *The Writer* (December 1984), p. 14.

25. Rizzo, *Claims Upon My Heart*, p. 15.

26. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 81.

27. Kay Rizzo, *The Chloe Mae Chronicles: Still My Aching Heart* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1993-1994), pp. 247, 248.

28. Some recent Harlequin romances also break new ground in presenting a heroine with a career who manages both to earn the hero's love and to inspire respect for women in the workplace. See Leslie W.