Introduction by Suzanne Milton

Purpose and Scope
This special issue of Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice, devoted to essays written about selected contemporary American romance fiction writers, is intended to provide instructors with bio-bibliographical information about several novelists, highlighting primary themes and motifs, with some analysis of the author’s contribution to the genre. Each entry provides a comprehensive list of the author’s fiction works that can be further explored in the classroom. This issue may also be of interest to researchers, librarians and readers who wish to learn more about a particular novelist.

Introduction
Love stories have existed for millennia, but as Kristin Ramsdell indicates in Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre, Samuel Richardson’s heralded work The History of Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded, written in 1740, is generally acknowledged as the “direct antecedent of today’s romances…” (5).

The historical journey of the romance novel is a fascinating read, evidenced by the growing body of literature exploring the romance genre and related subgenres. Recognition of its significance is marked not only by scholarly publications, but also by the number of universities and colleges offering popular culture courses and comparative literature courses that include the romance genre as a topic of serious inquiry. Professional association conferences, both regional and national, are regularly featuring romance fiction presentations and panel discussions.

The discourse generated by romance fiction is in large part inspired by its mass market appeal. The importance of the marketplace and its overall impact should not be discounted in shaping the growing interest in romance fiction. Industry statistics underscore the significant role popular consumption plays in shaping society. Data on the educational levels of romance fiction’s readership dispel some of the myths surrounding the appeal of romance, so much so that sociologists like Elizabeth Long have explored the changing ideologies of our society through the novel, and well-known scholars like Janice Radway, who is noted for her first book, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, explores the ethnography of readers.

An extract from Romance Writers of America’s data collection provides a relevant snapshot.
ROMANCE WRITERS OF AMERICA’S MARKET SALES
• Romance fiction generated estimated sales of $1.375 billion in 2007.
• Approximate number of romance titles released in the last five years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Titles Released</th>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>8,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6,400</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>2,285</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>2,093</td>
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MARKET SHARE OF ROMANCE FICTION
• In 2007, romance fiction represented 12.9% of the entire book market, which is the largest fiction category.
• 26.4% of all fiction sold is romance (2006 data).

EDUCATION LEVEL OF ROMANCE READERS (2004 data)
42% hold a bachelor’s degree or higher.
27% college graduates
15% post-graduate work or degrees
7% associate degrees

http://www.storyforu.com/cs/the_romance_genre/romance_literature_statistics

TALTP chose to focus on contemporary authors since it is one of the largest subgenres. The contemporary romance can be traced back to the 1980’s when historical romance was still popular, but a variety of sociological trends created a socio-psychological shift and romance writers responded to these changes by creating more assertive heroines who played an increasingly significant role in shaping their own destiny. The 1990’s mark another major shift in the romance genre. Kristin Ramsdell succinctly describes this as the “genreblending” decade, noting growth within the genre both in terms of greater diversity and inclusiveness (11). Particularly noteworthy during this decade are
the writers of ethnic and multicultural romance, a few of which are represented in this issue.

These love stories with contemporary settings tend to focus on the female protagonist’s journey to find happiness and success both personally and professionally. Although romance is still at the core, greater emphasis is placed on character development of the primary characters. Since the relationship is explored within a societal construct, it allows for current trends to be woven into the plot. A double-edged sword, this “genreblending” makes it more difficult to categorize the subgenres for marketing purposes, but widens the readership net and provides a richer landscape for these authors to explore.

There are a myriad of reasons romance fiction has been able to cast such a wide readership net beyond the core message of a positive love relationship; contemporary romance fiction redefines traditional heroism and has remapped it to be more representative of the more feminized age within which we live. Romance fiction celebrates life, both reflecting, upholding, and to some extent shaping social trends.

Works Cited

