

Toxic Tropes: Should *bad boys* be banned?

From enemies to lovers to “I can change him”: Are romance tropes warping our idea of love?



Colleen Hoover: American Author best known for her 2016 romance novel, *It Ends With Us*.

Whether it's Miles Archer from *Ugly Love* or Billy Dunne from *Daisy Jones & The Six* that gets your heart racing, one thing is for sure, literature loves a bad boy. The genre of romantic fiction has been around for centuries, but with its readers getting younger and younger, concerns are growing that popular tropes are romanticising toxic relationships. Research by Words Rated, revealed that ten years ago the main readers of romance were women aged 35–54. Now, the main reading group are women aged 18–54, with 70% of fans discovering the genre between 11–18. Thanks to platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, the romance genre has soared into popularity among the younger generation.

Colleen Hoover, bestselling romance author, is one of the writers dominating the charts. She has sold over 20 million books altogether and in 2022 her books were bought more than the Bible. According to her publisher Atria, her most popular books on TikTok have spent a combined 151 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list. With over a million followers under her belt, the hashtag #colleenhoover has 2.4 billion views on TikTok and she has been dubbed

the “Queen of Booktok” by her fans. Despite the unprecedented success, readers have a love-hate relationship with her work. Hoover has recently been called out across social media for romanticising abuse and toxic relationships. Feminist magazine, *Ms*, described her novel *It Ends With Us* as “feeding into the very structures of toxic masculinity that it purports to combat. It romanticises red flags and glorifies a charismatic-but-dangerous man (he's complicated! he's damaged!) and it ultimately delivers a decidedly anti-feminist message.”

👉 It romanticises red flags and glorifies a charismatic but dangerous man 👉

While it's so easy to get swept up into a romance, sometimes it's for the best that the tropes are left within the pages and not carried into our own lives.

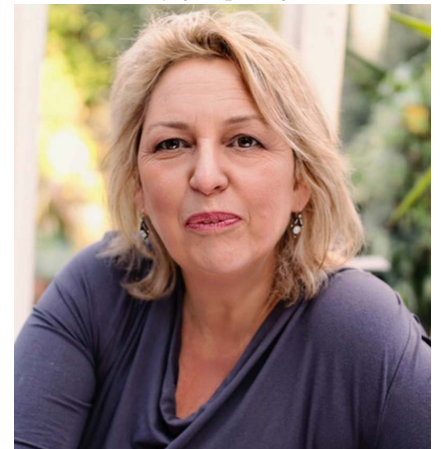
Therapist, Sally Baker, said: “You can be influenced from the ages of 14 and upwards. Before you're even going out and dating and romantic fiction

can completely alter what love should look like so it's an easy trap to fall into.

“Some tropes are more damaging than others. I think the ‘twin flame’ trope which implies you're with your soulmate forever can be quite dangerous. The idea they're your one person means their toxic behaviour is made excuses for because you believe they're your soulmate.”

On the other end of the scale, Sally explains that really high expectations can come from romance novels: “Women sometimes come to me with an non negotiable list of qualities their partner must have and it's so specific, from height to job and I've noticed that some of these ideas do come from romantic fiction which can lead to self-sabotage.”

Her advice to young readers would be, “Books are escapism and with escapism comes fantasy and it would make boring reading if everything was the same as real life. I'd say just make sure if you're reading books like this try to keep in mind that it's just fiction and enjoy it purely for that.”



Sally Baker: Award-winning therapist, author and speaker from London.

Though, it's not as easy as it seems. Lucy Jones*, a 23-year-old student from Birmingham, said: “When I was younger I read a lot of books that normalised controlling behaviours,



Source: Unsplash

so in my teen years I didn't realise that being treated that way wasn't normal! I began to idolise men who would be obsessive and controlling because I thought it was their way of showing that they loved me."

“I began to idolise men who would be obsessive and controlling”

Best-selling saga author, Glenda Young, is determined to change the narrative: “For my romance books, and this is a very deliberate thing I wanted to do when I started writing them, I made sure the girls were not going to be anyone's fools. For me as a woman and as a writer, I'm absolutely appalled by these books that romanticise such negative harmful relationships.

“From word one I make my books feminist. The girls in my books may be put in danger at the hands of a man but I never let them fall in love with someone who is going to undermine them and get away with it. Before I even start writing I know the heroine will defeat whatever problems are thrown at her. Falling in love is portrayed as a bonus in their lives, not everything, and that's the important thing,” she continued.

Understandably though, not all authors are on the same page. Anna Khamsamran is a romance author from the United States who believes censorship will only make things worse.

She said “I think romance is a really valuable way to explore fantasy. Reading a romance novel is fantasy and you can go through experiences without having to do them yourself. My point of view is that there's nothing bad enough that it could be damaging. I don't subscribe to the

idea that if you let your child watch a violent cartoon that they will become violent and this is the same concept.

“There are people who yearn to have a partner who's obsessed with them and want to control them. People even have rape fantasies. It's much better to have that in fiction than go out and seek that in real life. I'm a woman who's very alpha in her own life and it's really nice to be able to give up the power when reading romantic fiction, to have someone who's super strong as your partner.”



Glenda Young: Novelist from Sunderland, UK. She is best known for her romance saga books set during WWII

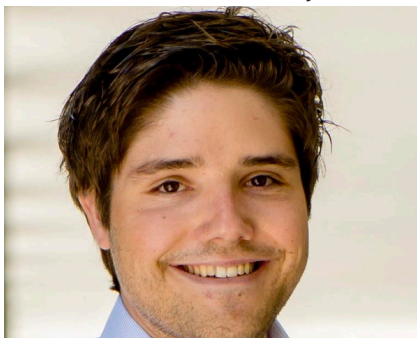


Anna Khamsaman, American author of romance novel *Sink or Swim*

Anna believes it actually goes against feminism to look down on these kinds of romance books. She explained “Women are always being called out for immorality. Women are not supposed to say anything about sex. Even by other women we’re censored. For forever women have always been called out on sexuality and having any kind of pleasure. We have amazing brains, why can’t we explore fantasy as far as we want to go, why be limited?”

Psychologists such as Jenny M. Bivona have looked into the aspects of female fantasies and found that women who fantasise about behaviour they would never choose to do in reality are not psychologically disturbed. The University of North Texas and the University of Notre Dame studied 355 young women and proved quite the opposite – women who have control fantasies, even rape fantasies tend to have a more positive attitude towards sex and higher self esteem. The participants were also read a rape fantasy from an erotic novel and told to imagine themselves as the woman in the book. It found that 62% of participants had a rape fantasy of some kind.

Is this down to times changing and women’s pleasure becoming less taboo? If women are already having these fantasies, how much damage can romantic literature be doing? It depends on how well we are able to separate fantasy and reality. Chris Pleines, Dating Expert, believes romantic fiction can be dangerous when it’s taken too seriously.



Chris Pines, Dating Expert at Dating Scout

He said “Any story has some effect on readers, especially tropes in romantic fiction. But that’s why fiction should not be totally taken seriously. Dating in real life is more raw, unrefined, and sometimes brutal. When readers dwell too much on romantic fiction they tend to disregard the reality of red flags, emotional abuse, and violence because it seems romantic or because of the notion ‘love endures’.” So how can we solve this issue? Romance author, Maya Bairey, believes the key is a wider range of options: “I absolutely think everyone should be able to read whatever they want and write whatever they want. I do think however there should be a greater breadth of options so maybe a counter point where there are books that model healthy relationships and good behaviour so young readers don’t just think romance looks one distinct way.

“All the popular romance books right now are very similar and I think there needs to be more exposure to multiple views. There needs to be more options so young people know it’s not the only relationship dynamic that exists and not what you should be aiming for.”

“It’s not the only relationship dynamic that exists and not what you should be aiming for”



Maya Bairey, American author of romance novel *Painting Celia*

She added that “trigger warnings should be used if books have certain content such as abuse or especially non-consensual content, people need to know what they’re getting into.”

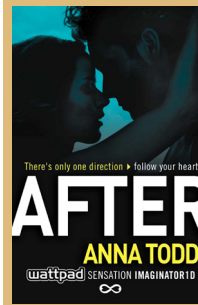
So, next time you pick up a romance book and dive into a world of fantasy, make sure you come up for air before returning to the real world. The toxic guy you’ve been speaking to does not need you to change him, he needs therapy.

OPINION: Young adult literature’s worst bad boys

*This list contains spoilers

Here are, in The Nook’s opinion, the worst of the bad boys in young adult literature. While at times they could be tempting, we would definitely swipe left on these characters.

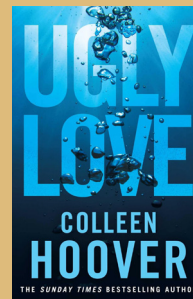
Hardin Scott



Hardin, the male lead of Anna Todd’s *After* saga, is tortured and damaged; a bad boy lover’s dream. Of course, he has anger issues and regularly treats the female lead Tessa, awfully. She wants to save him and miraculously

she’s the only one who can calm him down. Fun fact: this book started out as a Harry Styles fanfiction.

Miles Archer



Miles Archer, the male romantic interest from Colleen Hoover’s *Ugly Love*, is a walking red flag. She falls in love with him while he’s just using her for sex and, spoiler alert, they end up together

after she “changes him.” One of Miles main personality traits is that he never smiles. Come on, we can do better than this.

Ryle Kincaid



Saving the worst for last, the love interest in Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us*, takes the cake for being terrible. His character is mentally and physically abusive, but is depicted as it being out of his

control. Tormented by his past and he really wants to be good. It makes excuses for abuse and is marketed as a romance book with no trigger