

Turning Judgement Into Community How Romance Book Clubs Foster Friendships

By Maggie Vaughn

(Submitted May 2024 as a final piece for a journalism seminar)

Reading romance once sent people into dark shadows and corners to read alone, leaving their romance books behind when going out in public or burying their noses into a Kindle, their reading choice a secret. Now, romance readers proudly walk around reading cartoon-cover romance books on their way to work, unashamed of their favorite genre. Although the perception of romance still has a ways to go, the shift towards acceptance has allowed readers to feel empowered to find a community of others who like to read the genre.

The community for romance readers has blossomed over the last decade, but primarily over the last few years. Romance has cultivated a specific community, ranging from book clubs, [Instagram accounts](#), an entire bookstore called [The Ripped Bodice](#), and even a dark romance sexy book convention called [Sinners & Stardust](#) happening this summer.

The romance community flourished in the wake of COVID-19. Book clubs that began online blossomed into in-person meetings where readers met friends who shared their love for love. The [Bad Bitch Book Club](#) began during the pandemic and has since started chapters all over the country. There is a branch specifically for romance readers, called [Bad Bitches In Love](#), but the Boston chapter reads primarily romance as well. Adrianna Imbriano, Ariana Chapin, and Emily Karlsson run the Boston Chapter together. Although they do read more popular romance authors, they try to expand narrative perspectives.

“It's pretty heavy on the romance like contemporary romance.” said Chapin, “Definitely leans into more diverse romance. We try to read a little bit of everything.”

The diversity of content they read extends to romance books that include problematic or distasteful storylines. At their last meeting, they read a book that had non-consent, also known as the rape trope, where a female character is taken advantage of and it is seen as sexy. A small subset of readers love dark romance where moments like this aren't uncommon, yet are still less prevalent than they used to be. The book club promotes an inclusive space for all interests while encouraging productive conversations about the topic. They try to strike a balance between censorship and safety.

“We do a good job at not censoring what people are going to read but giving them the option to present why they view it a certain way.” said Karlsson, “We have really strong community guidelines that people abide by, like making sure that you're using content warnings.”

Although they have rules for the book club, they still want to cultivate an open environment allowing for conversations of all kinds. “I think that sometimes can go on the verge of censorship, but I don’t think it encourages that at all.” said Karlsson, “If anything, it encourages more open dialogue.”

Dark romance readers, people who enjoy tropes that might be seen as harmful, are not hard to come by. Although they may be shy to share what they’ve been reading, in many book clubs, not just Bad Bitches Book Club, people feel comfortable sharing these opinions. Despite this, some book clubs chose not to read tropes that could be harmful to readers, like Happily Ever After.

Veronica Koven-Matasy, a librarian at BPL, created the Happily Ever After book club. Each month, she hand-picks a trope, for instance, sports romances, and then readers pick a novel within that trope. Group participants, mostly women ranging from their early 20s to late 50s, are each given a chance to chat about their books. Within Happily Ever After, there aren’t very many dark romance readers.

They try to stay away from the limited dark plot lines that have been popular in the last few years as romance shifts away from harmful storylines. Older romance books emphasize traditional gender roles whereas now they are more focused on female pleasure. These dark plotlines were, at the time, a creative way to reinforce a dominant man and a submissive woman.

“It’s definitely interesting to have the conversation between the older members of the club and the younger ones.” said Koven-Matasy, “We can see trends in how romance has been written as well as perceived. We can talk about tropes that are less prevalent now than they used to be like the rape-to-love plotlines.”

Caroline Linden, a romance author and creator of the [Romancing New England](#) newsletter where she compiles information about romance events, has seen firsthand how changing the plotlines in romance are impactful for a community. At a literary event in Rhode Island, she attended a panel about how romance novels can model a positive and healthy relationship.

“It was sponsored by an organization that helps primarily women but I guess anybody really who’s trying to leave an abusive or dangerous relationship.” said Linden, “The panel was about how romance novels model good relationships and good relationship behavior.”

Linden herself read romance novels in the 90s where a sex scene would read as hot but then upon further inspection was incredibly harmful. For example, a villain captures a woman, keeps her in his grasp, and has terrible intentions towards her, and yet they somehow end up together.

“There were some things in the books that could read brilliantly,” said Linden, “but if you sat down and thought about them, you would say, you know, that wasn't really the most consensual thing. And it seemed really smoking hot when I read it, but if it happened to me, I would not be very happy.”

The core of most romance writing is to model a loving relationship that ends happily. Instead of glorifying abuse, romance authors are moving to celebrate consensual sex in healthy relationships. The shift in these romance plots has turned consent sexy, so much so a simple moment where a man respected a woman's body went viral.

Chelsea Curto, a romance author of books like “Caught On Camera”, wrote a scene in one of her novels where a woman asks a man she has had a relationship with to zip up her dress. Instead of assuming he's allowed to see her body again, even though he has before, he respectfully looks away. This small moment blew up on BookTok, which at first Curto was surprised by until she quickly realized all women want is to be treated respectfully.

“A lot of women were saying that's important,” said Linden, “that respect that lack of entitlement to another person's body is important to show and also, you know, I guess it was a sexy scene.”

These conversations surrounding consent and the content of romance books are necessary and new in the reading community. Beforehand, when people were too shy to gather around and discuss romance with each other, these discussions weren't happening out in the open. Instead, they were sequestered hiding behind their Kindles where no one could see what they were reading. The pride in reading romance is slowly growing, as is the industry.

Shelley Thompson, a bookseller at The Purple Couch Bookshop, recently started a romance book club, which has been packed for their first two meetings. The booksellers themselves have noticed the sales in romance climbing, even in only six months.

“Our owner is more of a historical/literary fiction reader and has been pleasantly surprised by the popularity of the romance section and our book club.” said Shelley, “We have only been open 6 months, but our sales have been consistently good in the romance section.”

The structure of these romance book clubs breeds comfort and understanding among its members. Rather than a standard book club that can mirror a stuffy college English class, romance garners a certain group of readers, people who value happy endings, love stories, and pleasure reading. To create loyal customers at their new bookstore, Thompson felt romance was the perfect genre.

“It felt like something that could be more casual and friendly than your average buttoned-up book club where everyone comes having done their homework and with thoughtfully prepared questions,” said Thompson.

Romance novels have not only reevaluated the importance of consent but have also become a place where everyone can see their happy ending, not just heterosexual white people. Rather, the romance genre has expanded so that everyone can find a character to identify with, regardless of whether you are the stereotypical romance reader. Despite this, most of the book clubs are still primarily attended by women or female-presenting individuals.

“Romance is one place where everyone, every race, LGBTQ+, women at just about every age and every size, can see a character like them getting a happy and hot ending.” said Thompspon, “That’s so important. I’d love to see more men get into reading romance because I think it would be great for their relationships, but I’m not seeing it here yet.”

The diversity in the romance novels is an important expansion in the genre. Back when Linden began reading romance in college in the '90s, there was no overlap between LGBTQ+ or racially diverse books and the romance section.

“[LGBTQ+ and racially diverse romance] didn’t really, at least as far as I was aware, blend too much with the other romance community.” said Linden, “Those books would always be shelved differently. So when you went to the romance section, you weren’t even exposed to them.”

Now, people of all identities are able to read books featuring stories that have characters who look and feel like them. Linden attributes this primarily to the internet and these reading communities. Groups that start online and move to in-person – or were always in-person – are having a noticeable impact on what is being read and how it is being consumed.

It is also having an effect on how people socialize surrounding a genre that has rarely been celebrated so publicly. Instead of reading alone with no one to discuss things with, people are finding true friendship and meaning within these groups.

The women who run the Bad Bitch Book Club didn’t know each other before they joined their first Zoom book club meeting. Now, they’re best friends, with two of them driving home together while being interviewed. They sat next to each other while chatting, glancing across the console, and laughing at each other’s answers. They bonded over a common interest, never feeling judged for their hobby.

“With the stigmatization of reading romance,” said Imbriano, “I view it as very light. It’s a thing that a lot of women do. And I feel like women aren’t allowed to really have hobbies without

getting misogynistic comments. Right now is a pivotal time where we're allowed to have a hobby and celebrate it, where more people feel comfortable.”

Celebrating hobbies together has built many lifelong friendships across cities and book clubs. Not only do founders become best friends, but participants are finding a way to connect to one another and be proud of their interests. Now, people don't have to hide but can proudly boast their ripped bodice covers in public, even bonding when they see a fellow romance reader on public transportation.

While on their way to the [Steamy Lit Con](#), one of many conventions celebrating sexy romance, Imbriano, and Karlson shared a book interest with their flight attendant. A moment of serendipity where romance was spreading everywhere around them. It is there once you begin looking for it.

“On the way I was reading a romance novel on the plane and a flight attendant, who was sitting in front of us was also reading one that we recognized.” said Imbriano, “People on the plane are also going to Steamy Lit Con so it was kind of a weird moment of ‘oh, this is okay.’”

More and more people are feeling this acceptance. The community that romance has created for individuals is only growing. Whether that be online on BookTok or getting involved in one of the many book clubs that focus solely on romance, people are finding friends they never would have met before. Once romance stops being scorned, a judgment-free community is formed. To uplift each other's interests is to celebrate one another's passions, no matter how steamy they may be.

“I think having books as our common interest is just the best thing ever.” said Chapin, “Adriana and Emily and our friends get it and I think that is so special.”

How One Woman Brought Romance To Brookline Booksmith
Amy Brabenec's Journey To Happy Endings
By: Maggie Vaughn

A woman stands before the large shelves of brightly colored romance books with cartoon covers and big bubbly fonts. She asks an employee for a recommendation but is too nervous to ask how much 'spice' there is in the book. The bookkeeper notices the woman Googling it after she has left. Down the aisle, there are middle-aged men and young women alike looking at the fantasy shelves. The dark-colored spines, many with gold lettering in dramatic fonts, promise to create world-building escapism, whether that be through the classic *Lord Of The Rings*, or romantasy style via *A Court Of Thorns and Roses*. The stacks at Brookline Booksmith have much more than romance to offer, but recently searching for a romance title has been many people's reason for entering the bookstore.

Despite their popularity now, the romance stacks didn't even exist 15 or so years ago, when Amy Brabenec began working there in 2012. Now she is technically an Assistant Operations Manager, a Children's book buyer as well as a buyer for romance, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. As she put it "I tell everybody I do all of the cool stuff." She is also the somewhat unofficial romance expert on staff and has been since she started. She was the pioneer of the romance section at Brookline Booksmith.

"I kept saying 'We should have [a romance section].' For the longest time [indie bookstores] were held to a standard of being a beacon for high literature, so there was some residual from that."

Despite this resistance at first, she knew that romance books were what she and her friends liked to read. Other book buyers were interested as well. Eventually, the store gave her a spinner, a small book holder that rotates and holds only a small amount of books. Now, she has developed it into three and a half cases and a few tables full of romance books.

As resident romance expert and romance reader herself, she is the go-to recommender for these books. Despite this, during the week she only gives one or two recommendations, and on weekends that jumps to three or four. Romance readers are self-reliant. They know what they want when they walk in.

Brabenec has also noticed people linger in romance longer than other sections. "People hang out in the section a lot. They will stay there for 20 minutes, reading the backs of books and finding things, rather than asking."

With the growing popularity of BookTok and GoodReads, readers can find their next book recommendation from the comfort of their own homes. Although BookTok is certainly

contributing to this lack of human interaction, Brabenec also attributes this independence to the lasting shame around the romance genre.

“I still think there is a bit of a shame aspect to it... I have had some people be kind of bashful about it.”

The bashfulness of romance doesn't detract from sales. Brookline Booksmith has their store set up in sections that are each numbered. Within the romance section, there was a 28% sales increase from 2022 to 2023. That number does not include all of the romance books that aren't stacked in the romance section. For instance, one of the most popular romance authors right now, Emily Henry, has her books stacked on the 'Most Popular' table at the front of the store. The books that are stacked there aren't included in their sales. Brabenec has seen romance books on that table she never thought she would.

“It's very cool to see a werewolf-vampire romance novel on the 'books we love' table, which is not something I ever thought I'd get to see when I started eleven years ago.”

Romance was also attributed to 1.38% of sales last year. Although that number might seem small, Brabenec stressed that in terms of everything they sell, that is a large number. For reference, all of their paperback fiction books, which include science fiction, mystery, general fiction, and foreign language fiction, were 8.6% of sales.

Brabenec recognizes some of the sales represent a larger trend in publishing, which is a shift from mass market to trade paperbacks within romance. Mass market paperbacks are typically smaller, only 5x8 inches, whereas trade paperbacks can range from any size, typically being 6x9 inches. Romance was historically made in the mass market as they are smaller and priced lower than trade paperbacks.

“It's also interesting because of the way we've seen that shift from mass market to trade. We saw from 2022 to 2023 a 17% increase in units sold, but a 28% increase in dollar amount.”

As the pioneer romance curator at Brookline Booksmith, Brabenec is proud of these sales. She can't help but gloat when she walks by a romance book she picked out for the store on the Top 100 bookshelf by checkout. As people browse through the stacks, Brabenec has pride in her legacy at Brookline Booksmith, even if that is providing people with a bit of escapism and an always happy ending.

Focusing On The Survivors: Children And Gun Violence

How John Woodrow Cox Brings Perspective After Tragedy

By: Maggie Vaughn

For a man who writes about gun violence, John Woodrow Cox seems remarkably well-adjusted. Sitting in his home office, there is almost no indication of what he does for a living, except his book, “Children Under Fire: An American Crisis,” which he published in 2021, displayed proudly on the bookshelf behind him.

There’s a picture of his son, who is under a year old, next to it. “Now I have a baby and I don’t know how that will affect my [work].” said Cox, “I know it will.” It already has. After having his son, Cox started to take a step back from the direct frontline of gun violence against children.

Cox has been writing about the same topic for 10 years, which is hard to believe as he looks young to have that consistent longevity, with short brown hair and a scruff that's lacking grays. He has spent his time focusing specifically on how children are impacted by gun violence, whether that be [school shootings](#), [accidents caused by systemic injustices within communities](#), or [freak incidents](#). The tragedy of this topic doesn’t seem sustainable for a person, yet Cox keeps coming back.

“People always think that gun violence is my beat,” said Cox. “But technically it's not. It’s just a thing I keep choosing to do year after year. At the end of every year, I think, ‘Okay, this is going to be it. I’m gonna go do something else.’ But it just continues to be a thing I feel like I have a little bit more to say.”

Cox didn’t find this reporting niche until later in his career. Speaking to Boston College students enamored with his story, he explained how he sat in a classroom at the University of Florida, his alma mater, set up in the same shape as theirs and fell in love with journalism, just as these journalism minors had. He explained that he started at a tiny newspaper called the *Valley News* in New Hampshire where he spent his time covering town hall meetings, poking fun at a council member who fell asleep during a vote.

From there, he went to get a Master of Business as a backup plan while he watched the journalism industry suffer in the 2008 recession. After that, he went to work at the *Tampa Bay Times*, covering stories from strip clubs to [a hoax of a boy](#) who supposedly crawled into a balloon and floated away, when in reality the son was hiding at home. He found himself at *The Washington Post*, after months of interviews.

He anchored the [January 6th, 2021](#) coverage for *The Washington Post* sitting in the back of his car with his parents in the front seat, like a teenager who doesn’t have his license yet. Instead of

waiting to be dropped off at a friend's house, he was shaping the way America views the insurrection.

Although he is now well known for his empathetic coverage of children affected by gun violence, he only began writing long-form pieces when he covered children [who are born with HIV](#) and the journey of finding out what that means and how to live with it.

Cox's editor pointed out the grace of which he was able to write about this difficult subject. His editor suggested writing about children who had experienced violence through their eyes, which Cox discovered he needed to narrow down.

Writing about [Tyshaun McPhatter](#) helped him dive deeper into this calling. Tyshaun's father had been shot and killed by a local gang right outside of his school. He was in third grade. In his neighborhood, this wasn't an uncommon experience.

When Cox shadowed Tyshaun, he returned to school with him. He noticed an activity where children answered "What makes you sad about your neighborhood?" by drawing a picture on a Cat and the Hat cardboard cutout.

"All I saw were these incredibly graphic scenes of violence," Cox said. "People being shot to death and graves and funerals. These were not imagined. They weren't scenes they were inventing. These were their lived experiences."

These children were witnesses to brutal and grotesque violence that surrounded them. Tyshaun was just one of many of these children.

Children who witness these acts of violence are often forgotten about. They are living in a violent community where death and grief are everywhere and no one is doing anything to stop it or help them. No one is asking them how they are. Except Cox.

"None of these kids were considered victims of anything legally," he told the journalism class full of seniors, "They weren't victims of anything."

Although that may be true under the law, Cox felt differently.

"This was the moment where I was like 'Oh, we don't understand gun violence in America.' It's not hundreds of victims or even thousands..." said Cox, "There are literally millions of people whose lives are fundamentally shaped by gun violence, and that is especially true for kids."

This catapulted Cox into coverage of all that happens when the buzz surrounding a shooting withers away. He began following [school shootings](#) and [gun violence instances involving children](#). His job is to now bear witness to their suffering, to what happens after the news trucks pull away and school starts up again. He was there weeks later when the kids couldn't fall asleep at night without their parents in their beds or when someone dropped something and sent them cowering under their desks.

[In an interview with NPR](#), Cox discussed how he viewed children's resilience in these moments. It's easy to read the narratives Cox shares and commend the children for their strength. To look at them as inspiration. But children, Cox knows, are more than that.

“You know, that is a phrase that I've come to despise, that children are resilient because I think it's a way for adults to be dismissive of what children have gone through...” said Cox, “Those children are deeply affected by what they endure. They've soiled themselves. They've wept. They've texted their parents goodbye.”

Instead of dismissing these experiences once the rush to report fades and the next school shooting takes over the headlines, Cox is invested in doing more.

When the shooting at a Uvalde elementary school took place, he decided he wouldn't go when the shooting first happened. He waited three weeks. He felt as though he didn't want to add fuel to the fire and make these families' lives harder.

“I'm not going [the first few days] because at this stage,” said Cox, “I don't want to be a part of the scrum of people all trying to get the same thing and all harassing the same people and knocking on the same doors.”

Where others were racing to the homes of families involved, Cox arrived and realized no one was covering the personal experiences in the aftermath of the violence. Once the dust settles and the reporters leave, these people are left with their lives completely changed and no one to listen to them.

He met [Caitlyne Gonzales](#), a girl who had experienced the shooting and lost her best friend. She was only 10 years old at the time. The first time he met her she wanted to sit him down and tell him the entire story.

While profiling Caitlyne, it became obvious that Cox would have to reiterate the fact that she was a child. With stories like hers, it's easy to hear what children experienced and try to push away how young they really are. Instead, Cox stressed that youth, a point integral in understanding the epidemic of this issue.

“We're very intentional about us to not go too long without reminding the reader that this is a child because it's really easy to identify victims of gun violence, especially children of color.” said Cox, “There's just like this natural instinct to, and I think, especially with a kid like Caitlyne. She was so smart.”

Caitlyn wanted to tell her story, much like other kids that Cox interviews. They want to be seen and understood not just because of what happened to them but despite it. They're still kids with their favorite toys, but they also speak to Congress and protest at anti-gun violence rallies on the weekends. Caitlyn also goes to play at her best friend's grave, instead of having a playdate.

Cox gives them a space to tell those stories, to be understood after the heat of the gun violence grows cold. He reminds America that these are its children and that we're failing them, not only letting them die but allowing kids to be stripped of their childhood. Before, no one was listening, ignoring the impact this trauma has had on them. Now, Cox is intently trying to understand.

“The truth is that no matter how old you are,” said Cox, “people are so desperate to be heard.”

Annabel Monaghan: The Accidental Romance Author
How One Woman Turned Her Childhood Dream Into A (Sort Of) Reality
By Maggie Vaughn

Sometimes becoming a romance author starts in the most unlikely places. Rather than sitting down at a typewriter with a cup of tea in a cottage, Annabel Monaghan's path to becoming a successful author began with a few years of working in investment banking.

Monaghan never doubted her passion for writing. She wrote stories as a little kid, became a stellar English student throughout school, and chose her college, Duke University, because of its exceptional writing program. Yet once the fantastical romanticism of becoming a writer melted away and the 'real' world crept in, she saw she was never taught how to monetize her talent.

"I realize I didn't understand the economics of being a writer," said Monaghan, "You couldn't go get a job writing in an office. That wasn't a thing. All my friends were moving to New York City and I was like 'Oh, I'm not going to be able to afford food.'"

She found herself at Goldman Sachs once reality hit, and after working there for two years, she went for her MBA at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. She convinced herself her writing career was just a childhood dream she was letting go of.

"I just had this feeling that was a cute dream I had as a kid that was improbable. And so I gave up. I didn't do any writing at all. I worked late and slept while I could. It was a writing wasteland."

Her exit from investment banking led her to her next job: motherhood. That's when Monaghan rediscovered her old love and began writing again at age 37. She started in the Young Adult genre, with her first book "A Girl Named Digit" in 2012 and "Double Digit" in 2014. Both books follow Digit, a geeky genius who hides her smarts to fit in with the popular crowd. In the first book, she cracks a terrorist's number sequence and gets thrown into an FBI investigation during her senior year of high school. The second book follows Digit to MIT where she gets into more trouble.

Between the ages of 37 and 50, she wrote those two books and a [biweekly column](#) that focuses on short personal stories. She found her way to "Nora Goes Off Script," her widely successful adult romance novel in 2022, followed quickly by "Same Time Next Summer" in 2023. In June 2024, she will release her 3rd romance book in three years, "Summer Romance."

On the other end of the phone, Monaghan sat in her quiet home office, located in a suburb outside of New York City, to escape the noise of her busy house full of painters and barking

dogs. Monaghan's blonde hair, long dresses, and sparkly smile may lead people to assume she always wanted to write romance. But that's not the case.

She had never read romance before publishing "Nora Goes Off Script," shocking to the romance community who devour their books like they're binge-watching a TV show. She never knew what a trope was until people began to categorize her stories. Typically within romance, [a trope](#) refers to a specific plot device used across the genre.

"I don't read romance, okay." said Monaghan, "I never set out to write romance. So I'm coming at this in a really backward way."

At her first marketing meeting for "Nora Goes Off Script," six months before the book was released, her team told her they would market it as both women's fiction and romance. They would see which community adopted it. Romance took it and Monaghan was suddenly a romance writer.

Once the book was published and she was thrown into the genre, Monaghan's only references were from the romance movies she grew up watching. People would tell her things about her book she didn't even realize while writing it.

"I see all these people, 'Oh, it's the trope of a famous person, regular person,' and I'm looking that up to see what it means." said Monaghan, "But now as a person who grew up watching rom-coms, I understand what a trope is"

Her favorite trope? Fake dating, where two characters pretend to date, maybe to make an ex jealous, or to get a job they want, but end up real dating. Once she knew what tropes were, she was able to see them in pieces of work she already loved.

"Like in the movie with Ryan Reynolds and Sandra Bullock. 'The Proposal' I love that movie."

While most people go to the beach and snag a cartoon-covered romance book to devour in a day, using fluffy love as a form of giddy escapism that brings them peace as the waves wash on the beach, Monaghan picks something different.

"I'm the person everybody calls for a blurb..." said Monaghan, "So yeah, I read them now. But when it's my time to be on vacation and read a book I pick up some thriller with a dead body. Like I love a dead body."

Monaghan's work is one of hundreds of others in the genre as romance has its moment. Despite the decrease in paperback book sales, romance sales increased by [52% in 2022](#). There were nearly [19 million units](#) of romance books sold in 2022, which is a peak since 2014.

Goodreads, a popular book-reviewing app, has thousands of [reviews](#) for Monaghan's novels. For reviews under "Same Time Next Summer," there are multiple comparisons to Christina Lauren's "Love and Other Words," a book with a similar second-chance teenage relationship turned adult lovers plot line.

The comparisons don't bother Monaghan. There are the big romance players: Emily Henry, Colleen Hoover, and Ali Hazelwood, whom Monaghan isn't trying to compete with. She writes her own stories and feels complimented by any comparisons, not threatened. Instead of competing she feels that these romance authors all help each other by producing books readers want to read.

"It's not like with cars - people buy more than one book." said Monaghan "So if you rediscover romcoms, you're going to immediately want to read another one. So we all sort of help each other out because the better one writer does the better we all do."

The difference between her books and the other big writers? Hers have little spice, a book community term for sex, while many of the other popular romance novels are dripping in smut scenes.

The public perception of romance and sex is that you can't have one without the other. To have romance is to have graphic, steamy, and detailed sex scenes between the two love interests. But that isn't the only way to have a well-rounded love story that feels intimate.

After the first round of edits on "Nora Goes Off Script," Monaghan's editor realized there was no sex in the novel and told her she had to sit down and write some.

"In [my editor's] first editorial letter she's like 'Wait, there's no sex. You're going to write some sex.'"

It took Monaghan three weeks of attempting to write one single sex scene. It just didn't feel right to her. Monaghan has opted for the fade-to-black scenes; where characters are implied to be having sex but it isn't described in epic detail.

"It turns out there are two ways to do it." said Monaghan, "It's either you have body parts doing a thing right? Or you have the feel of it, right? Which is what it's like when they're together."

It is always said that sex sells, and that certainly includes romance novels, but Monaghan found that there's a market for people who are not interested in reading sex scenes. Readers like her books because they fade to black. They get the same feeling of intimacy between the characters while avoiding the, sometimes admittedly, crazy sex.

One Instagram book reviewer, [@brittanyreadsbooks](#), spoke specifically about how the lack of sex is what made her like "Nora Goes Off Script." [In her review](#), she even went as far as to call out other romance books she read that were filled with smut, which made her dislike romance as a genre.

"The more I read, the more I realize that the romance genre really isn't for me." said Brittany, "I usually find it so cringy and unrealistic that I just don't care. It was refreshing to read a romance that wasn't too over the top or smutty."

She rated the book four out of five stars and said to read it if you like to "read a romance without flipping through 150 pages of smut."

Monaghan has found her audience, and they're not just readers on GoodReads or social media. Celebrated New York Times Best Selling author, blogger with 54.3k followers, award-winning podcast host, and bookstore owner Zibby Owens loves Monaghan too.

"Annabel is a genius." Owens said, "I've been reading her work since 'Does This Volvo Make My Butt Look Big' and she keeps getting better. I crave her work. She's only going to get bigger and bigger."

Despite the celebration by many, romance as a genre has a bad reputation. Romance authors are branded as 'unserious' by critics because of the sex scenes and the audience of mostly women. Although this is shifting as romance books rocket in popularity and people are more open about reading them, Monaghan has never let that bother her.

"I think that's when you laugh all the way to the bank, right?"

Monaghan is completely content with her status as an author. Her career is right where she always wanted it to be, after years of working in business, letting go of her childhood dream, and finally rediscovering it.

"I just want to keep doing this until I die."



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Photos by Veronica Wells

How do you write about a guy on campus who seems to have it all? UGBC President, Orientation Leader, Arrupe participant, APPA lead, and generally accomplished Lubens Benjamin has taken “The Company We Keep” to another level. Not only is he the most well-known person on campus, but he can back it up too.

Sitting down with Benjamin to discuss his experience with relationships at BC, I didn’t really know what to expect. Maybe there was a hidden struggle? Loneliness beneath all the popularity? For the guy who can’t walk through Gasson quad without being stopped, I was thinking that maybe it hasn’t been so easy for him and he struggles with friends just like the rest of us?

Not to say he hasn’t struggled, we all go through hard times in college with everything we have going on these days, but Lubens is one of the lucky few who has had the same friends since Orientation.

When I asked who his first friend was at BC he laughed and said “This is Awesome. Guess”. I laughed and slyly said “Chris Marenco?” “Bingo!” said Lubens “He actually was my first friend at BC! I came in at Orientation, didn’t know anybody... I finally found someone from Massachusetts who was AHANA and it was perfect timing.” Marenco is his roommate and apparently friend since Lubens’ inception as a BC student. A predictable outcome for the duo who act more like brothers than friends.

Although Marenco is clearly an important figure in Lubens’ life, it’s not just the friends that Lubens welcomes in. Almost perfectly timed, during our conversation about relationships at BC, the woman who cleans the UGBC office opens the door and comes on in. “Gloria!” Lubens sits up excitedly and says to me “I love Gloria. Gloria, how are you?” She begins to scold Lubens like a loving mother because he hasn’t had the UGBC team clean the UGBC office. As she is making her way out of the room, Lubens promises to cancel the Sunday meeting and clean everything up before next week. Talk about found community.



As Gloria meandered on out of the room and Lubens and I settled back into our conversation, we began talking about the profound impact his faculty mentors have had on his BC experience, the most notable of his mentors had a signed poster hanging right about Lubens’ head. Matt Razek, a man who has had about every title at BC, is the answer to the very tough question of Lubens’ favorite relationship at BC. “He challenges me in the best ways. I’m someone who can be very stubborn, even though I’m a nice guy or I lead well enough, he challenges me where I need to be challenged and helps me think about things differently. It’s only helped me grow as a leader and as a person.” Razek is well-known and well-loved around BC, acting as a warm mentor for many. The signed foam poster of Razek looking down and watching over Lubens seemed almost too metaphorically perfect for the moment.

What else was perfect for the moment? The unplanned and well-timed call from another one of Lubens’ good friends, Mikayla Sanchez. “Oh speaking of relationships, it’s Mikayla, one of my besties” Also a loved leader on campus as Head SAP coordinator, Mikayla has come to be one of Lubens’ deepest confidants. A quick phone call, Mikayla was just making sure that Lubens could still cook her dinner that night. In a wholesome

and family-esque style, Lubens and Mikayla have been trying to find a time to have a meal together, cooked and prepared by Lubens. It's clearly hard to schedule a time between both of the extremely involved students, but as good friends do, they prioritize each other. Mikayla is not only the answer to his dinner plans but also the answer to the deepest relationship he has here at BC. "She knows my story," says Benjamin "She is open and willing to hear everything. Being able to talk about, really, anything and I really value her for that."

Although Mikayla knows his story, his roommates have his back through anything. "At the end of the day for them, I'll always be Lubens. It's never someone with a title, someone who does this or that, I'll just always be Lubens." Not everyone on this campus is lucky enough to have so many people who feel that way about them, but Benjamin reflected during our conversation about how lucky he really is. "I'm just so lucky to have found my group of guys. I found a lot of good people early on at BC, maybe that's because I'm a good judge of character."

As our conversation about company came to a close, I wanted to get a grasp on what Benjamin thought of our theme for the print magazine this year. After a deep breath and a pause, Lubens began to say "It really is the company that you keep. They always say 'show me who your friends are and I'll show you who you are' and that's kind of true these days... I really try to see the good in every person." He really means it too. He not only tries to see the good in others, but he tries to inspire that goodness in others.

Passing Lubens a few days after our interview, he gave me a big smile, waved hello and as we walked past each other said to me "Be good." That's all Lubens Benjamin wants people to be. He wants them to be good. He wants to be good. The company we keep is only as good as the company we are to others.



going to college during a pandemic

OPINIONS / SPRING 2020 / MAGGIE VAUGHN

(seriously?)



In July, I didn't think I was going to make it to college.

I was whole-heartedly convinced I would start my new, exciting college life from the comfort and constraints of my childhood bedroom and attend what we have now dubbed "Zoom University". It wasn't until a few weeks before arriving at Boston College that I fully believed I would have to pack up my life and head to an entirely new place. To say I was nervous would be an understatement. Going into their first year of college, most students worry about making enough friends or liking their

classes. I was worried about catching a virus that has killed millions in the last 7 or so months.

When the Class of 2024 arrived on The Heights, we knew right away that the next four years were going to be vastly different from the experiences of those who came before us. As we began the move-in process, we were greeted by tables of smiling nurses equipped with nose swabs to ensure each student was tested before entering the dorms. Once we received our maroon BC bracelets, we trickled into our bare rooms with lysol

and the one parent we were allowed through the doors. Already, college was not as we had all expected it to be when we filled out our CommonApp the year prior.

It wasn't until I arrived in my quad on Upper, bed made and parents gone, that I let myself think about meeting friends. How was I supposed to find "my people?" How am I supposed to decipher what is normal for a college transition and what is caused by COVID-19?

As the weeks went on, my normally extraverted self became increasingly quiet. With only one in-person class a week, my social outlet was limited to surface-level conversations with my three randomly-assigned roommates. I began to feel myself shrink into the depths of my extra-long twin size bed.

How was I supposed to escape the feeling of social isolation?

I'm not sure if I've found the answer. But I have made some progress. Following my mom's advice, I left my door open in the hopes someone might stop by and make small talk—luckily, it worked, and I found myself walking down Commonwealth Ave to White Mountain with my new friend Katie in a matter of minutes. I slid my name and number under a neighbor's door after we had met in the communal bathroom. I even made a friend over email after the two of us entered the wrong Zoom link, and she was kind enough to send me the right one.

Despite these efforts, my weeknight routine of homework, dining hall, and more homework still left me feeling lonely. It wasn't until I heard about the virtual clubs fair that I realized this could change. Once I was able to join some campus organizations, I was able to keep myself busy and find out what actually excited me. My weeknights became jam-packed, and I've been finding myself thinking about home less and less.

That is, until the dreaded weekend hits.

On Friday nights, I feel just as stuck as I did during my first few weeks here. With the new guest-policy restricting freshmen to one guest per room and the temperature dropping, my options are becoming more limited. While some freshmen try their luck with discrete dorm room parties or ventures into the city, I usually end up cutting my losses and staying in to watch Netflix and TikTok.

For all freshmen, being social this year takes work. Without significant effort, you may find yourself stuck friendless in your dorm room. That being said, the burden shouldn't fall entirely on our shoulders. When Boston College decided to bring us to campus in person, I assumed that I would be meeting the people I would be spending the next four years with at organized and safe social gatherings. I was wrong. BC has done almost nothing—besides hold a few virtual paint nights—to encourage freshmen to mingle responsibly. On top of this, the university has chastised freshmen for gathering in large groups outside or hosting too many people in their dorm rooms. What do they expect? When 18-year-olds who have been cooped up for seven months are suddenly shoved into a life of freedom, of course they'll want to socialize.

Even though classes and student groups have provided freshmen with opportunities to meet each other, the fact that almost everything must take place over Zoom makes it hard to connect with people on a deeper level. How can you really get to know your classmates when you've never met most of them in person?

This is when it becomes difficult to distinguish between the challenges imposed by the pandemic and the challenges that are just part of freshman year. Of course it will take time to grow our relationships with one another, but Covid isn't making it any easier. Still, most of us feel incredibly grateful just to be on campus this year, especially since so many other students do not have that opportunity.

I came into this year knowing that it was going to be hard. I knew I would spend some Friday nights alone, and that I would get sick of staring at my computer screen day in and day out. Even so, I have found myself settling into college more easily than I expected. I've met some amazing people, and I cherish the friendships I have been able to make. These are the aspects of college that make me feel hopeful about the future. Freshman year struggles have been magnified and redoubled by the pandemic, but at the same time, we are coming together to make the most of this experience. Without an understanding of what "normal" is supposed to look like, it's up to us to forge our own normal over the next few years.

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Current Occupancy
53%

LIBRARY HOURS	
Monday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Tuesday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Wednesday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Thursday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Friday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Saturday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.
Sunday	10:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.



seriously?

