

Do romance novels lead to better sex for Mormon women?

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OGDEN, Utah (RNS) Mormon leaders have condemned romance novels as "soft porn," and literary critics long have railed against these fictional yarns as "dope for dupes."

So why are so many self-described Mormon feminists drinking from such a theologically poisoned well?

That's easy, say three women who've studied the genre. It's because church leaders and critics are missing the messages of independence and empowerment embedded in a genre written largely by women, for women and about women.

These novels, though often erotically explicit, seem to support many Mormon teachings, especially the primacy of monogamous marriage, childbearing and family life.

Indeed, Caroline Kline discovered that nearly every Mormon congregation she has attended has had a group of romance readers. Kline, who has a master's degree in classics from the University of California at Santa Barbara, conducted an informal survey of 40 Mormon women, who were self-described romance devotees.

More than half (54 percent) said their marital relationships (75 percent were married) were strengthened because they were more sexually interested in their husbands when reading the novels, and 40 percent said that such books made their sex lives more fulfilling.

Although 55 percent saw romance novels as pornography to some extent, Kline reported that 80 percent did not see these novels as harming their spirituality in any way.

"My women felt they deserved to have a great sex life with their spouse. They were willing to say that their sex lives matter," she said at a recent symposium sponsored by Sunstone, an independent Mormon journal. "If the books contributed to that and to the health of the marriage, then they didn't accept those negative pronouncements." Simply put, the steamy novels heated up their bedrooms and warmed their marriages.

Feminists also have reason to value this genre, said Margaret Toscano, who teaches classic literature at the University of Utah and was another Sunstone panelist.

"Romance writers and readers today do not like weak heroines; they do not like submissive or manipulative little doormats who give over their identity to men and subordinate their wills in order to get a husband," Toscano said.

"Heroines can be plain, they can be beautiful; they can be innocent or the soiled dove; they can be anti-heroines or kick-a** alpha heroines; they can be feminine or tomboys. But they cannot be stupid or utterly dependent, or women readers will reject them."

Amelia Parkin, a single Mormon who has a master's degree in English from the University of Virginia, enjoys reading the romance novels of today, but recognizes how different they are from their literary predecessors.

The hero of Kathleen Woodiwiss' 1972 book, "The Flame and the Flower," rapes the 17-year-old heroine, mistaking her for a prostitute, then marries her when she becomes pregnant.

In the 1970s and '80s, Parkin said, such heroines regularly fell in love with their abusers despite being imprisoned, kidnapped, tied up and, of course, raped.

What's changed in a lot of modern romances is the men. Some power discrepancies -- of class, money or sexual experience -- remain, she said, but "where older romances generally focus on the heroine's developmental arc, more recent romances portray the

complementary development of both hero and heroine."

Sex between these two fictional lovers now is transformative for both. She may be a virgin and he more experienced, Parkin said, but once he makes love to the heroine, the hero finds himself unable to be attracted to or involved with any other woman.

"This," she said, "will be a first for him, too, a first in terms of emotional connection and vulnerability."

What these books have in common is a more equal emotional and erotic relationship, and, the Sunstone panelists argued, both Mormons and feminists should be delighted by that message.

"For her spiritual well-being, happiness and personal growth," Toscano said, "every Mormon woman should read at least one good romance -- filled with lots of good sex -- at least once a year."