

Rom-com in the flesh

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [September 2, 2015](#) issue



SHOCKINGLY MUNDANE: Sharon and Rob (Sharon Horgan and Rob Delaney) explore the messy facts of love. © 2015 Amazon Studios. All rights reserved.

"Why Harry Wouldn't Meet Sally in 2013" was one of many headlines announcing the death of the romantic comedy. The notices extended well into 2014 with articles on "Who Killed the Romantic Comedy?" and "The Romantic Comedy Is Dead."

Some would suggest that romantic comedy had it coming. The genre was formulaic and relied on outdated ideas about finding love. We are better off without the stereotypes about men and women that it perpetuated. Someone should have eradicated it years ago, like polio.

Enter two new romantic comedies: *Trainwreck*, from Amy Schumer and Judd Apatow, and *Catastrophe*, Sharon Horgan and Rob Delaney's TV series on Amazon.

Do *Trainwreck* and *Catastrophe* herald a true resurrection of the genre? Or are they merely a grotesque reanimation? Reanimation of a dead genre is like the dead bodies in horror stories that come back to life; the result is disgusting and terrifying. Resurrection works in continuity with the thing that has died but transforms it and makes it new.

In *Trainwreck*, Amy Schumer plays a character who's had a series of no-strings-attached lovers. Four different actors are named on the cast list as "one-night stand guy." But when Amy meets a surgeon named Aaron Connors (Bill Hader), she abandons one-night stands—slowly, against her will and against her self-

definition—for a loving relationship.

In *Catastrophe*, Sharon and Rob (played by the writers) have “a bit of fun” while Rob is on a business trip in London. When Sharon finds out she is pregnant, the affair turns into a commitment and then a marriage.

Old romantic comedies began with the assumption that the heroine is looking for love and longing for a soul mate. But in *Trainwreck*, Amy, who is scarred by her parent’s divorce, declares herself incapable of monogamy. She must be convinced, through a long, painful process, that she wants to love the good man who loves her. In *Catastrophe*, Sharon doesn’t appear to be looking for anything until a surprise pregnancy leads her to reevaluate her life. These heroines—older, wiser, even jaded—are no ingenues. They’re smart, funny, and warm, and men have to be their equals.

The other new thing in these rom-coms is their raunchiness: they trade on the fleshy, messy facts of embodied life and of sex. There are jokes about death, tampons, cervixes, and “geriatric pregnancy.” Their comedic lifeblood is bodily fluids and functions, and the couples’ lives are thoroughly tethered to the mundane.

With that fleshiness come portrayals of relationships of warmth and intimacy. *Trainwreck* and *Catastrophe* don’t end with the kiss that comes with happily ever after; they begin with a kiss, and then trudge through the messiness of human happiness. When they embrace that messiness and the love that comes with it at the end of a hard day, they’re embracing imperfect life without airbrushing.

But what makes these romantic comedies worth watching is that they take women and men seriously. The films refuse to suppose that men and women need to laugh in separate theaters, watching separate stereotyped genres. In *Trainwreck* and *Catastrophe*, smart, talented women take the stigma out of the romantic comedy. They reach through the clichés to insist that hard-won laughter and love aren’t anachronisms. In the resurrected romantic comedy, love is broken and costly. The comedy manages to be tender even as it pokes fun at sentimentality and snubs the illusions of pornography.