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A Consumption of Gay Men: Navigating the Shifting Boundaries of M/M Romantic Readership

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## Introduction

It is no surprise to readers of the romance genre that some of their favorite novels are treated as the bastard children of popular literature. One just has to look at the blank and concerned face of a staff-member at any bookstore other than a mass-chain to realize that these novels are not being represented with the rest in these stores; even science-fiction, a close cousin to the romance novel gets some shelf space at these places. Instead, romances are relegated to pharmacies, grocery stores, and airport stop-and-shops. What's surprising is that romance novels continue to have this bad-girl reputation when romance novel compromise 17% of adult fiction, outselling almost all other fiction, besides the category of "general fiction."<sup>1</sup> There were 9,513 romance ISBNs registered in 2013 alone and that same year the industry had estimated annual total sales valued at \$1.08 billion.<sup>2</sup> Romance is used largely as an umbrella term that encompasses a number of different subgenres including: regency, contemporary, paranormal, and even Amish, to name a few.

In recent years, one of these subgenres has vastly risen in popularity, almost paradoxically to expectations; this subgenre is male/male romance novels. It does seem perhaps a little peculiar that m/m romances have become quite so popular in a genre that primarily features women as readers and writers.<sup>3</sup> Often m/m romance novels feature women primarily in minor supporting roles, if they feature women at all.<sup>4</sup> However, ever since at least the turn of the

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Rodale, *Dangerous Books for Girls: The Bad Reputation of Romance Novels, Explained* (New York: Maya Rodale, 2015), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> According to her surveys, Rodale projects that 84% of romance readers are women, while men compose 16%, *Dangerous Books for Girls*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> The decision to "m/m romance" instead of "gay romance" for the purposes of this paper is deliberate. Using m/m allows for the flexibility of using of books in which the male characters might be on GBT spectrum, such as one of the heroes being bisexual and falling in love with a man. M/m also avoids the use of the word "queer," which still carries with it a number of negative connotations and allows for more precision in defining which part of the LGBT spectrum this article will be discussing.

century, the popularity of these novels has been on the rise, reasons for which will be explored below. According to a survey of 1,500 m/m romance readers, “85% of gay romance readers are women, 12% are men, and 58% are 30 to 50 years of age.”<sup>5</sup> These numbers are almost similar to the overall statistics of romance readers, prompting us to wonder if there is a great deal of cross-over between women who read m/m romance and women who read heterosexual or straight romance. Freely continues that this number is subject to change as the subgenre becomes even more popular, which no doubt has happened since the survey’s publication in 2013. It is also noted that “[g]ay romance is a young genre, only existing commercially since about 2004. Many readers are still discovering it. In fact, 74% of survey respondents have been reading gay romance for less than five year. At this point in time, discoverability remains a big issue.”<sup>6</sup>

Due to the relatively recent popularity of m/m romance novels, there has been little work done on the genre as a source of academic study. Much of the discussion about and around m/m romance takes place on personal blogs, twitter feeds and other romance community gathering places like popular genre websites and Goodreads. These areas have been the sources for much of the information contained in this paper. It is this precise lack of academic scholarship which makes m/m romance novels the perfect place for study. An often overlooked but popular literary genre, romance novels generate space for authors to engage with shifting socio-political boundaries, within the real world and the margins of their genre. Questions of what happens when a genre widely known to by women, for women, and—until recently—about women, shift to embrace works where women feature so little lie at the heart of this paper. This project is concerned with the currently shifting landscape of romances novels as a predominantly women-

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<sup>5</sup> Jessica Freely, “Reading gay romance,” *The Popular Romance Project*, October 17, 2013, <http://popularromanceproject.org/reading-gay-romance/> (accessed March 13, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

centered space is beginning sharing space with men who are interested in men. A change in community such as this requires attention to issues which had never before needed to be considered, at the same time it opens up potential for romance novels to produce cutting-edge transformative works.

As acceptance has grown of LGBT identities, there has been a corresponding boom in the appearance of m/m romance novels, that is, novels featuring at least two male characters who are attracted to, and enter into a relationship with, each other. This acceptance of a previously marginalized identity into the genre of mainstream romance does not come without its host of struggles, many of which seem to center around the fact that the majority of its authors and readers are female. This demographic raises questions concerning fetishization, appropriation and permitted authorship. As the popularity of m/m romance novels continues to grow, authors and readers have needed to navigate these questions and concerns as a community. It will be the purpose of this paper to showcase why women both read and write m/m romances, what issues are presented by a female majority reading and writing in this genre, and how one female m/m author, K.J. Charles, is addressing these issues in the novels that she produces.

### **History of Gay Romance Novels**

Before we can begin understanding the current debates around the genre of m/m romance, we must examine how some of the currently contested issues have a historical precedence, set forth by the progenitors of m/m novels and the way its digital nature contributed to the formation of the debates that still circulate around the modern m/m romance novel. For a relatively new genre in the overall history of popular romances, tracing the history of m/m romance novels is a rather difficult exercise. Gay literature itself has a storied history with novels

dating from the early twentieth century, if not well before; E.M. Forster's *Maurice* was written in 1913, for example.<sup>7</sup> While these novels were not widely available for consumption and even illegal to publish in the United States under the 1873 Comstock Law, gay literature existed in an underground subculture for those who knew what to look for.<sup>8</sup> Creating a history for a gay novel in general is not such a difficult exercise as creating a history for m/m romances. It seems nigh on impossible to identify the first m/m romance novel, making the origins of this subgenre of romance difficult to pinpoint as well. However, we do know that genre only seems to be less than twenty years old, practically an infant in terms of other areas of romance novels. Part of the difficulty in tracing the path of the m/m romance novel could possibly come from the fact that the genre is still emerging and we as an audience do not have very much of a distance from the beginning of the genre as a whole. Perhaps as our knowledge of m/m romance continues to expand, we will have more resources to trace its history.

Nevertheless, there are a number of facts we know for certain when discussing m/m romances. Two of the first novels featuring two male characters in love were published by Running Press, a subsidiary of global book moguls Hachette Book Group: "In spring 2009, Philadelphia-based publishing house Running Press premiered a new line of M/M soft-core erotica designed to tap this growing market, based on research indicating that M/M was among

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<sup>7</sup> E.M. Forster, *Maurice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971). Though written during 1913-14, *Maurice* was not published until 1971 by the executors of Forester's estate, after his death in 1970.

<sup>8</sup> A federal act for "Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use," also known as the Comstock Act after Anthony Comstock, its main proponent. This act "covered every 'obscene, lewd, lascivious, or filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print, or other publication of an indecent character,' as well as 'any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion' and 'any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use.'" (Whitney Strub, *Obscenity Rules: Roth v. United States and the Long Struggle over Sexual Expression* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 16.) The Comstock Law made it illegal to distribute contraception information and rigidly defined pornography through the mail, stunting the emerging Women's and LGBT movements in America.

the fastest-growing trend in the billion-dollar juggernaut that is romantic fiction.”<sup>9</sup> Both of these novels were historicals rather than contemporary romances, set in England between the 16th- and the 19<sup>th</sup>-centuries. *False Colors: An M/M Romance* by Alex Beecroft tells the story of Alfie and John, two sailors going from the Algiers to the Caribbean to put an end to the slave trade, while an author using the pen name Erastes wrote *Transgressions: An M/M Romance*, the love story between two iron workers set among the puritanical views of the Middle Ages and English witch-hunts.<sup>10</sup> The very titles of these books reveal the transformative nature of these works. The marker “An M/M Romance” was necessarily to differentiate the new novels from the sea of heterosexual romance novels that primarily made up the market. This additions would allow readers to both find these novels if they were interested in a growing genre, as well as provide a warning of sorts to readers who would not expect these books among the other Running Press offerings. As the genre has progressed, there necessity of including “An M/M Romance” at the end of book titles has been dropped completely. Instead, readers generally know what they are getting into with m/m romances and actively seek them out; there is no longer a need to identify them as Running Press had to do with its first two novels. With their two novels, Beecroft and Erastes formed the backbone of the emerging m/m romance genre as it was being picked up by larger publishing houses. A true sign that this subgenre has cemented its place in popular literature is the fact that “even Harlequin, the oldest and most uptight of the romance publishing houses, is getting in on the hot M/M action with its new imprint, Carina Press.”<sup>11</sup> Other imprints

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<sup>9</sup> Cintra Wilson, “W4M4M?” *OUT Magazine*, August 17, 2010, <http://www.out.com/entertainment/2010/08/17/w4m4m> (accessed January 17, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Alex Beecroft, *False Colors: An M/M Romance* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009); Erastes, *Transgressions: An M/M Romance* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, “W4M4M?”

of romance publishing houses began to follow the money in the same way as Harlequin, by creating their own m/m romance imprints.

Identifying the origins of m/m romances in publishing houses is relatively easy; however, we must question the underlying movement towards m/m romances that got these large publishers to notice them in the first place. Much like any other decision, a good deal of market research went into the decision to publish m/m romances: “‘Our research indicates that M/M is the fastest-growing trend in the romance genre,’ says Running Press Associate Publisher Craig Herman. ‘We recognized an opportunity in the marketplace.’”<sup>12</sup> Herman’s statement causes readers to question in turn just how m/m romance became popular enough for Running Press to pick it up, even though nothing in the genre had not previously been published by another large publishing house. How had these readers been getting enough of these stories to make the big publishers stand up and take notice? The answer to this question also reveals just why it is so difficult to trace the history of m/m romance: self-publishing.

A deal of the difficult with creating a timeline for m/m romance comes from attempting to trace a genre that is largely digital. As electronic readers become more prevalent, the necessity of printed romance has been greatly reduced. While it is highly unlikely that any category of literature, including all genres of romance, will become completely digital we can certainly see trends in the ways readers can access the materials they are interested in reading. With m/m romance this access originally and continues to largely come in the form of self-published books. This has the possibility of changing as more publishing houses create imprints specifically for the publication of m/m novels; however, the importance of self-publishing in m/m romances cannot be overstated. In an interview with *Smart Podcast, Trashy Books* m/m reviewer Jay from

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<sup>12</sup> Gendy Alimurung, “Man on Man: The New Gay Romance,” *LA Weekly*, December 16, 2009, <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/man-on-man-the-new-gay-romance-2162963> (accessed January 1, 2017).



the popular blog *Joyfully Jay* notes that “self pub is really a major part of the genre, and we get tons of books that are, you know, that are available that way.”<sup>13</sup> Self-publishing is especially crucial in the formation and exploration of new romance genres, particularly in areas such as m/m where there is only starting to be a large amount of stories coming from larger publishing houses. The independence and freedom inherent in self-publishing allows established and aspiring writers to get their feet wet in the genre and also allows room for experimentation that larger publishing houses are either unable or unwilling to produce.<sup>14</sup>

This experimentation is the expected inheritance of m/m romance when we begin to consider what factors account for its rise in popularity. The beginning of the m/m genre with digital origins has often been linked to a perhaps rather unexpected source: fanfiction. Defined as “fiction that utilizes pre-existing characters and settings from a literary or media text. Fanfiction (‘fanfic’ or ‘fic,’ for short) differs from other forms of ‘recursive’ fiction...by its unofficial methods of distribution.”<sup>15</sup> Fanfiction originally started in the form of self-published zines, where other interested fans would sign up for mailing lists and purchase these zines to gain access to the fiction produced by other fans. This method of production necessitated a small reach, as fans must have the income to purchase these zines or attend conventions. Essentially, like with gay fiction, readers would have to know the right people or look in the right places in

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah and Jane, *M/M Romance and Recommendations: An Interview with Joyfully Jay*, podcast audio, Smart Bitches Trashy Books, MP3, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/podcast/134-mm-romance-and-recommendations-an-interview-with-joyfully-jay/#transcript>.

<sup>14</sup> Self-publishing does of course have its drawbacks for the romance community. The large portion of self-published stories, particularly in the m/m subgenre have managed to cultivate an aura of unrespectability, much more so than the bad reputation persistently lurking around the romance genre in general. While many excellent books come about because of self-publishing, there is an undeniable overall lack of consistency in self-published romance novels which is made much more noticeable as digitalization and self-publishing collide to make the publication process easier. Romance naysayers latch on to these poorer quality books and use them as a justification for their malignance towards the genre in general and the subgenre of m/m romance specifically.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Tosenberger, “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction,” *Children’s Literature* 36 (2008): 185.

order to access the content. With the rise of the internet, the dissemination of fanfiction moved from zines to private listserves and yahoo groups, where fans could share their work with each other electronically. These listserves also involved a certain level of knowing the right person, but with the rise of personal blogging sites such as LiveJournal, this fan generated content became accessible to anyone with a computer and a working internet connection. As fanfiction began to be consolidated to specific sites such as Fanfiction.net and the recently popular ArchiveofOurOwn (AO3 for short), fans are able to access thousands of stories with various pairings and tropes all in one place.

Although fans have been engaging with their favorite media for centuries, the rise of fandom allowed a new type of interaction to be produced and this would not have been popular without the ground-breaking *Star Trek* program. Fanfiction can be categorized into a number of different “genres” based on the characters involved and the relationships present. The three most popular include: “gen,” for general fiction, in which there is no romantic relationship, which might explore the friendship between any particular characters or focus more fully on the thoughts of just one; “het,” or heterosexual pairings, where the romantically involved characters consist of a man and a woman; and “slash,” where the relationship is between two characters of the same sex or two characters who do not identify as men or women. It is the last of these that the 1966 television program *Star Trek* helped popularize.<sup>16</sup> The term “slash” to notate same-sex pairings originated in *Star Trek* fan culture in the 1970’s, “referring to the punctuation mark separating the characters’ names (Kirk/Spock). The ‘X/Y’ model indicated that the major romantic pairing was homosexual. . . . Although later fandoms adopted the slash punctuation mark for all romantic pairings (i.e., Hermione/Ron), the term ‘slash’ stuck, retaining its original

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<sup>16</sup> *Star Trek*, creator Gene Roddenberry, perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelly, NBC, September 1966-June 1969.

meaning of homoerotic romance.”<sup>17</sup> These slash pairings were and continue to be extremely popular with readers, leading to slash pairings to be considered the majority in fandom spaces. The creation of Internet-based fandoms allowed for readers and authors to explore their interests in slash, at a time when same-sex relationships were virtually non-existent in mainstream media.

The importance of slash fiction to the rise of m/m romance novels cannot be overstated. This new area of the internet allowed readers and authors a great extent of freedom for experimentation. Fan works were not being monitored by any outside authority besides the fans themselves, unlike the oversight that would come from both larger and minor publishing houses. Fanfiction was easy to publish to a wide number of readers who had the ability to access these stories without much trouble, and more importantly, it was free to write and read. The only existing obstacle seems to be the authors’ imaginations. This freedom of creation allows for the “potential to encounter and experiment with alternate modes of sexual discourse, particularly queer discourse.”<sup>18</sup> The much older cultural phenomenon of fanfiction was the catalyst for emerging writers to begin to consider the possibility of writing stories between two characters of the same gender. In his interviews with women who read and write m/m romance, Knight found a few respondents admitted that they first found the genre by reading and writing slash fiction in various fandoms before they thought to look for m/m romance novels.<sup>19</sup>

The digital history of m/m romance has also influenced the genre in perhaps an even more noticeable way. As self-publishing became a more convenient avenue for emerging authors to explore, those who had participated in fandom spaces began to transform their fanfictions for publication. This was a move employed by authors called “pull-to-publish” or P2P. This would

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<sup>17</sup> Tosenberger, “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts,” 186.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance* (Albion, NY: MLR Press, 2012).

often happen when a particular story had become popular in the fandom and the author would remove it in order to try and publish it for profit, after changing the names and other important information, of course.<sup>20</sup> The prevalence of pull-to-publish has diminished in recent years, but not before allowing a space for authors to transform their slash fiction into published works, most often appearing as m/m romance novels. While not all or even most m/m romance novels are pulled-to-publish stories, the close connection between slash fiction and m/m romance allows us to see how each genre might inform each other as readers and authors begin to cross over.

The interdependence of these two genres allow m/m romance authors to note the similarities in conventions and attitudes that mark each. The similarities between m/m romance and slash fiction can be found in areas such as popular tropes and character attributes. One author considers these points of similarity as opening up the way for self-reflection and self-awareness in the m/m romance genre. Authors have “inherited a boatload of conventions from het romance, fanfic, and slashfic as we started.”<sup>21</sup> Part of this self-reflection, Lloyd argues, is due in part to m/m romance still being a relatively new genre. M/m romance is a heavily influenced genre from a variety of different corners and this necessarily means that there is going to be a period of fluctuation, before the genre understands its various intricacies and the values that it stands for. In addition to similar conventions, slash fiction and m/m romance novels also have similar audiences. In a blog post discussing whether women can or should write m/m romance, male m/m author Jamie Fessenden states: “Not to put too fine a point on it, MM Romance—in my opinion—does not owe its origin to mainstream gay fiction. It comes from slashfic...it

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<sup>20</sup> P2P was particularly popular when the fervor around *Twilight* had reached its zenith and many stories from that fandom were converted to for-profit works. The most popular of these was the cultural hit *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its subsequent books that had previous been published under the fanfiction titled “Master of the Universe.”

<sup>21</sup> Lloyd A. Meeker, “About Who Writes M/M Romance,” *Lloyd A. Meeker Weblog*, comment posted July 5, 2014, <http://lloydmeeker.com/> (accessed January 19, 2017).

descended from slashfic, and the gender demographics haven't changed a lot. The majority of writers are still female, and the majority of *readers* are female."<sup>22</sup> We have previously seen admissions that slash fiction causes a crossover of readers into m/m romance.<sup>23</sup> As we question why women are interested in m/m romance (and thusly slash fiction) and what affect their presence has on the genre, we must also question the ways in which fandom participation has helped to construct and influence their ideas in regards to m/m romance novels.

We've seen how a number of factors make the history of m/m romance novels hard to track. The rise of digitalization in particular has played an immense role in the formulation of this romantic subgenre. Self-publishing makes it virtually impossible to determine the first m/m romance novel, but also allows for more freedom of expression and experimentation by authors. Through self-published books, readers are given easier access to novels through services provided by e-readers and often can purchase books at a lower expense than those that come from larger publishing houses. The largely digital nature of m/m romances are a hold-over from their main predecessor, slash fanfiction. Slash fic provided many of the tropes that m/m romance still concerns itself with today and allowed a number of readers and authors to test the waters with same-sex relationships before they made the full venture into m/m romance. Slash fiction created a space for authors to experiment with different themes and to test their stories before adapting them for publication. This history reveals a number of clues as to how m/m romance came to initially be published and how it continues to rise in popularity with romance readers, even if its origins remain shrouded in mystery for now; however, this information also raises

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<sup>22</sup> Jamie Fessenden, "My take on women writing MM Romance," *Jamie Fessenden's Blog* Weblog, entry posted June 28, 2014, <http://jamiefessenden.com/> (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*

questions as to why a mainly female audience would want to even read stories about two men, often without any female representation, in the first place.

### **Why Women Read and Write M/M Romance**

Non-romance readers often wonder about the ability of women to read and write romance novels focused entirely on men or their desire to do so. This is a question women have been negotiating since the m/m romance genre gained a measure of popularity that seems both surprising and unexpected. The choices on what we write and read are of course personal and probably not able to be understood completely, but we also are able to identify specific trends and patterns to why women would engage with this specific romance subgenre over the plethora of others. While critics can claim that women reading these novels are engaging in anti-feminist practice, it is not the intent of this paper to prove this claim one way or another. This debate has been played out on blogposts and author websites all over the Internet and it would not behoove us to attempt to engage in it here. This section is intended to examine these women's reasons for reading and writing m/m romance in their own words, without offering a value judgement on whatsoever their reasons might be.

Women readers of this genre are often asked by outsiders how they can stand to read something that by its very nature does not necessarily need to include women at all, to which we can reply, rather easily. As Pamela Regis points out to readers in her history of the romance genre: "The romance is the most female of popular genres. Nearly all of the writers and readers are women. Men have traditionally controlled which books get reviewed, and the effort that they must make to read across the genre barrier is every great. Women read across this barrier much

more readily, the practice having been acquired early on in their reading lives.”<sup>24</sup> Female readers have always been forced to identify with male characters, in order to have wider access to the world of literature and especially the literary canon. While heterosexual, straight romances upset this balance and allow women to connect with female characters in ways that have not been available before, female readers did not lose this ability. M/m romances give readers the same emotionality and level of feeling which they have come to expect from straight romances, merely without a major female character. This romance without the female character is actually a reason women feel gravitated towards m/m romances as opposed to straight ones, which people would expect them to prefer. This reason will be explained in more detail below. Reading m/m romance does not require these women to learn a new skill, but rather relies on one women readers have been employing their whole lives, particularly in a world where as “Jane Tompkins notes that in our culture ‘stories about men...function as stories about all people,’ so ‘women learn at an early age to identify with male heroes.’”<sup>25</sup> An understanding of the lives of women readers *as* women readers helps to explain why their reading m/m romance novels is not as obscure of a choice as it might seem. We have always been instructed to understand and often sympathize with a male lead character even if the narrative itself is forcing us away from doing such, so two intentionally likeable, romantic male characters present much less of a challenge for women to read than would otherwise be assumed.

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<sup>24</sup> Pamela Regis, *The Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), xii.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 17, quoted in Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, xii.

*Teaches about Acceptance*

A Goodreads poll was conducted by user Lisa Arbitrary, in order to celebrate the release of *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance?* The poll was open to the site's users and published September 2, 2012 and it collected 394 total votes to a number of answers to the question "Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?"<sup>26</sup> The most popular response, with 85 votes, was "I love reading about acceptance. Two men in love are just beautiful." This acceptance can come from within the narrative itself or from the way readers feel about the characters. One responder who calls herself Nathalie writes in the comments: "honestly, reading m/m has made me a different person, it's so freeing if that makes sense. Besides the angsty moments, I'm a happier person now!"<sup>27</sup> It would seem that the explicit acceptance in m/m romances novels the readers are encountering is promoting an implicit acceptance within their own real lives, causing at least this one user to engage more positively with the world. When responding to another user who comments that characters are treated more normally than they would be in a straight romance, Arbitrary posts: "I'm sure there are degrees to all of those types in a variety of books, but you are so right, it's the acceptance factor that makes reading m/m so comfortable. I think was always struggling to find that before discovering m/m."<sup>28</sup> The acceptance the books themselves displayed to different characters allows some readers to feel more of an acceptance towards themselves extending from the narrative. And these might not only be passive lessons, but also more active ones, as noted by another user. "I think though, in gay romance, I do see a trend toward an even footing. In straight romance I don't often find that. It exists sure, but it isn't

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<sup>26</sup> Lisa Arbitrary, "Poll: Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Genre?" *Goodreads*, posted September 7, 2012, <http://www.goodreads.com/poll/show/71069-why-do-you-read-m-m-romance-books-bc-why-straight-women-love-gay-romanc?order=a&page=1> (accessed December 30, 2016). This poll is still running, so the statistics taken from it are based on the access date, not current numbers.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, comment #4 posted September 5, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, comment #167 posted March 15, 2016.



standard. It seems to me there is an underlying wave of activism in many glbt books trying to subtly change the message(s). One being the, ‘who’s the girl’, misconception.”<sup>29</sup> This user does not call what is happening acceptance, instead preferring activism; however, it functions in much of the same way. Often times it seems that m/m romances are trying to do one by invoking the other, in that they are attempting to promote acceptance through activism while also displaying their own acceptance within the novels as a form of activism itself. This trend towards activism is also another reason women find themselves reading m/m romances.

### *Guides Activism*

Some romance readers and writers allow their interactions with m/m romance to inform their daily activism. They use the lessons they learn from romances to advocate for causes like marriage equality and further rights for LGBT people throughout the world. One poll respondent explains her choice in choosing this answer: “reading and being a member of this group gave me the impetus to support marriage equality beyond voting.”<sup>30</sup> They go on to say that they have written papers for college about the Defense of Marriage Act and have written their own m/m short story, based on their experiences with reading m/m romances. Another poll respondent, Tina, tells other users: “For me it is a combination of men being vulnerable and emoting honestly. It drives my acceptance and activism. I am much more open minded and liberal than before I started reading M/M.”<sup>31</sup> Based on this comment, Tina did not seem to come into the m/m romance genre as liberal and accepting as she is now, like others think. It seems to be a common perception that readers of m/m romance are already accepting of the men within the stories, enough so that even authors share this assumption. In responding to a commenter on his

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., comment 20 posted September 2, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., comment 72 posted September 8, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., comment 10 posted September 5, 2012.

blog post, Lloyd Meeker writes: “You raise an interesting point about our stories being an inspirational agent, maybe even educational, for women who are still unsure about the legitimacy of same-sex attraction. I’ve always assumed that our readership had accepted already accepted that [sic.] Something for me to think about.”<sup>32</sup> However, Tina’s comment show us that readers come to m/m romance without a sense of activism and might not, in fact, be fully convinced about the legitimacy of what they are reading.

One m/m romance author describes how her writing influenced her everyday activism. Jen is a self-professed “faghag of the highest order. And love[s] it!”<sup>33</sup> As an author, she was attempting to meet gay men to lend her books a level of authenticity that she as a straight woman cannot provide. She tells Knight: “When I was trying to meet some gay men, I asked A.J. Llewlllyn where a good place for a middle-aged woman could go and not be obnoxiously out of place. He suggested PFLAG...The leader of the local chapter was gracious if not confused when I asked to attend a meeting, since I was neither gay nor did I have an LGBT child. I ended up on the board of Greater Boston PFLAG a year later.”<sup>34</sup> Through research for her books, Jen became an active crusader for LGBT rights in the Boston area and allowed her reading and writing to transform an important aspect of her self-identity. Fellow author Jamie Fessenden includes on his blog “My take on women writing MM Romance” that he thinks “this genre has been good for the LGBTQ community. It’s expanding our acceptance with both readers and publishers, and it’s influenced the way a lot of people vote on gay rights issues. I have no doubt that it’s expanded the acceptance of same-sex marriage in this country and others.”<sup>35</sup> Both readers and authors

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<sup>32</sup> Meeker, “About Who Writes M/M Romance,” comment posted July 5, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 1277.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, location 1294. PFLAG is the acronym of the group Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, committed to total equality for LGBT people. They also are known for offering counseling for LGBT people and their family members.

<sup>35</sup> Fessenden, “My take on women writing MM Romance.”

seem themselves and their work as being acted upon by their acceptance of and interaction with m/m romance, largely in a positive way.

*A Better Understanding of Differing Experiences*

Another reason women cited as motivating their reading of m/m romance is so that they might gain a better understanding of a number of different aspects, including everything from their own lives, to men in general, to gay relationships in particular. One reader notes that the genre of m/m romance is “just so much more wide open, for us (women). It’s discovering the unknown and to an extent it will always be unknowable. One of the weirdest things is how much I’ve learned about ‘me’ from reading about men loving men.”<sup>36</sup> This critical self-examination seems to be extremely prevalent for readers of m/m romance. Something about the books, the characters or the genre prompts them to undertake a more full understanding of self that they would not have achieved before. Reader Dolorianne affirms this statement in Knight’s book when she tells him: “With each new story, I was uncovering subconscious thoughts and reconciling them with a new understanding; actually thinking instead of assuming.”<sup>37</sup> The kind of reflection Dolorianne undertakes reveals her own previously unrealized naivety in her understanding of gay men. This realization would lead her to reconsider her perceptions of the world, causing a shift in her fundamental understanding. Another Goodreads commenter suggests that m/m romances are literally a mirror for readers, to be reflected onto themselves as they read: “Gay romance has also given me another outlet for learning more about myself. No character does critical self-examination like a gay man preparing to come out. We evolve and grow with every experience, thought, feeling. This is one more mirror.”<sup>38</sup> Though the readers

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<sup>36</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 79 posted September 10, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 851.

<sup>38</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 90 posted September 11, 2012.

might not be able to relate to the experiences of the gay men of whom they are reading about, they are nevertheless able to learn about themselves through reading and writing these novels.

In opposition to the lofty goal of learning about themselves through their interactions with m/m romance novels, other readers simply want to learn more about men and the experience of being a gay man. Part of the attraction for these readers is the inaccessibility in their ordinary lives. The appeal of the unknown is particularly attracting for both readers and writers of the m/m genre. Romance author Ally tells Knight: “If I’m honest, I think the reason the male/male romantic relationship draws me the way it does, as a reader and a writer, is because I can’t ever be a part of that relationship. As human beings we’re always drawn to the unknown and unknowable.”<sup>39</sup> Reading m/m romance might not make relationships between two men completely knowable to female readers, but it can certainly make them feel more known. This is not just a feature that applies to straight women either. As a response to the Goodreads poll, Kerry writes, “I read M/M romance books because I love to read about things that are outside my experience. As a women [sic] and a lesbian M/M romance is not something I can personally experience accept [sic] in books.”<sup>40</sup> People from all walks of life use m/m romance novels as a way to understand not only the gay male experience, but also men in general. Erica, another straight female author of m/m romance tells Knight in an interview: “I think this is the perfect genre for straight women. It gives them a great insight into men to better understand them, but they’ll also be able to see men in a different light. My own appreciation of and outlook on men has changed a lot since I started reading the genre.”<sup>41</sup> Goodreads commenter Tina perhaps said it best when she referred to the genre as a mirror. The books do not feature women

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<sup>39</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 1118.

<sup>40</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 139 posted September 17, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 1573.

in major roles the way straight romance novels do, but perhaps this simply allows for the women writing and reading them to reflect more fully on the intended and accidental lessons of m/m romance novels. By stepping back from women's roles in the book, they can begin to more fully understand how these novels might provide the catalyst for understand multiple aspects of their lives.

### *Lack of Heroines*

As derogatory as it might seem, a large impetus for many readers to enter into the world of m/m romances is due to the lack of heroines. The reasons for embracing this lack of female characters typically fall into three categories. Firstly, the reason female readers object most vehemently towards female characters are due to purely anti-feminist, misogynistic reasons. This can be exemplified in explicit statements against female protagonists such as Goodreads user Silkeeeeeee, who “answer was Other and my explanation is that very few Heroins [sic] in FM do anything other than irritate the living hell out of me. Two men, that’s just hot and no irritation. Yeah!”<sup>42</sup> Others assert these prejudices in more subtle ways, by indicating that they are a secondary reason to other, more important reasons. After going through the whole list of reasons available on the poll, user Jen comments: “I’ll add a delightful lack of TSTL [Too Stupid To Live] whiney-ass, bitchy heroines.”<sup>43</sup> While these comments reek of misogynistic undertones, other reasons have slightly more validity. Elisa takes a slightly different approach. She attempts to adapt a similar concept as Regis, where she states “the female reader identifies herself with the hero and not the heroine, and that is the reason why the hero is so strong in the romance novel in comparison to the heroine. If I adapt this concept to the M/M romance, there is no problem of

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<sup>42</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 134 posted September 12, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., comment 7 posted September 5, 2012.

identification, the female reader can pick both heroes without having to choose and she is not annoyed by the weak heroine.”<sup>44</sup> This reason seems slightly more plausible and certainly less internally misogynistic. Yet other reasons are built from even more understandable cloth.

The second citation for the lack of heroines being a draw of m/m romances is more freedom in terms of storylines and from concerns of abuse. This reason was speculated in “Man on Man: The New Gay Romance” as the article attempted to uncover the attraction m/m romance held for women. Linda Williams, a “Berkeley professor who wrote the first serious book about porn film, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible,’* suggests a similar freedom – specifically one from worry. When women watch straight pornography, there’s always the problem of who’s on top, or who’s on the bottom. ‘On the other hand,’ Williams says, ‘if you’re watching two men have sex, you don’t have to worry about a woman being mishandled, or abused or overpowered.’”<sup>45</sup> Disregarding the equation of m/m romance with pornography, Williams raises a point that is shared with many readers and writers within the genre. One commenter named Hannah on the Goodreads poll writes of her concern regarding the use of sexism within what she perceives to be most m/f romance novels: “I find that eliminating the female character altogether removes a lot of that frustration [of traditional (unequal) gender roles]. It sounds odd to say that I read m/m because I’m a feminist, but it’s actually true.”<sup>46</sup> This reader overcomes her mistrust of straight romance novels by focusing her reading and spending power on m/m romances instead, because she knows she is almost guaranteed to not see women forced into traditional roles that other novels have a history of forcing them into. The freedom from concerns of abuse is only one of the freedoms perceived by m/m romance readers and

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<sup>44</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Read Gay Romance*, location 915.

<sup>45</sup> Alimurung, “Man on Man: The New Gay Romance”

<sup>46</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 14 posted September 5, 2012.

writers. Author of one of the first mass published m/m romances Erastes, offers one of the reasons why she writes m/m historicals as opposed to another genre: “the main reason I write Regency-era novels which only feature men in [sexual and emotional situations] is that the Regency female character isn’t as interesting to me. She has to be a blue stocking or some sort of slave abolitionist or supremely feisty. With gay historicals, I feel you have the option to break the stereotypes and have your protagonists go off on swashbuckling adventures as well as unpredictable romances.”<sup>47</sup> This flexibility of plot neatly side-steps the question of historical realism when it comes to the roles women in the Regency and Victorian eras. Because of real world sexism, it is more believable for male characters to engage in adventures where women might have previously had their options limited.

The final reason female readers and writers might gravitate towards a dearth of female characters could be the lack of comparison between those characters and readers. Often time’s heroines are written in such a way as to make audiences believe that their happy ending is nothing less than they deserve. They may have flaws, but these can be overcome or overlooked by their love interest in a way some women might not find possible in the real world. One woman elaborates this problem within the context of m/m romances: “I would like to add that when I read m/m, as a woman, I don’t compare myself to the MCs [Main Characters]. If I’m reading m/f, I’m always subconsciously comparing myself to the female MC and therefore shut down some storylines. I just can’t picture myself doing some of those things. With m/m, I’m free to enjoy all storylines.”<sup>48</sup> This inability for the reader to compare themselves to the male heroes allow for them to submerge themselves more fully into the story and not become distracted as a

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<sup>47</sup> Elio Iannacci, “What women want: Gay male romance novels,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 11, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/what-women-want-gay-male-romance-novels/article565992/> (accessed March 14, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 78 posted September 10, 2012.

result of their own insecurities. Author Marie Sexton tells of a friend's first time reading m/m romance and how much she liked it "because she didn't spend the entire novel comparing herself to the heroine and coming up short. I don't know what percentage of female readers feel that way, but I will say that most women I know who try gay romance discover that they like it far more than they anticipated."<sup>49</sup> The ability for these women to enjoy their romance the ways they wish, without having to worry that their own inadequacies will rise to the surface go quite far in determining what women are willing to read. In this way it is a positive aspect of m/m romances, that they are not a mirror, but rather a window through which readers can observe the characters without seeming themselves negatively reflected.

### *Two Men are More Appealing*

Many readers of m/m romance do so because they find two men doubly attractive. There are different challenges to a relationship not involving women and for readers, this brings out the vulnerable, emotional sides of the male characters that much more. Sarah Frantz, a senior editor at Riptide Publishing, describes her attraction to m/m romance by explaining "that she's been interested in the heroes in romance stories since she was a tween. She recalls falling for the stoic hero revealing his vulnerable side. 'That hooked me and never let me go and I've been an avid romance reader ever since,' she says. 'So when I read a story with two heroes, it just gives me that much more of what I'm reading romance for in the first place.'<sup>50</sup> Anne, a reader and writer of m/m romance echoes Frantz's sentiments, saying: "I love reading m/m fiction because I really love the whole strength/vulnerability mix and it's also just sooo hot! :))"<sup>51</sup> While heroes are often

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<sup>49</sup> Maria Mora, "Is Gay Male Erotica the Next Big Thing?" *All Parenting*, April 2, 2014, <http://allparenting.com/my-life/articles/970447/is-gay-male-erotica-the-next-big-thing> (accessed February 15, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Goodreads, "Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?" comment 26 posted September 5, 2012.



emotionally available to the heroines in straight romances, having two men in these stories together allow for even more of an emotional outpouring, doubling the feelings that are presented to and invoked from readers in m/m romances. In a response to a blog post detailing why the blogger does not read m/m romance, one commenter replies: “When it comes to m/m romances, either on screen or on paper, I submit to my baser instincts. Two hot guys, semi hot guys, one hot guy and one okay guy getting it on is total turn on for me [sic]. Voyeurism is not a sexual proclivity of mine, but I do put on my voyeurism goggles when it comes to m/m. It’s a world I’ve never been. It’s a world I can’t be in (because I’m a woman). And, I get to see an emotional side that most straight men don’t reveal.”<sup>52</sup> This comment most fully reveals the two different reasons women choose to read m/m romance over straight romances. It offers them a greater emotional release and connection than they might have with m/f protagonists while at the same time offering them two men being intimate together, which some women find incredibly arousing.

The Goodreads polls lists this doubling of men in m/m romances as the option “Because 2 C\*cks are better than one. The hot sex scenes just turn me on!” This response captured 12.2% of the votes, but seemed to be one of the topics to appear the most in the comments section. One responder commented on the poll: “If there’s more than 1 cock involved, it’s always awesome! Then including two men in love? Even better. There’s just a different dynamic when reading M/M other than the obvious...and I love it!”<sup>53</sup> As this comment indicates, much of the appeal of m/m romance comes from the heroes not just having sex—though that is appreciated by readers

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<sup>52</sup> Laurie Gold, “Too Much of the Same: Why M/M and F/F Romance Doesn’t Float My Boat,” *Heroes and Heartbreakers* Weblog, comment 7 posted May 17, 2012, <http://www.heroesandheartbreakers.com/blogs/2012/05/its-raining-men-why-mm-romance-doesnt-float-my-boat> (accessed March 26, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 19 posted September 5, 2012.

too—but also falling and being in love while they do it. M/m romance reader Tamara McNeill is interviewed about why she reads this genre over straight romances and some of her responses highlight the importance of the male characters being in love with one another and how the sex scene play into that in many books. “It is no surprise then that explicit sex is a must for McNeill. ‘Whenever they close the bedroom door, I always wonder what’s going on,’ she says. ‘Are they as happy in there as they are out here?’”<sup>54</sup> The sex scenes within these novels, if written well, serve as a place for readers to also engage in the emotional lives of the male characters. However, Williams puts it much more simply in her conjecture of why women read m/m romance, stating “it could simply be a fantasy of abundance. ‘If you presume that these women are heterosexual,’ Williams adds, ‘and their own desire is for men, then you’ve doubled the pleasure.’”<sup>55</sup> Whether the reason is emotional or purely sexual, the presence of two heroes in m/m romances are certainly a draw for some readers and if we combine this with a lack of female characters, it seems to make the novels all that more enticing.

### *More Equal Relationships*

An additional reason women give for deciding to read m/m romance also plays into a slightly different version of there being two men; instead of the sex-appeal, these women claim m/m romances have more equal relationships between the main couple. In straight romances, the concern is always that one (usually male) character holds all of the power in the relationship and thusly the interactions between the couple cannot truly be equal in a way readers can enjoy. Tiya captures this in her Goodreads comment. “It started out as the ‘two cocks are better than one’ reason for me, but the most I read the more I realized that the main force driving me to continue

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<sup>54</sup> Alimurung, “Man on Man: The New Gay Romance.”

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

reading m/m is the equal relationship between the two (or three) MCs...the relationship between two men is equal in such a way that it can never be between a man and a woman.”<sup>56</sup> Another commenter describes her experience of reading m/m romances as “the irresistible entre into a mystic world where potentially no one holds all the power in the relationship.”<sup>57</sup> Because romance readers across the board are extremely self-aware in what they are reading and in their genre, potential sexism and abusive relationships are a concern for the largely female audience. With m/m romances these concerns might not be totally negated, but they are certainly understood to be lessened than with straight romances. One commenter directly compares the relationships between m/m and m/f romances: “Not only does the love [in m/m] resonate in a way I’ve never read before but the idea of two people who are equals in every way finding love in each other is amazing. It’s rare in an M/F to find that.”<sup>58</sup> This theme of equality comes out for others as well, even in short snippets such as one reader who finds herself “more open minded towards the equality in love” and another who reads m/m romances for a lot of reason but “the top of which for me is still that idea of equality.”<sup>59</sup> While the choice between reading m/m and m/f romances has never been a competition, those who answered the Goodreads poll were very much attuned to the ways in which relationship dynamics could be abused or misrepresented in straight romances. For these readers, this same complication does not arise in m/m romances. Though it is not often cited as the defining factor in why readers pick on category over the other, the implied equality within m/m romances manages to assuage some of the fears and guesswork that make choosing a straight romance difficult.

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<sup>56</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 5 posted September 5, 2012. This is an ideal understanding of the relationship between two men and does not take into account the other ways in which other factors could play into a relationship, making it unequal or even abusive.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., comment 72 posted September 8, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., comment 151 posted December 20, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., comment 11 posted September 5, 2012; comment 45 posted September 6, 2012.

*Love Is Love*

If the equity in relationships is an internal motivator within these novels for women to read m/m romances, their own options about the ways in which all love is equal are external motivations. These readers express their understanding of love as a concept, which can be applied to all people and relationships, regardless of gender. Romance author Jen writes with regards to the gender of the characters: “They might have been men, but they still wanted what I wanted as a woman: a permanent, loving, happy, safe, equal relationships with a partner who valued me as much as I valued him.”<sup>60</sup> The fundamentals of the relationships have not changed with m/m romances from what they were in the preceding straight romances. Some readers also go on to express their willingness to read any category of romances novels, as long as love is the main motivator for the characters: “To me love is love is love. We all need it, we all deserve it, and as long as it is expressed in a healthy manner, I want to read about it.”<sup>61</sup> Though it feels like an echo of *Pride Parade*, these readers genuinely believe that the difference between genres are nonexistent, which allows them to read and enjoy all of them more freely.

Some readers go on to directly state the lack of differences they find between m/m and m/f romances. One reader comments that sometimes changing the genres that she is reading can be a nice breather, “fast forward and sometimes, I need a break from M/F. And the end of the day (for me at least), a relationship is a relationship, love is love, and sex is sex.”<sup>62</sup> Other readers jokingly mention that the sex between the characters is one of the only places where they see the two different genres of romance differ: “To me there’s nothing different (aside form [sic] the sex

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<sup>60</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 941.

<sup>61</sup> Goodreads, “Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?” comment 90 posted September 11, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, comment 105 posted September 26, 2012.

scenes of course ;) in reading a love story between m/m or m/f. Its [sic] just love.”<sup>63</sup> Instead of the view taken by previously mention commenters, one respondent to the Goodreads poll thinks that m/m romances are not necessarily sexier than m/f romances. This reader writes: “Well sure, the sex is hot, but so is it in F/M books O.o I personally read it for the romance between them, it’s just beautiful to read, and although I haven’t read many M/M books, my favorites are those who are the most emotionally intense and with a great story.”<sup>64</sup> For those readers who enjoy romances across a variety of genres, love between the main characters feels essentially the same. They are not waylaid by the genre of the couple, but instead focus on the emotional aspects of the books, which is the reason many of the readers are engaging with this genre anyway.

### *Exploring Their Sexuality*

The final reason readers and writers give for choosing m/m romance over straight romance is that the former allows them to begin to explore their own sexuality. They see the relationships they are engaging with as a way to explore sides of their personality that might not be given light or validity anywhere else in their lives. When asked for a reason why women might read gay romances Rinaldo Walcott, a sociology professor at the University of Toronto noted, “It’s like a constant reliving of the Rock Hudson narrative. The unattainable is what makes these books so desirable and many straight women are now willing to investigate their own sexual curiosities.”<sup>65</sup> This operates under the assumption that women are fascinated with the idea of two men having sex and perhaps their own voyeuristic feelings in reading and wanting to be a part of that. This is raised by author Alex Beecroft, who confesses “writing m/m romance felt like I was coming out in a way: I am writing about all the fantasies I have had since I hit

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., comment 3 posted September 5, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., comment 61 posted September 6, 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Iannacci, “What women want: Gay male romance novels.”

puberty. There is an element of women's sexuality that has not been able to express itself for such a long time. These books allow that for me and the reader."<sup>66</sup> However, for other readers this sexuality and desire operates in an entirely different way. One reader writes: "I have always loved gay men. For me the most beautiful and arousing thing is to see two men kiss or have sex. I'd like to be a gay man myself to have that!"<sup>67</sup> Instead of expressing a form of female sexuality, some readers engage with m/m romances for the position of what they perceive to actually be a gay experience.

This notion is further complicated by Beecroft and Erastes, where in another interview they attempt to define the ways in which their sexuality shapes or is shaped by the m/m romances they write. When asked why Beecroft does not seem to imagine women in the sexual worlds of her novels, she responds "The plain and simple answer for me is that in my sexual imagination, I'm a gay man. I write to satisfy a sexual desire that I can't physically satisfy in this body;" Erastes replies that she is "a penetrative gay man as well."<sup>68</sup> They go on to describe the ways in which they feel as if they truly don't align themselves with any particular gender or sexuality. For them, it is not so much that they are writing to try to fit themselves into a specific sexuality, but they are writing the sexuality itself. The interviewer asks: "So slash is really the end zone? Slash is *the sexuality*. Is slash *part* of the sexuality or it is the whole thing? Both women agree: Slash is the whole thing. For both of them, and presumably for a number of their fans as well, slash, in itself, literally *is* sex."<sup>69</sup> So for Beecroft and Erastes, the genre of m/m romance allows them to engage and describe a sexuality that would not have words otherwise. Slash is thinking and feeling and reading as a gay man, without being one completely. In this

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Goodreads, "Why Do YOU Read M/M Romance Books?" comment 130 posted May 29, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, "W4M4M?"

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

way m/m romance allows readers and authors to define and describe not only their sexuality but also their gender identity, in ways that might not have been available to them previously.

*Additional Story Lines and Life Changes*

The authors have additional reasons for writing m/m romances rather than another genre, which will be described briefly here. One reason echoes that of readers who are tired of reading the same romance over again with little variation. When m/m romance first started to become popular, it was largely unexplored territory. Writers were able to invent situations that had never been used before or were able to take a new, fresh take on some older themes, such as a character's religion impacting their sexuality. As Erastes had pointed out previously, two male heroes allowed also for a number of different plots, especially in Regency novels, since one of the characters did not have to adhere to the traditional role of a high society lady. Characters can go out and explore the world and have any number of jobs and adventures not open to women at the time. This freedom also allows for more imagination as to what plots might be and characters might do, in a way that the established genre of straight romance had not considered before.

Authors also say that writing m/m romance instead of straight romance gives them more space to change readers' lives. In an interview with Geoffrey Knight, a romance novelist named Carol describes a family situation in which cousin felt afraid of coming out to everyone. She says her writing allowed him to see that his identity was acceptable to those within his life, even if his parents might not have reacted particularly well: "He knew he still had people who loved him for who he was. That's a feeling that means more to me than how many books I write or sell. Knowing what I did prompted him to finally live the life he wanted, but was too afraid to live, is worth every sentence of every story."<sup>70</sup> This is a sentiment that has been echoed by authors

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<sup>70</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 1669.

throughout the genre on blog post, in comments sections, and in interviews. Many novelists feel they're work can be used as a way of promoting acceptance within their readers, whether they be family member of LGBT people or LGBT people themselves. In this way they view their books not only as romance novels, but also transformative pieces through which lives might be changed in a positive way.

Though everyone has a different personal reason for reading or writing m/m, there have nevertheless been noticeable trends within the community. Women name reasons all across the board as to why they have chosen to participate the genre in the way that they have. Community centered pieces such as the Goodreads poll and the Knight's book *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance* allow us to really dive into the community and examine their reasons in their own words. It is obvious that the members of this genre of m/m romance are being self-reflexive in their reading and are attempting to respond to both internal and external criticism in a meaningful, thoughtful way. It will be the work of the next section to detail just what this criticism might be and why the m/m romance community seems to be getting a disproportionate amount of flax than other subgenres of the romance community.

### **Issues Presented by Women Reading M/M**

Perhaps the largest qualm opponents of women engaging with m/m romance novels have is the very genders of the participants themselves. Much of the contention around the genre comes from women writing about gay men for profit—without having their lived experiences—with an audience comprised mainly of other women. While good straight female authors will attest to doing their research before attempting to write a romance novel, critics claim that having a monetary value attached to their novels and the sexual scenes involved contribute to a culture of fetishization around the books that authors and readers are not in a hurry to correct. Those



who are opposed to m/m romance novels claim with various levels of contempt that for the readers and writers of this genre, it is more about getting the perception of an authentic portrayal of the (sex) lives of gay men than it is about actually getting a true depiction. According to critics and even some readers and writers of the genre, m/m romances are designed to be by and for women than supposed to include actual gay men in any way. For many this is precisely where the issue lies.

The largest contention is that women, by virtue of their gender, are not able to accurately depict a true gay man's experience as they do not have the same circumstances; this largely results in what critics call "an appropriation of voice."<sup>71</sup> By this critics mean that women authors are effectually taking the voice from gay men to speak on a topic they themselves have little experience in understanding. One author understands the solution to this appropriation to be "what author Guy Gavriel Kay calls 'Imaginative Empathy.' If you have this, and you do some research, and you listen to people, and you spend your life unpicking the knots of the human heart, and you learn something about writing craft...well then you have a better chance of not pissing on people's shoes when you write."<sup>72</sup> This reply seems almost flippant to the very real opposition coming from dissenters of m/m romance. One such writer is blogger Brandon Taylor, who writes about the queerness of gay romance novels. "This isn't entirely surprising as they aren't written for queer audiences and so aren't beholden to to [sic] *get it right* in any significant way. Yet, I think that there is a kind of implicit obligation to get it right when you're writing

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<sup>71</sup> For the purposes of this essay, "woman" is used as shorthand for cisgender heterosexual women to mean those whose gender identity matches their biological sex, who are also attracted in men. The experiences of those female readers who do not fall into this identity will by necessity engage with m/m romance novels in different ways. This paper also acknowledges that there is not one authentic gay male experience, but that instead there is a multitude of ways LGBT people can live their lives.

<sup>72</sup> Michele Fogal, "Why are Women Writing and Reading Male/Male Romance?" *Michele Fogal Weblog*, comment posted February 25, 2015, <http://michelefogal.com/women-writing-reading-male-male-romance/> (accessed January 9, 2017).

about groups of people and when your writing forms the bedrock of many people's perception of those groups of people."<sup>73</sup> While it is doubtful romance novelists are intentionally attempting to portray their characters in an unrealistic relationship, Taylor is correct in saying that they do not have any kind of obligation to present a true relationship, or one that gay men would ever engage in. This might require a greater deal of Imaginative Empathy on the part of authors, but it also requires a commitment to *want* to portray the truth, which is not the same thing as not purposely writing a lie.

A demonstration of women's potential appropriation of voice comes from the names of the authors. Like with other genres of romance, most write under a pen name. Some, like the focus of this essay K.J. Charles, merely use initials as their signature. Others use gender neutral names such as Alex Beecroft or titles that are not names at all, such as Erastes. These assumed names work in two intertwining ways. They hide the true identity of the author, including their gender, from those who they might not wish to know it. By choosing a masculine sounding name, combined with the hidden identity, many reader assume these author actually are men. This lends them a sense of authority that they did not possess before if they had been writing under a feminine sounding name. For men on the other hand, the situation is reversed. Authors such as Alexis Hall assume a more feminine sounding name to sell their novels. This is done in part because romance novels still retain their female reputation and readership. By Hall assuming a feminine name this works to conceal the fact that he is a man which could allow him to sell more books; however, it also conceals the fact that he might possess more of an authority to

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<sup>73</sup> Brandon Taylor, "Gay Romance Novels Are Not Queer Romance Novels," *Brandon Rambles* Weblog, entry posted June 26, 2016, <http://brandonrambles.tumblr.com/post/146534279006/gay-romance-novels-are-not-queer-romance-novels> (accessed November 28, 2016), original emphasis.

write m/m romances than some straight female authors. This paradox helps to highlight the issues of appropriation of voice that are almost inherent in woman writing m/m romances.

Because the potential for appropriation is so high, writers and readers need to be aware of power dynamics present when they are consuming media written by and for a group of people about which neither belongs. This has been a topic of much conversation in the m/m romance community, especially by gay men. One commenter, Fangs 4 the Fantasy, writes in response to a woman arguing that m/m romances are without power dynamics because of the genders of the characters that “you can’t just decide to ‘write about a man’ without power dynamics without considering the tropes and dynamics that effect gay men... What about the pressures of homophobia and heterosexism and all the things that make our romances so much more than ‘something straight ladies can enjoy without the gender power dynamic.’”<sup>74</sup> The consideration of power dynamics, particularly in m/m romance, is especially important. Different identities are all operating against each other and careful consideration must be paid to the levels of oppression at work on each other.

This same user also comments on the prevalence of women to become hostile towards gay men in the romance novel community, particularly when they are disagreeing on issues of fetishization. Based on his experience, he writes: “I find the m/m genre a really hostile and unsafe space for gay men – and that becomes a problem considering how huge it is and the time we have to spend trying to find our own stories among the fetishism... It’s contemptuous. It’s disrespectful. It’s dehumanizing. And it’s why I avoid the genre – it’s a genre that uses me as a thing, but doesn’t welcome me as a person.”<sup>75</sup> In response to a woman telling him that his

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<sup>74</sup> Meoskop, “You Won’t Believe What Happened When These M/M Authors Were Interviewed,” *Love in the Margins* Weblog, comment posted June 15, 2014, <http://loveinthemargins.com/2014/06/14/you-wont-believe-what-happened-when-these-mm-authors-were-interviewed> (accessed February 24, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

statement is “over the top,” he replies, “No, Anne, it’s not over the top – it’s how I feel about the genre. I do not consider it a safe space for gay men, I find it hostile, a space where we exist as objects and tools and where our personhood is denied and our presence rejected. The appearance of gay men is taken, appropriated and welcomed only when those gay men are willing to play nice and fit the roles proscribed.”<sup>76</sup> It is ironic that in attempting to prove Fangs wrong, Anne exhibits just what he accuses other women in the genre of doing, speaking over gay men in order to further their own point of view. She does this by posted a comment much longer than Fangs’ original comment or rebuttal, going point by point to assert her claim. The inability of some women authors and readers to take criticism from gay men who also participate in the genre further contributes to this assumption of hostility.

These women’s assumptions of their own righteousness also pose a problem for critics of the genre. Much of this revolves around the assumption of the perception on the part of readers and writers that they are somehow striking a large blow for equality by writing and reading their romance novels. Opponents of the genre do not agree that this is what these women are doing. Sunny Moraine tackles this issue quite extensively on their blog where they respond to these perceptions: “‘Redeeming’ gay romantic relationships is patronizing. Focusing cisgender male erotic relationships to the exclusion of other queer identities because you find that stuff hot is erasure. Reducing the significance of characters to gender and sexuality – especially in the interest of depicting erotic sexual activity – is fetishizing.” These attitudes closely mirror why Fangs 4 the Fantasy finds the m/m romance community to be hostile to real life gay men while at the same time embracing the character of m/m romance novels. When confronted with these women’s claims of activism, Moraine advises them “don’t you dare claim that you’re doing

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

something progressive on behalf of populations to which you don't belong. Because you aren't. It's not your progress to make. And I'm getting real tired of seeing straight cisgender women congratulate themselves for it." The perceived activism of women writing and reading m/m romance is often a sticking point for critics, who do not feel that these women are being all that radical or progressive in their engagement with m/m romances, which is in direct contrast to how the women who read and write them feel themselves as we have seen previously.

Questioning the true activism of these women also leads us to further questions. One of these is almost inherent with the nature of the genre. While these women are claiming that the main reason they are reading these novels is because of the acceptance within them—as the top answer of the Goodreads poll leads us to assume—why then, is there not an equally large number of f/f romance novels? Chris Booklover echoes this question in his comment on Laurie Gold's blogpost as to why she cannot read m/m or f/f novels: "It's interesting that some readers state that gender does not matter, and only a good story does. If this is true f/f books should be as popular with romance readers as m/m ones, but this is far from the case."<sup>77</sup> This comment highlights an interesting discrepancy in the world of romance subgenres and makes us question the transformative nature of some of these novels. Perhaps at the same time m/m romances are trying to make claims of their transformative nature, "in practice what we have is a tremendous amount of stroke material featuring white cisgender traditionally attractive mostly able-bodied gay men, written by and for the consumption of straight cisgender women."<sup>78</sup> This understanding of the characters in m/m romances cause a number of outcries against their characterization in

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<sup>77</sup> Gold, "Too Much of the Same," comment posted May 18, 2012. It should be mentioned that lesbian romances have a rocky history in the world of publishing in a way that was not pushed upon m/m romances. Pulp lesbian romances in the 1950's contributed to a history of tragi-lesbian romances, from which it seems the romance world has never truly recovered. For more information see Kay Mitchell, "Popular Genres and 'Lesbian' Culture: From Pulp to Crime, and Beyond" in *Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. J.M. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015): 154-68.

<sup>78</sup> Moraine, "If you're a straight cisgender woman."

romance novels by a variety of sources who claim, like Moraine, that these men are not to men engaging in a relationship at all, but rather straight men in sheep's clothing.

This ability to read the characters in the novels as either straight men or women with a phallus is one of the largest contributors to claims of fetishization. In another comment to the Gold article one poster, who incidentally does not read m/m romances, writes that she feels “as if in many ways (other than physically) men are fundamentally different. Of the M/M books I tried, I either had a hard time believing those were actually *men* (they don't read like any men I've known, either gay or straight; instead, they read like women's fantasies of how men might communicate.)”<sup>79</sup> This unexpected unmanliness of the main characters in m/m romances is echoed by others and there is the chance that it is just bad writing coming from some female authors who have not necessarily mastered their craft. This idea is promoted by romance writer Laura Baumlach, who tries to “write characters that seem to appeal to both genders without a problem. I just make sure I write men as men and not women with dicks.”<sup>80</sup> One explanation for this phenomenon of female coded gay characters can be the way women often use the female characters in straight romances as placeholders for themselves. This could have bled over, consciously or unconsciously, on the part of writers onto m/m romance in order to give female readers a point of identification. Of course, this then raises questions of appropriation in the novels and the appropriateness of writing female characteristics onto characters in the novel who are not women at all, but in essence gay men.

If on one end of the spectrum we have characters in m/m romance novels reading as “women with dicks,” on the other end we have characters that appear as straight men in disguise.

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<sup>79</sup> Gold, “Too Much of the Same,” comment posted May 17, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Dick Smart, “Straight Women/Gay Romance,” *Lambda Literary*, June 8, 2010, <http://lambdaliterary.org/sandbox/features/06/08/straight-womengay-romance> (accessed March 3, 2017).

These characters read as the same heroes of more stylistically traditional m/f novels, only they are in love with another man. Taylor mentions this trope in his blogpost: “To the point of fetishism, straight men are placed at the center of these stories. Straight men whose sexuality is softened and made mutable by a sultry gaze from men who have been feminized to the point of homophobic caricature.”<sup>81</sup> Taylor accurately points out what is happening with some of the characters in m/m romances. Either they are straight men at the start of the novel who then, through the “gay for you” trope find themselves in a relationship with an often effeminate, out gay character or they are so deeply internally homophobic that might as well be labeled as straight men from the way the author presents them. While some gay men actually are effeminate or deeply homophobic, the decision to position straight men whose sexuality get “turned” positions gay men within the margins of m/m romance novels at the same time that it plays on dangerous stereotypes of the predatory gay man, who is the enemy of heterosexuals everywhere. By primarily using these two types of men, the novels “vacillate between flamboyant pride as a plot device and stoic, self-loathing concealment. There are no nuanced conversations of masculinity, of male privilege, of straight-passing, of the politics of the closet, of trans\* men, of non-binary men, of asexual men, and on and on and on.”<sup>82</sup> By choosing to focus their novels on a small set of convenient, traditionally handsome gay men m/m romance novels often leave out the possibility for further discussion around male sexuality that might have be as easily or simply cannot be placed in straight romances. Comprising gay romance novels primarily of straight men—who readers coincidentally would have a chance with in real life—contributes to the issues of fetishization surrounding these novels and strips them of any activists potential they might have had.

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<sup>81</sup> Taylor, “Gay Romance Novels Are Not Queer Romance Novels.”

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Another area where m/m romances are fetishized and consequently depoliticized is in the realm of the sex itself. Much of the criticism in the depictions of sex within romance novels is how closely it mirrors the sex in straight romance novels. Often there is some experiment before leading up the Big Moment, where the penetrative sex happens and the couple is completely connected for the first time, supposedly. While romances do not have a specific formula as it is often believed, if they did this way of depicting sex would be in it, either in straight or m/m romances. Not all m/m novels engage with this trope; however, it is prevalent enough for us to consider if there is something else happening here. Fessenden postulates “that the whole ‘anal sex is the ultimate form of love’ thing is a holdover from straight romance novels, in which ‘going all the way’ – i.e., full vaginal penetration – is reserved for special moments in the novel, such as the final love scene.”<sup>83</sup> The treatment of anal sex in the same way as vaginal sex is doing a disservice to characters in m/m romance novels. It does not take into account the ways the sex acts are fundamentally different and different method of preparation are required for each of them, beyond the one-two-three of lubed fingers for anal sex. This focus on penetration as an attempt to mirror straight sex does not consider the ways in which gay men might feel about the sex they are having. A majority of m/m romances assume that their characters will like and enjoy anal penetration, when this is not the case for real gay men. As a gay man who writes romance novels, Fessenden thinks “there’s a little too much emphasis on it, as it represents the ultimate merging of souls for two men. It can be that, just as any sexual act can be for two people who are in love. But that’s just my point. It doesn’t have to be anal sex. There are other possibilities.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Jamie Fessenden, “Even in gay romance, love does not have to equal anal sex,” *Jamie Fessenden’s Blog*, entry posted June 28, 2014, <https://jamiefessenden.com/2013/01/13/even-in-gay-romance-love-does-not-always-have-to-equal-anal-sex/> (accessed January 12, 2017).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



Taylor goes one step farther in stating not only has the wrong emphasis been placed on anal sex in m/m romance novels, but the sex itself is depoliticized in a way that is harmful to readers and gay men. Taylor asks the question of his readers: “Gay romance novels have depoliticized gay sex to an impressive degree, but what it make of this in an era where gay sex, queer sex, *is political*? To say nothing of the sex itself...the space around gay sex in these novels is a sterile field. It’s all a crisp dichotomy made understandable for outsiders. Tops. Bottoms. Vers.”<sup>85</sup> These caricatures are then further stereotyped, with the top always being the most masculine and sexually domineering, while the bottom is effeminate and open to being taken. Not only the roles of the sexual participants are taken out of their political context, but “the sex itself has also been rendered apolitical and unqueer. The hair is in all of the right places. The femme is always hairless, lanky and nubile. He has tender lips. He kisses hungrily and open himself up to be taken, to be fulfilled. The man, the butch, the lumberjack, pounds into this hairless, nubile entity.”<sup>86</sup> While there might have been advancements in the area of LGBT rights recently, we are still living in a time when divergent sexualities are, as Taylor says, essentially political. We do not often see the characters of m/m romance novels interacting within a space dedicated to people like them, where they can come to grips with their own sexuality in their own political moment. When the sex within m/m romance novels is made into “heterosexual insert sex with a gay varnish” do we not have the responsibility to comment and point this out to others in the community?<sup>87</sup> In some cases the fetishization by women of the men in these types of romance novels not only strips the characters of a sexuality that would be most fitting for

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<sup>85</sup> Taylor, “Gay Romance Novels Are Not Queer Romance Novels.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

them and their individual relationships, but instead it also depoliticizes it in a time when LGBT sex still have very political ramifications.

Worse than this though, for Taylor, is the way not just sex but the actual love in the m/m romance novel has also been depoliticized. The love that exists outside of the traditional heterosexual couple is not as definable and easy to pin down as the love that exists within that unit. “In gay romance novels, it takes the shape of a pair, their masculinity in careful, tenuous balance. Yet, queer love often does not look like this at all. Queer love is multi-peopled, multi-faceted, shifting, changing, thriving. Queer love, which has always had to exist at the fringes of society, is mutable and quicksilver. It’s impossible to pin down.”<sup>88</sup> As readers, we must ask what happens when we take something that has always lived on the fringes and bring it into the mainstream, especially when it is for profit and economic consumption. Two elements of gay culture that do not particularly translate to m/m romance novels are the amount of dating that occurs and with this the possibility of having more than a single partner at once. “The lack of dating and compulsory pairing aside, again, this is where the depoliticizing of queer love shines most obviously in gay romance novels. I think that this is the source of shallowness that I feel when I read these novels. That the characters aren’t engaging romantically and sexually with another person.”<sup>89</sup> We must ask how and why m/m romances are being forced to fit into the traditional romance novel structure, when the potential for the relationships is completely different. The ways the relationships within the novels are turned into a more palatable entity for straight female audience can be read as a sign that although the mainstream romance community is ready for m/m romance novels, it is not truly ready for queer romance novels. Or perhaps a truly queer romance novel cannot exist within this space. Or maybe we’re working our way

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

there, one positive m/m novel at a time. Whichever explanation is deemed most suitable, we as readers need to be conscious of the ways in which our preferences and habits might be influencing the types of work we are allowing ourselves to receive.

The critics of m/m romance novels have a number of valid concerns with the genre. They range from being with the way authors engage with gay men within the community, a sometimes overinflated sense of activism, and various types of fetishization within the community. Throughout these criticisms of women writing and reading m/m romance novels, we have seen one theme come up frequently: the fact that these women, for better or worse, are writing about an identity that does not belong to them, framing their entire genre around it, and using it to profit often at what gay men feel is their own expense. While a majority of women is a defining and engraved part of this genre, it would behoove us to listen to the criticisms as they come from both inside and out in order to build a better community that will hopefully have fewer issues in the future. This starts by taking constructive criticism, actively listening, and writing one good romance novel at a time. The next section will focus on K.J. Charles and how novels in turns uphold and subvert the themes of the genre. By looking at her novels critically, we can have a point of reference for what is actively being done to embrace this criticism and where we might have further to go.

### **Themes in M/M Romance as Demonstrated Through K.J. Charles**

#### *Defense of K.J. Charles*

Due to the large number of m/m romance being produced in recent years—caused in part by the rise of self-publishing, as mentioned previously—examining trends within the genre, especially with all of its subgenres, as one cohesive group is simply not possible. The genre of m/m romance has exploded, making it so that picking just one author to examine for trends

might seem like an unintentional limitation of scope; however, because of the constraints of this project, it is necessary to choose only one and K.J. Charles has been that deliberate choice. A number of factors contribute to Charles being a good candidate to examine, including: the size and timing of her publications; her public political activism, particularly on Twitter; the inclusion of other political issues in her novels, including imperialism and class issues; and her additional role in the publishing community as an editor. These reasons are enough to denote Charles as an author operating in a particular place in m/m romances novels, which offer her corpus for this kind of study.

The first of the reasons for the study of Charles is due to her collection of novels. Charles' first individual novel, *The Magpie Lord*, was published in 2013 by Samhain Publishing.<sup>90</sup> This is four years, as we recall, after Running Press publishes *Beecroft and Erastes*. In the same year as the publication of *False Colors* and *Transgressions*, the Rainbow Awards was formed and first started handing out prizes for the best LGBT fiction and nonfiction.<sup>91</sup> This is four years that the romance subgenre has had time to grow and advance before Charles enters the field. Four years in a largely digital medium is a relatively large amount of time; nine and a half thousand romance ISBNs were issued in 2013 alone, with a number of these no doubt belonging to m/m romances. In her first year as an established m/m romance author Charles released *The Magpie Lord* and a short story "Interlude with Tattoos" that takes place after the end the previous novel, where Stephen Day and Lord Crane further explore the sexual nature of their relationship.<sup>92</sup> Charles increases her production over the next two years, completing the

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<sup>90</sup> K.J. Charles, *The Magpie Lord* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2013).

<sup>91</sup> The Rainbow Awards are an independent award committee hosted by Elisa Rolle, an LGBT blogger, starting in 2009. Though there was no award for LGBT romance until the following year, *Beecroft's* romance *False Colors* won Best Setting Development and was a runner-up for Best LGBT Historical.

<sup>92</sup> K.J. Charles, "Interlude with Tattoos," (London: Smashwords, 2013). Charles also released two short stories this year "The Caldwell Ghost" and "Butterflies," which would form the beginning chapters of her later book *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2015).

books and most of the short stories of the *Charm of Magpies* series; starting her second trilogy and accompanying short stories, *The Society of Gentlemen*; as well as producing several standalone novels, including her solitary straight romance novel. The sheer amount of consistently quality writing, as evidenced by her multiple awards and positive reviews, helped to cement Charles' status as a writer to truly be contended with as she emerged onto the m/m romance scene.

In addition to being a writer, Charles has more than twenty years of editing experience, specializing in romance, historical and fantasy. According to her website, she has “worked at companies including Harlequin Mills & Boons and Bloomsbury Publishing.”<sup>93</sup> This places Charles in a unique position of being an editor working in the business with respected Romance publishing houses, before she was an author. Such an experience would give Charles a head for the business and allow her to follow trends as they emerged on the scene of m/m romance novels. Her continued engagement in freelance editing also allows for an understanding of trends and upcoming books in the romance world. Perhaps her dual roles contributed to part of her success as a romance novelist, but however we look at it, this editing experience no doubt impacted the way Charles would go on to write her own romances.

Charles' involvement in many facets of the romance community no doubt kept her abreast of the issues previously presented to women reading and writing m/m romance novels. We can speculate from this information and by looking at her Twitter account, Charles is extremely conscious of these continuing social justice issues. From tweets denouncing men's rights activism to the recent Brexit election, Charles uses her Twitter as a means of communicating her politics to her larger audience, which in large part include romance writers

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<sup>93</sup> K.J. Charles, “Editing,” <http://kjcharleswriter.com/editing>.

and readers.<sup>94</sup> She also takes to twitter to critique aspects of the romance novel genre, such as one reply to Nazi romances: “‘Nazi Romance’ isn’t a genre, it’s a perversion. And that is not a word I use lightly. Abominable vomitous fetishising bullshit.”<sup>95</sup> Charles has also recently criticized her own subgenre, especially in relation to realism in historical romances. In a series of tweets she discusses the paradoxes implicit in implying that straight historical romances do not have to confront their historical realities, but m/m romances are expected to do so always:

Hist rom casts the past in a better, happier, less smelly, filthy and painful light.  
All of it, even the most accurate. It’s romance.

If you think the golden glow of romance should cover white heterosexuals but not be extended to queer MCs [Main Characters], or POC [People of Color]? Ask yourself why.<sup>96</sup>

In just these two tweets readers can see the ways in which Charles investigates questions that have been raised by others contemplating the ability of m/m historical romances to even exist; arguments like the one Charles is responding to often forget, as it is pointed out later in the same thread, that LGBT people have been living their lives since the beginning and that excluding m/m relationships from historical romances for the sake of accuracy is in fact a violent form of erasure.

Charles’ novels do not only display a concern with accurately representing LGBT characters in a historical context, but also other forms of social justice, such as British imperialism, emerging radical politics in the wake of the French Revolution, and a shifting class consciousness as England moved from an agrarian society to a capitalist one. She takes a more politically charged bend with her second series, *The Society of Gentlemen*, which feature a

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<sup>94</sup> See K.J. Charles, Twitter Post, May 3, 2017, 12:53 PM, [https://twitter.com/kj\\_charles/status/859828370762342402](https://twitter.com/kj_charles/status/859828370762342402) for one example among many.

<sup>95</sup> K.J. Charles, Twitter Post, May 11, 2017, 6:26 PM, [https://twitter.com/kj\\_charles/status/862811259531653122](https://twitter.com/kj_charles/status/862811259531653122).

<sup>96</sup> These two tweets are part of a larger thread posted May 8, 2017 at 11:24 and 11:25 respectively.

radical in love with a Tory and the fallout of those radical politics on that couple and the entire society throughout the trilogy. Another sign to readers that Charles is thinking of political issues when writing her novels can be found in her interview with Alexis Hall. He asks Charles if elements of *A Seditious Affair* reflect the political culture in modern Britain as she was writing.<sup>97</sup> She replies: “I wrote a lot of that book in a state of rage and fear about current political developments. There are so many parallels with now which I didn’t intend but which were inescapable in the writing of it...it is, er, possible that [Dominic’s] humiliation kink became a bit more pronounced, and comprehensively fulfilled, as I wrote.”<sup>98</sup> Charles is not ignorant of the effects of the inclusion of politics in her books either. In a response to other romance writers urging authors to be neutral on the basis of politics, Charles tweets: “Authors \*know\* we put off some readers with politics. Perhaps, just perhaps, we feel that there are more important things than sales?”<sup>99</sup> With this snarky tweet Charles reaffirms her political position within the world of romance novels and her commitment to providing a message to readers tinged with her politics.

Charles tackles the particularly difficult genre of m/m historical romance. Unlike other subgenres such as contemporary or fantasy, historicals carry with them an imperative to contain a certain amount of accuracy, otherwise it feels like readers are in more of an alternate universe than, say, Regency England, for a popular example. We have already seen some of Charles’

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<sup>97</sup> K.J. Charles, *A Seditious Affair* (New York: Loveswept, 2015).

<sup>98</sup> Dabney Grinnan, “Alexis Hall interviews K.J. Charles (and a giveaway),” *All About Romance* Weblog, <http://allaboutromance.com/alexis-hall-interviews-k-j-charles/> (accessed January 16 2017). It should be noted that while Charles works to advocate liberal, left-leaning politics throughout her books, she does include some conservatism of her own. One example is the reliance of the Dragon Lady stereotype unnecessarily when referencing an Asian woman, Mrs. Phan, in *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*: “She gave her characteristic little hiss, blowing air through her nostrils. It had just a slight quality of dragon to it” (92). Charles also incorporates anti-Semitic stereotypes when referencing her Jewish characters. One instance is with Daniel Da Silva in *Think of England* where his features are compared to a lizard (28). Another instance is throughout *The Charm of Magpies* series with the character of Esther Gold. Her magical powers center around her large nose and sense of smell; in addition, she is often characterized by other characters as frigid and passive aggressive, two stereotypes that often get mapped onto Jewish women.

<sup>99</sup> K.J. Charles, Twitter Post, May 3, 2017, 2:37 PM, [https://twitter.com/kj\\_charles/status/859854414609354752](https://twitter.com/kj_charles/status/859854414609354752).

refutations for there to be a truly historically accurate m/m romance novel, as often these outcries for a “true” portrayal of history are used as an attempt to discredit m/m romance novelists and their genres of choice. However, Charles is not attempting to throw the baby out with the bathwater completely. Of course this historical accuracy comes with its own problems specific to m/m romance. Authors like Charles must balance world-building in such a way as to create realistic circumstances for their characters who love other men, while giving readers the happy ending any romance requires. In an interview with Alexis Hall, Charles answers the question of plausibility in m/m historical romances with her take on the genre:

It is important to me to set up situations that are plausible for a historical HEA [Happily Ever After], as far as it’s possible. So I can’t present a future in which everyone’s family rallies around to offer love and protection, much though I’d have liked to; there’s no way that the Silas/Dominic and Richard/David relationships will ever be fully accepted by most of their closest friends, let alone anyone else. But my society of gentlemen will continue to be protected by Richard’s wealth and David’s cunning, and their mutual allegiance. It’s the best I can do.<sup>100</sup>

Charles acknowledges the outcry that exists in fiction involving LGBT people for a happy ending; however, she reminds readers that often the best, most realistic ending is not one in which characters are living a life of acceptance and wedded bliss, but that in which the characters can be content with their situations and in their relationship with each other. This is again where the need for historical accuracy can be a detriment to the storyline at the same time it is a necessity. For Silas and Dominic, their relationship involves a BDSM element that is not even accepted within their social circle, the Society of Gentlemen, much less the rest of England. Dominic gets so much derision from his best friend, Richard, that his self-image is almost permanently damaged, much to Silas’s horror. For his own part, Richard is in a relationship with his servant David, which he himself prevents because of propriety. Both couples struggle with

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<sup>100</sup> Grinnan, “Alexis Hall interviews K.J. Charles (and a giveaway)”



their relationships within the boundaries of their circle of acquaintances, such much so that the happiest ending the reader can be presented with and believe is their contentment.

### *Fear of Discovery*

As noted in the previous section, one of Charles' concerns when writing historical romance is the creation of a historically accurate setting what can still be believed to end happy. This adherence to the necessary facts to homosexual life in historical England includes necessary fears of discovery by the characters. One aspect of this concern that Charles deals with in particular are the class implications of such a discovery. For characters of the upper-class, the effects of being charged with sodomy or buggery would be much more detrimental to lower class characters. In addition to jail time, members of the gentry would be risking their reputation and social circles every time they engaged in sexual activity. Lower class characters still risked jail time and exclusion from their families, but their social position was much less threatened by an indecency charge than those above them on the social ladder. Members of the armed forces were also at a much higher risk of being prosecuted for indecent sex acts.

The age the characters lived in also directly influenced their interaction with the law over issues of homosexuality.<sup>101</sup> The rise of social-morality debates in the 1880s greatly affected the laws around sexual indecency in Great Britain. Prior to this decade “the only legislation which directly affected homosexual acts was that referring to sodomy or buggery,” which evoked fear enough, but were not directly targeting homosexuality; “sodomy was a portmanteau for any

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<sup>101</sup> As Matt Cook points out in *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), “homosexual” and “homosexuality” as terms that we know today were “only coined in the late 1860s and were little used until well into the twentieth century...the heterosexual/homosexual or gay/straight binary that structures our understandings of sexuality now was not so familiar in the late nineteenth century and cannot simply be imposed retrospectively” (xiv). The following sections will still use the terms “homosexual(ity)” as we understand them now to offer more defined definitions and a narrower scope of sex acts, with full knowledge of their historical contexts and that this might not have been the terms used at the times being discussed.

forms of sex that did not have conception as their aim, from homosexuality to birth control”.<sup>102</sup> The ability to convict men of these acts was made harder in 1781, following a legal decision where the accusers needed to provide both penetration and the emission of semen; however, punishment after conviction was usually much more severe. From here, “the death penalty for buggery, tacitly abandoned after 1836, was finally abolished in England and Wales in 1861 (in Scotland in 1889) to be replaced by penal servitude of between ten years and life.”<sup>103</sup> However, this did not signal a lessening in severity, as the Labouchère Amendment—quoted in full below—passes the House of Commons in 1885. By this act, “*all* male homosexual acts short of buggery, whether committed in public or in private, were made illegal”<sup>104</sup> It is under this legal precedent that many of Charles’ characters are engaging in their relationships with each other, creating a culture of fear and apprehension.

The potential of discovery is dealt with most heavily in the *Society of Gentlemen* series. The Ricardians, the name the gentlemen give their group of friends after their founder and patron Lord Richard Vane, are all brought together because of their shared homosexuality in the Regency period of England, were it was punishable by law. Before Gabriel “Ash” Ashleigh joins their number, he categorizes them as “an odd assortment of men of varied birth, wealth, and brain, including some rather queer fish, but they shared qualities of self-possession and a strong mutual loyalty that made them bad men to cross.”<sup>105</sup> After the beginning of his relationship with Mr. Francis Webster, Ash is entered into the fold and offered the protection all members are extended, in order to keep their mutual secret. This becomes a major plot point in the third book,

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<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain From the Nineteenth Century to Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1990) 11, 14.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> K.J. Charles, *The Ruin of Gabriel Ashleigh* (New York: Loveswept, 2015), Kindle edition, location 220.

*A Gentleman's Position* as their relationship is discovered by Ash's powerful brother, Lord Maltravers.<sup>106</sup> With a known contempt for Francis since their school days and a loathing for his brother Ash, upon discovery of a letter between the two men Lord Maltravers attempts to use it as political leverage against Richard. Richard asks for clarification: "'A sodomite,' Lord Maltravers repeated. 'He and that wretch Webster are engaged in unnatural acts of the most abominable kind.'"<sup>107</sup> Ash admits to the letter being "pretty ripe stuff" and Francis tells Richard "It would serve very well as evidence in a prosecution for sodomy... Gabriel wrote about a night we spent before he left for Warminster, with detailed reference to our first evening together. A memoir of buggery running some four pages in his unique handwriting... I rather wished I'd read it."<sup>108</sup> Nothing comes of this evidence, due largely to the machinations of Richard's valet, David Cyprian, whose relationship with Richard is the primary romantic focus of *A Gentleman's Position*.

As a result of some clever trickery, Ash and Francis' relationship is not exposed to public ridicule; however, the closeness of this possibility of this exposition reveals that it is a very real concern to the Ricardians. Richard's best friend and past lover, Dominic, tells him that even though the group is set up to protect its members, "Dear fellow, we are all vulnerable. Every time we fall in love, we are nothing *but* vulnerable."<sup>109</sup> Richard himself, the most stoic of the Ricardians—that is, until his relationship with David—finds himself resenting the laws that control his blooming relationship. When David and Richard are still going through the will-they-won't-they stage of their relationship, David wants to respond to Richard's objections: "What he wanted to say was *It wasn't wrong*, but they both knew that legally, morally, socially, in the eyes

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<sup>106</sup> K.J. Charles, *A Gentleman's Position* (New York: Loveswept, 2016), Kindle edition.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, location 3352.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, location 2104.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, location 2061, original emphasis.

of God and man and his master's elevated world, it was wrong as hell."<sup>110</sup> These legal crimes form the crux of the conflicts in the *Society of Gentlemen* series, more so than for the main characters of Charles' other historical *Charm of Magpies* series. All of the relationships in this series rely on her ability to create a believable version of the Georgian period, where these men could all fall in love and have their HEAs in a time where society and the law are not on their sides.

Though nothing comes of it, this same fear of discovery is also a major plot point between the characters Simon Feximal and his partner Robert Caldwell. Their relationship, and much of *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*, takes place during the nineteenth century, just as legislation governing homosexuality and indecency laws were being cemented into place.<sup>111</sup> A character named only as the Fat Man, a presumably high ranking government official Robert refuses to name in his letters, attempts to blackmail Simon into doing his bidding with his knowledge of the relationship. Just as Simon is about to deny the Fat Man what he wants, the man quotes: "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is party to the commission of...or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person...shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof, shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour."<sup>112</sup> This accusation takes place in 1895, after Simon and Robert have been together for less than a year. This quoted passage is known as Labouchère's Amendment after Henry Labouchère, or Clause 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., location 733. It should be noted that Richard's objection does not only come from the homosexual aspect of his relationship with David, but the class dimensions as well. David's position as Richard's valet adds a new dimension to their relationship that the other couples in the *Society of Gentlemen* series do not have to contend with.

<sup>111</sup> K.J. Charles, *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 128.

1885, which helped construct an identity of criminal homosexuality in England.<sup>113</sup> At this point arrests for sodomy have become a rather serious accusation under English law. The threat, which was uttered to prompt Simon and Robert into investigating a mysterious event known as The Hunt and a rival magic user, Dr. Berry, had been successful for the Fat Man. Simon and Robert investigated the case and managed to take down the Fat Man's political rival at the same time. This blackmail would be used against the pair on the advent of the First World War by the Fat Man's successor, Sir Ranjit before they disappeared from England forever.

If the *Society of Gentlemen* series and the Ricardians are most concerned with the potential of discovery, the actual realities of discovery are a point of contention in *Jackdaw*, a spin-off centered on minor characters in the *Charm of Magpie* series.<sup>114</sup> Johan Pastern is a criminal magic user, wanted for arrest by Stephen Day for his participation in illegal magical activities. Upon his arrest by his lover, Constable Ben Spenser, Jonah slips the law leaving Ben in a compromising position that leads to his arrest and conviction on an indecency charge. This plot point, which opens the novel, sets the tone for the large inclusion of legal matters. Though Ben was not convicted by his local police or the magic judiciary for letting Jonah escape, he was left with "the gross indecency charge, based on his discovery in the carriage. Ben pleaded guilty to that. He lacked the strength to fight any more, and he could not afford a lawyer, and it was true, all true. Ben served ten weeks with hard labour for Jonah's last Judas kiss. He did the kind of time that could be expected for a bent copper and a mary-ann."<sup>115</sup> In addition to indecency, Ben is concerned about getting a conviction for the actual act of sodomy, which would not have

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<sup>113</sup> Sean Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861-1913* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 85.

<sup>114</sup> K.J. Charles, *Jackdaw* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2015), Kindle edition. A jackdaw is a member of the crow family of birds, to which the magpie also belongs.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, location 842.

applied to him previously. He and Jonah are engaged in a rather risqué position, when the men's meeting house they had found each other at again was being raided:

Taken in the act of sodomy in a male meeting house. Another conviction. It would be two years' hard labour this time, a flogging too perhaps, for a shameless recidivist like himself, little more than four months on from his last conviction. He'd been seen all over London's disreputable haunts, the police would know his face. They could convict him on that alone, not to mention the room, and the sheets, and the reek of semen, and the half-naked man chained to the sodding bed.<sup>116</sup>

Though Ben was not a member of the upper-class the way the Ricardians were, he lost his respectable job as a police officer and was outcast from his family as they found out his preferences. The setting of this novel also helps to further these concerns. Unlike the Georgian period when the Ricardians lived, Jonah and Ben's relationship is during the Victorian era, where laws against homosexuality and not just sodomy were beginning to come into their own. The consequences of a sentence would be much more severe as the century wore on, putting Jonah and Ben, as well as Stephen Day and Lord Crane at much more of a risk.

In a stark departure from this fear of discovery, the couple in *A Queer Trade* have a scene in which they act rather cavalierly about their relationship and getting caught acting romantic in public.<sup>117</sup> While the Ricardians all fear the possibility of being jailed because of their sexuality and Ben Spenser is actually jailed because of his relationship with Jonah Pastern, Ned Hall and Crispin Tredarloe do not seem to face any serious consequences as a result of their relationship. These two share an intimate embrace in an alley in full daylight, an act other couples in Charles'

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., location 352.

<sup>117</sup> K.J. Charles, *A Queer Trade* (London: K.J. Charles, 2015), Kindle edition.

novels would not dare to do. The two are called out for their behavior by another man: “‘Oi!’ It was a furious yell from the yard. Crispin jerked in shock, his teeth banging painfully against Ned’s lip. ‘Bloody mollies, fuck off out of it! Piss off to Cleveland Street!’”<sup>118</sup> A number of differences exist between this encounter and the others previously described. The first of these is that the pair was not caught by a police officer, but rather by a yardman, or laborer in shipyards, lumber yards, etc. Had the couple been spotted by a police officer the odds of a negative outcome would have likely been much higher. Another major difference is that neither Ned nor Crispin are of a high class and their encounter happened in London. Unlike the high placed Ricardians, Ned is a wasteman, collecting used paper scraps and Crispin was formerly the apprentice of a warlock. And unlike Ben, whose arrest happened in Hertfordshire, the pair are in London which has the nature of most big cities, where residents are giving a great deal more leniency based in part on their sheer number.

The latest set of Charles’ historical novels contains a more fully formed notion of the legal definition of homosexuality and the laws against it. Set in 1904, *Think of England* protagonists Archie Curtis and Daniel da Silva face threats of exposure due to illicit sex acts committed at the home of their hosts, the Armstrongs who themselves are enmeshed in a military scandal.<sup>119</sup> Upon learning of the possibility of incriminating photographs, Archie laments “Christ almighty. Five minutes of da Silva’s mouth and he was looking at two years for gross indecency.”<sup>120</sup> The almost two decades since the passage of Labouchère’s Amendment and Oscar Wilde’s trial went a long way in defining a homosexual identity, for better or worse, that did no exist previous. This combined with the later rise of medicalization that would take place

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., location 570.

<sup>119</sup> K. J. Charles, *Think of England* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 71.

in the latter half of the nineteenth century and turned the law from being punishing of sexual acts through sodomy to punishing homosexual men as a class instead. This is obvious in *Think of England* based on Archie's obsession with not appearing to be "that sort" and his looming fear of being prosecuted under the tightening laws.

### *Realistic Acceptance of Relationships*

Much of the fear of discovery for men during this period and for Charles' characters revolves not only around criminalization of sodomy, but also the repercussions they might face, especially from important people in their lives. We have previously seen how Gabriel Ashleigh's brother, Lord Maltravers, reacts when he discovers Ash's relationship with Francis Webster; he immediately starts with threats of blackmail in an attempt to advance his own political career. However, not all families in the *Society of Gentlemen* series react the same way. As a second son, Lord Richard Vane has a relatively large amount of freedom. He is not required to marry to continue the family line, or to be the bastion of morality his brother must, though it is at first posed upon him. Philip Vane, Marquess of Cirencester and his wife Eustacia are very concerned for their brother's happiness, as he has not yet found a wife by age thirty-eight. When telling his brother that he might never wish to marry and in fact might be in a secret illicit relationship, Philip tells him: "Of course you must behave as befits your position. You must conduct yourself as a gentleman, and you may only do that by behaving in private as you would in public. There are plenty of men who indulge in liaisons out of the eyes of the world, but really, Richard, have we not seen where such things lead?"<sup>121</sup> In a moment of unrealized irony, Philip later ends the conversation by telling his brother, "You have [his good opinion]. And you may talk to me

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<sup>121</sup> Charles, *A Gentleman's Position*, location 2307.



whenever you wish.’ Philip visibly steeled himself to add, ‘About any subject you wish.’”<sup>122</sup>

This uninspiring end to the conversation leaves Richard feeling more downtrodden than when he originally went to talk to his brother in the first place.

It may not seem that Philip is supportive of his brother’s dalliances, especially since he has no idea there is not a woman hidden away after all, but that Richard loves his valet. However, mere pages later he receives a letter from Philip—penned by his wife, as Philip is illiterate—regarding their previous conversation. It reads: “Dear Richard, In your conversation today, Philip omitted to observe that some things are of necessity private but may still be conducted honestly. He asks me now to assure you of his faith in your conduct, both in public and in private, and of his continuing regard, whatever course you think best to pursue.”<sup>123</sup> This is not tacit approval for Richard’s relationship with his valet, David Cyprian, and we cannot know if that approval might come if their relationship was discovered by the Marquess of Cirencester. However, Philip going so far as to acknowledge his brother’s unconventional relationship status, in a time when gender roles and matrimony went firmly hand in hand, is enough approval for Richard. Philip himself, not known for writing if he could avoid it, also “had scrawled three words in his childlike hand: *I stand corrected;*” and after reading “the precious note” Richard was “still staring at that when David came in.”<sup>124</sup> Because of their position in society, this short note are all Richard and his brother are able to say in regards to Richard’s expected marital status, yet it would be enough for Richard who had no reason to hope for even this measure of acceptance from his only remaining family.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., location 2315.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., location 2363.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., location 2369.

This acknowledgement of approval in the upper class pales in comparison to members of the lower class. One example comes from *Wanted, A Gentleman* in a brief scene between Martin St. Vincent and his housekeeper.<sup>125</sup> Though this moment has little bearing on the plot, Peggy's acceptance of Martin's sexual preferences is a moment that readers might not expect from an m/m historical romance novel. She does not just exhibit the kind of passive acceptance the Vanes display towards each other either. The pair are not family, but "Peggy had been with him for twelve years, growing from a scrawny, scrappy brat to a well-built woman of decided personality."<sup>126</sup> This familiarity is better in some ways than Martin shares with his familial figures. A freed black man, he had no knowledge of his birth family and the next closest thing, besides Peggy, are the Conroys who he served until Mr. Conroy freed him. After he leaves the Conroy's household, Martin used part of the money given to him to buy and free Peggy when she was twelve and gave her employment as his housekeeper. Over the course of their close acquaintance, "she had somehow absorbed the knowledge of his desires along the way, and had moved from silent support to enthusiastic encouragement of any romance she could see or imagine."<sup>127</sup> The acceptance Peggy demonstrates could come from any number of factors: affection for Martin, gratitude at her situation, fewer obligations due to their social class, etc. Whatever her reasoning, Peggy's displayed affection for Martin is an unexpected show of support in a romance novel set in a time where such acceptance would not be a normal reaction.

Instead of looking at the acceptance displayed by individual people the characters know, the *Charm of Magpies* series is especially concerned with the ways homosexuality can be outlawed in one place and accepted in another. Although Lord Crane was born and spent his

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<sup>125</sup> K.J. Charles, *Wanted, A Gentleman* (Burnsville, NC: Riptide Publishing, 2017).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, location 1869.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

childhood in England, he lived the better part of his life in China after being exiled by his father. Crane reveals to Stephen he ““was expelled from five schools, three of them for gross immorality. My father was happy to tell all and sundry that was why he was getting rid of me. And of course, there’s no laws against it in China, so I lived as I chose, and word got back.”<sup>128</sup> When Stephen expresses his surprise at the lack of laws, Crane elaborates: “No laws, no moral objections. Nobody cares. It’s just one of the things people do. I’m sure my father didn’t know *that* when he sent me there.”<sup>129</sup> This explicit acceptance of acts that would be considered gross immorality in England is particularly powerful in a romance novel published in the United States, because it directly combats stereotypes of the perception of eternal homophobia in countries outside of North America and Europe. It implicitly reminds readers who are knowledgeable of LGBT rights of the ways in which homophobia from the United States has been exported throughout the world, particularly through Christian evangelizing in countries such as Uganda. Crane’s time in China occurred before the widespread Westernization that would later change attitudes towards men who have sex with men.<sup>130</sup> This change is noted in an interview with Z. Allora, an author of *Gay Romance* who had previously lived in Suzhou, China. She mentions to Knight: “In Suzhou, as I have said gay doesn’t exist. I was there five and a half years and it took five years to find the one and only gay club.”<sup>131</sup> In a city of eight million people, these men must confine their sexuality to a single, isolated gay club, with no other public acknowledgement. By providing readers of a historically accurate portrait of male same-sex desire in China, Charles disrupts readers’ perceptions of different cultures and ideas of Western

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<sup>128</sup> K.J. Charles, *The Magpie Lord*, 127.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

<sup>130</sup> For more information about changing attitudes towards homosexuality in China, see Jing Wu, “From ‘*Long Yang*’ and ‘*Dui Shi*’ to Tongzhi: Homosexuality in China,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy* 7.1-2 (2003): 117-143.

<sup>131</sup> Knight, *Why Straight Women Love Gay Romance*, location 1158.

exceptionalism. She demonstrates a variety of reactions to the same sexuality that are all dependent on the location of where the act is being performed and not on the act itself. Whereas *A Gentleman's Position* and *Wanted, A Gentleman* both display an acceptance of relationships that are centered around the kindheartedness of the characters' friends and family, *The Magpie Lord* confronts social understandings of morality and decency, themes that will continue throughout the *Charm of Magpies* series.

#### *Ability for Survival*

Another theme Charles introduces in her m/m romances novels revolve around the ability of same sex attracted men to survive in a homophobic society. This survival manifests in two different ways. The first of these is the concern of a continued lineage, particularly for aristocratic upper class families who need to assure their continued family wealth and status. It raises questions of maintaining a continued legacy when traditional avenues of reproduction are not available to these men. The next concern is the lengths to which Charles' characters go to insure their physical, legal, and emotional protection while living in a political and cultural reality that would rather they didn't exist.

The question of lineage is a major concern for Gideon Vane, the grandfather of Harry Vane, the protagonist of *A Fashionable Indulgence*.<sup>132</sup> The novel opens with Lord Richard Vane finding his long-lost cousin, whose radical parents had caused a rift within the family. An aging Gideon was determined to continue the family line after the recent death of Harry's uncle and male cousin, Gideon's original heirs, which necessitated Harry's reintroduction into society as a proper Vane. The old family line "stretched back to a knight of the Conqueror, Gideon had informed him, and then listed almost every Vane between that medieval gentleman and Harry

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<sup>132</sup> K.J. Charles, *A Fashionable Indulgence*, Ebook, (New York: Loveswept, 2015).

himself.”<sup>133</sup> Gideon is so concerned with his family’s continued heritage that he attempts to force Harry and his first cousin, Verona Vane to marry. Gideon’s plans are complicated by the fact that Harry does not fall for his cousin, who has a love interest of her own, but instead becomes romantically involved with his gentleman tutor, the notorious dandy Julius Norreys. It had been Gideon’s idea to sire “a new generation of Vanes, with Verona’s blood making up for [Harry’s].”<sup>134</sup> Harry intends to marry Verona to please his grandfather; however, his relationship with Julius makes this nigh on impossible. Besides the issues surrounding the legality of being with Julius, their relationship makes it impossible that Harry would be able to sire children naturally, or that he would even necessarily want to. This all works to complicate his grandfather’s quest for a renewed Vane family line. What Gideon is neglecting to see, of course, is that the Vane name is going to continue with Lord Philip Vane, Marquess of Cirencester, and Lord Richard’s brother. He and his wife Eustacia already have seven children through which their family name is assured. However, this is not enough for Gideon, as he wishes it is his side of the family being continued into posterity, not just his brother’s. The survival of the families of homosexual men during a period when they had no legal options for adoption or surrogacy is of primary concern not for Harry himself, but for his very conservative grandfather. The lineage being passed on is important enough to Gideon for him to threaten every living member of his remaining family so that he might accomplish his ends.

Another book in the *Society of Gentlemen* series concerns itself not with how a family line might survive in this period, but rather the ways and the lengths homosexual men themselves are willing to go to in order to assure their own survival in a system that is not concerned with their lives and would in fact actually prefer to see them dead. As mentioned above, much of this

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., location 355.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., location 1615.

novel hinges on the accusation of crimes of sodomy which Lord Maltravers levels against his brother Lord Gabriel Ashleigh. It is through clever planning and trickery, mostly on the part of Lord Richard's valet, David Cyprian, that the Ricardians are able to get the charge dismissed as a fantasy of Lord Maltravers' failing mind. Their subterfuge is only necessary in order to beat a system that called for the conviction of not only Ash and Francis Webster, but of nearly all of the other Ricardians as well. As for their general circumstances, "Richard did not often repine at his situation under the law—it was how things were, and his wealth and David's work had kept him safe enough—but the injustice grated viciously on his nerves now."<sup>135</sup> There were very few options for how homosexual men might be able to live their lives in total peace and if accusations were leveled against them, it took nearly an army and the best valet in London for the charges to go away. While the characters of *A Gentleman's Position* might rail against their circumstances, they have little choice but to play into and trick the dominant system, even as it is set up to ensure their downfall.

Part of the reason the Ricardians are able to concoct a plan that would allow them all to walk away relatively scot-free is due in large part to their social privileges, based largely on their class and wealth. For men from less fortunate circumstances, their options for continued survival and avoiding an indecency charge are more limited. *Wanted, A Gentleman* acknowledges that arrests do happen for less fortunate men. Martin details what must be done in order to avoid the consequences of these charges. He reveals that prior to meeting Theo Swann, "he hadn't indulged with a man in over a year, since an escapade on the Sodomite's Walk in Moorfields had led to his arrest. He'd bribed the officer with an eye-watering sum to be released without charge, and decided to keep his prick to himself in the future rather than face the unspeakable

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<sup>135</sup> Charles, *A Gentleman's Position*, location 2072.

consequences of using it as he wished.”<sup>136</sup> This paragraph reveals the crux of the issue for homosexual men in Regency England, especially those who pay visits to the men’s meeting houses, where patrons must take their chances with police raids. While no man would ever be truly safe from any accusation, assets like the funds to bribe police officers and the Ricardians’ upper class status would go a long way toward preventing any public disgrace. The only other option these men have is a tradeoff between the ability to live their life safely and ever fulfilling their sexual desires. It is only through severely forced celibacy that men who were interested in men might have been able to avoid any brushes with the law or any accusations of deviance. Part of the revolutionary power of romance novels that Charles herself advocates rather strongly is having the opportunity to create stories in which these bleak outlooks are not the only option for characters. Instead they have the chance at a happily ever after and the ability to live their lives as they would choose to do, rather than with a debilitating fear of the law and what might happen to them if they get caught.

### *Feminization of Male Characters*

It should be noted that a good deal of Charles’ feminization of male characters could be due in part to the historical contexts of many of her novels. In the past and presently, the most popular form of subtle homophobia was the equation of gay men and negative epithets usually aimed at women. By implying that gay men are inherently more feminine because of their sexuality, this strips them of any power they might be otherwise granted as a benefit of their masculinity. This works to assert the speakers own perceived superiority over the object, disparaging both gay men and women at the same time. A knowledge of historical homophobia can explain these speech acts which often times are spat towards a main character from a

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<sup>136</sup> Charles, *Wanted, A Gentleman*, location 676.

relatively minor character in passing. In the context of an m/m romance novel, these work to remind readers of the historical moment the couple is living and the ways in which they have to confront societal objections to their relationship as well as the main crux of the novel.

This historical precedence provides an understanding of the use of derogative terms employed in the novel; however, it does not account for the ways in which the narrative itself presents male characters as feminine. This perception is of particular concern to Alfie Curtis in *Think of England*. A war veteran, Alfie comes across as a true “man’s man,” except for the fact that he finds himself attracted to Daniel da Silva. For much of the novel, Alfie is concerned that he might be perceived as being “the type” to have a sexual relationship with another man, much less a romantic one. He assures himself when he and da Silva leave a room together: “Nobody would think such a thing of him, even if it would be the obvious conclusion to read about da Silva, and even if they did, *he* knew he was about no such business.”<sup>137</sup> This neglects the fact that Alfie has been about “such business” before with other men and is not a long way off from engaging in that business with da Silva. Alfie is particularly conscious about what men who are da Silva’s type do and what it might be that would qualify him as the “type.” He reassures himself again at a later point in the novel, stating that he “wasn’t like that. He simply didn’t *feel* queer, whatever that might feel like. He felt like a normal chap who, now and then, enjoyed encounters with other chaps, that was all. Some people might not see the distinction, he supposed, but there was definitely a difference. He wasn’t sure what it was, but there was one. Well, there had to be, since he wasn’t queer.”<sup>138</sup> Throughout the course of the novel, Alfie has no problem being the recipient of oral sex from da Silva, but he draws the line at kissing another man or being the more active participant in oral sex. Of course, he would later overcome his own

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<sup>137</sup> Charles, *Think of England*, 38.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.



narrowmindedness in his love for da Silva, but his initial concerns relentlessly plague the first half of the novel.

In direct contrast to Alfie's view of himself, the character of Crispin from *Rag and Bone* is heavily gay coded, almost to the point of stereotype. Crispin is described early in the novel as being "willowy, effete, his manner screaming *molly* no matter how hard he tried to hide it."<sup>139</sup> He is exactly the type of man that Alfie is terrified of being perceived as by others. However, Charles shifts even these qualities—typically understood to be negatives when referring to men—on their head. The aspect of the novel that prevents this stereotyping of Crispin from going too far is the way Crispin's partner Ned appreciates these qualities about him. Ned is presented as the physical opposite to his lover: "Ned was strong-muscled, a working man, a black man."<sup>140</sup> While it could be said that there are some racial connotations at play with Crispin, an effeminate white man, being contrasted to Ned, a physically able black man, Charles attempts to subvert these by disrupting their traditional sexual roles. It is almost expected that the larger, stronger partner would be the sexual driver in the relationship, while the smaller man would be the sexual recipient. However, with Ned and Crispin "both of them were very used to what other men wanted to them. And it had turned out that Ned was as tired of those expectations as Crispin."<sup>141</sup> Neither of the characters are interested in penetrative sex which is a change in convention, considering that in most straight romance novels, penetrative sex is the moment the characters become most connected and their relationship is fully realized. Ned expresses his admiration of Crispin's lack of overt masculinity later, when comparing him to his father. Ned narrates: "Some might call [Crispin] pansyish, even, what with he wouldn't be the first into a

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<sup>139</sup> K.J. Charles, *Rag and Bone* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2016), Kindle Ebook, location 285.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

fight, talked light, wore his feelings on his sleeve. Ned didn't see a problem with any of that. So what if Crispin cried easy? ... [Ned's father] used gin and his fist to vent his feelings instead. If that was manly, Ned would rather have a molly."<sup>142</sup> This rejection of violent masculinity in favor of a lighter version brings Ned's appreciation for his partner to light and emphasizes the accepting nature of their relationship and works to humanize Ned himself.

While the previous two books had an almost cut and dry understanding of male feminization, the portrayal of less manly men in the *Charm of Magpies* series is less prone to categorizing. This largely occurs with the character Stephen Day. He is often given infantilizing nicknames by his lover, Lord Crane. Throughout the series he is called variations of "lovely boy," "sweet boy," and the like. This is not counting the narrative's own obsession with referring to Stephen as a "little man," either in physical contrast to Lord Crane, by Crane, or as an identifier on its own. These pet names work make Stephen appear as a much younger man, who needs the kind of guidance that Crane could provide to him with his far more knowledgeable experiences within the world and regarding sexual activities. This is especially obviously when Stephen hardly even calls Crane by his given name, Lucien, preferring instead to call him "Lord Crane." While Charles had avoided the stereotype of the smaller man as sexual recipient in *Rag and Bone*, it comes out quite obviously in *Flight of Magpies*, the third book of the *Charm of Magpies* series. Not only is Stephen the more feminized character, but he is also the sexually submissive man when his relationship with Crane involves BDSM elements. "I can't imagine what you thought I'd do,' Crane murmured. 'Half my size, held down, utterly powerless. Why would I not take my pleasure exactly how I choose, without the slightest regard to your wishes?'"<sup>143</sup> While sexual submission is not inherently feminizing for men, Stephen's

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., location 1956.

<sup>143</sup> K.J. Charles, *Flight of Magpies* (Cincinnati: Samhain Publishing, 2014), Kindle Ebook, location 1687.

submission, combined with other aspects of his relationship to Crane present his lack of an overt masculinity not in a positive light.

A total feminization of Stephen's character is instead subverted by Charles in different ways. The most obvious of these is the way in which Stephen's magic and training makes him infinitely the more powerful of the two. This power might come from an internal magic source, which can also be drawn from Crane, rather than an external brute strength, but Stephen does not hesitate to use his powers when necessary. In his brief appearances in spinoffs of the series, Stephen is described as opposing in spite of his height and often cruel in order to accomplish his means. He is one of the senior members of the judiciary, the magic users' version of the London police. In *Jackdaw*, Ben encounters Stephen quite often in their hunts for Jonah and Stephen frequently brings Ben to heel: "[Ben] towered over Day, but he didn't delude himself that gave him any chance at all. He thought he could feel a tension in the air around him: perhaps just his imagination, but he was quite sure that invisible bonds would close round him again if he tried to run."<sup>144</sup> To other characters of the series, Stephen has an imposing presence that overrides their understanding of his stature. He has earned this reputation by being the hero of all of his novels, rather than the more physically impressive Lord Crane. While Crane's magical heritage and own innate magic abilities helped Stephen to take down the villains in the other books, it is ultimately Stephen's powers that would ensure their safety and often the safety of London as well. Though Stephen is the more feminized partner in his relationship with Lord Crane, to others he commands a domineering presence, a kind of man that they need to cross at their own peril. Through the spinoffs to the *Charm of Magpie* series, Charles is able to amend and provide more context on a feature that could otherwise be seen as a limitation of Stephen's character.

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<sup>144</sup> Charles, *Jackdaw*, location 886.

*(Lack of) Sexual Realism*

Perhaps the best sign that Charles conforms to the conventions of the m/m romance genre is the ways in which her characters seem to exhibit a lack of sexual realism. As seen previously, the inability or perhaps outright refusal of m/m romance authors to realistically write a sex scene between two men is a sticking point for critics, such as Taylor. This unrealistic sex seems to largely be a product of the genre, where sex between the two main characters is expected much faster than it is of straight protagonists. The speed with which the couples get together and the lack of reality in the sex acts themselves could possibly be put down to audience. Bloggers like Taylor are reacting to the fact that straight women who read m/m romance novels might not *want* to know the gritty details of what exactly entails getting prepared for anal penetration between two men. It is much easier for authors to provide an idealized fantasy for their readers than write about self-administered enemas and maintaining a proper plant-based diet prior to penetration. Criticism of sexual activities in m/m romances, while not undeserved, is based on what is partly an almost necessary function of the genre; however, at the same time it is this function that is drawing the most criticism. There is a fine line for m/m authors who are concerned with authenticity to take while at the same time presenting sex scenes that are pleasing for their female audiences.

In Charles novels many of the main couples seem to become involved rather quickly. Julius and Harry in *A Fashionable Indulgence* get together within the first quarter of the book, while in *A Seditious Affair* Dominic and Silas are together almost from the first page. This is a sharp departure from straight romances novels where, as mentioned previously, the characters do not get together until about halfway through the book. The formula method of romances novels might be a myth, but experience shows that the protagonists in m/m historicals usually engage in

some kind of sex act much sooner than m/f historicals when it might be a heated kiss at the halfway point. There could be a number of reasons for this, including: the preferences of different bodies of readers, the freedom from historical female chastity, an author's style or plot motivations, and the perceived promiscuity of gay men. Nevertheless, most of Charles' novels follow this pattern of the male protagonists getting into bed with each other quite early in the book, with almost all before the half-way mark.

Besides the early pairings of couples in the novel, Charles also ends up falling into the unrealistic sexual aspects trope of the genre. If we look at just the *Society of Gentlemen* series, we can see a number of instances where the actions of the characters and the descriptions of the sex acts makes a discerning reader pause. The short story "The Ruin of Gabriel Ashleigh" features the first sexual encounter between almost rivals Francis and Gabriel. After placing bets on Gabriel's body in return for the fortune he lost to Francis at a gambling table, Gabriel ends up being taken against a dining room table, telling the other man "It's not your finger I want.' Didn't want preparing. Loved the feeling of a thick cock pushing him open."<sup>145</sup> The couple then proceeds to have sex without any other form of preparation besides Francis' single finger and a small amount of oil. Ash's insistence that he likes the burn is perhaps Charles' concession to her readers. Presumably she knows that being anally penetrated without any form of preparation is going to be painful, producing a burning sensation, but because of the illusions and sometimes intentional mysteries around sex within m/m romance novels a full scene of accurate prep might not have been unneeded but also unwanted by the readers. The scene also concludes with Ash ejaculating untouched, from Francis' thrusts which is as unlikely for gay men as climaxing

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<sup>145</sup> K.J. Charles, "The Ruin of Gabriel Ashleigh," location 395.

without clitoral stimulation is for women; it happens, but not as frequently as we are led to believe.

In addition to a lack of preparation exhibited by Gabriel and Francis, the men in *A Fashionable Indulgence* forsake reality for a pretty picture. Harry and Julius are in the middle of a liaison, discussing their planned separation after Harry's marriage when Julius admits his desire to ejaculate on Harry's face. After getting approval "his seed shot white over Harry's face and neck and dark-furred chest."<sup>146</sup> Earlier in the novel, Harry spent on his shirt to the point of translucency after bringing Julius off with his mouth, enough so that he was worried about returning to his grandfather's house after his night with Julius had concluded. Both occasions display a large amount of hyperbole when projecting the amount of semen that one man is able to produce while having sex regularly. This can again perhaps be put down to the female fantasy implicit in m/m romance novels, but it lacks the sense of being a necessary change for the purposes of sexual gratification of a female audience the way the exclusion of preparation for anal sex could claim to be. Instead, this overproduction of semen could play into fantasies of marking someone as another's sexual property. A large amount of seed could also subconsciously cause readers to imagine that the participants are especially sexually virile, compared to other men.

Charles takes a different direction with the second novel of the series that must be commended. Dominic, a Tory, and his Radical Silas engage in a BDSM relationship that is nothing less than consensual at all points. Dominic has a troubled past with his relationship to submission and desire for roughness during sex. When he told his best friend and lover at the time, Lord Richard, of his desires he was summarily rejected in such a way as would color their

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<sup>146</sup> Charles, *A Fashionable Indulgence*, location 1822.

interactions for years to come. Silas is unilaterally accepting of their relationship in a way that Richard could not bring himself to be for Dominic. Throughout multiple parts of the novel, Silas tells Dominic such reassurances as: “What’s important... There’s nothing wrong with you, understand? Remember that. And be careful about it. No damn fool risks.”<sup>147</sup> While not dealing with the reality of sexual acts themselves, Charles must be admired for her straightforward, positive view of relationships which play with power dynamics. Even though Dominic takes the submissive role in his relationship with Silas, he is knowledgeable of the power dynamics at play as he tells Richard: “I know damned well that I have more power than Silas in the world outside. He wouldn’t let me forget it, even if I was inclined to. So... I give him the truth. I don’t ask for his; I give him mine.”<sup>148</sup> Dominic understands that there are levels of power within any relationship and even though Silas might be sexually dominant in the bedroom, Dominic’s position as a gentleman and a government official affords him more privileges in the wider world, even if it takes him a while to admit it. We live in a post-*50 Shades of Grey* world, where it has been proven BDSM relationships can be severely mishandled, but still become popular books and even the bases for relationships.<sup>149</sup> Authors must be increasingly conscious of the impact their works, especially when they depict alternative sexual topics, such as happens in *A Seditious Affair* and even in *50 Shades of Grey*.

The final novel of the series, *A Gentleman’s Position*, returns to the previous theme of lack of preparation before sexual activity. It also introduces the tired cliché also prevalent in straight romance novels, climaxing at the same time. In both m/m and straight romances, reaching climax at the same time is an ultimate expression of the couples’ love for each other as well as their

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<sup>147</sup> Charles, *A Seditious Affair*, location 1275.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, location 2366.

<sup>149</sup> E.L. James, *50 Shades of Grey* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

sexual compatibility. Whether this happens during their first sexual encounter together or the last one in the novel, we as readers are supposed to feel with the couple in that moment, and in an almost voyeuristic way engage with their feelings of love and completion, but of the act and of each other. This is articulated in *A Gentleman's Position* with David "crying out as he came so hard that it ached, only vaguely aware that Richard was climaxing at the same time. Two shuddering, interlocked bodies, two thundering hearts."<sup>150</sup> While emotionally satisfying, this situation reads close to when Ash ejaculates untouched by Francis. It is a possibility, but not as prevalent as romances would have us believe. Perhaps this is another necessary convention of romances novels that authors have to adhere to in order to fulfill audience expectations, even if they themselves know such situations are not always likely. However, *A Gentleman's Position* also includes another sexually unlikely scene wherein Richard, a man sitting comfortably at thirty-six, reaches climax twice within a few pages of each other. While it might be believable that Richard could get a second erection relatively quickly, the presence of a second orgasm so soon seems unlikely. It is possible that readers are supposed to acknowledge David's superior sexual prowess in this scene, since it is through him that Richard is able to achieve this second orgasm so quickly. We can even infer that Richard is very aroused during his sexual encounters with David, since increased arousal is one of the factors that shorten the male refractory period. However possible it *might* be for this to happen for David and Richard, the scene comes off more as wish fulfillment for readers than an actual possibility. This wish fulfillment might come off as perfectly fine within the novel if we were not conscious of the objections gay men have to m/m romance novels and their inability or unwillingness to accurately portray a true account of sex between men.

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<sup>150</sup> Charles, *A Gentleman's Position*, location 3476.



*Open Acknowledgement of the History of the Genre*

One way Charles engages with the larger meta-world of M/M Romance is by including tropes that are popular in slash fiction in various ways. An example of this is in the first chapter of *The Secret Casebook of Simon Feximal*. Originally written as a short story, “The Caldwell Ghost,” Robert Caldwell relates his first meeting with life-long partner Simon Feximal.<sup>151</sup> This chapter is perhaps the most playful of Charles’ book and hinges on a popular fanfiction trope. Commonly titled “Aliens Made Them Do It,” this trope can be described as “a specific kind of Applied Phlebotinum [plot fuel] often used in Fanfics to get two characters who have little motivation to have sex to do so. In the most traditional use of this trope, aliens kidnap the characters and require them to have sex for scientific study or experimental purpose.”<sup>152</sup> Like most tropes, this no doubt originated in the *Star Trek* fandom. To readers of M/M romances who either came from and/or continue to read slash fiction, the trope of “[Blank] Made Them Do It” would not be an unfamiliar one. The blank can be replaced with any number of things, from potions, aliens, sex pollen or as it is used here, by homosexual ghostly relatives interrupted mid-coitus. After experiences symptoms of a haunting, including pleasurable moans, screams, and bleeding walls, Robert calls on noted occultist Simon Feximal to deal with his problem. They soon realize the ghost’s intentions. Robert writes: “That was madness, I thought, but it was as if my body and mind were separate things. I was frightened, confused and desperate to run for my life, or soul, but my prick was being called, and it seemed to intend to come.”<sup>153</sup> Clever pun

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<sup>151</sup> The short story in question no longer seems to be available for purchase. The original publisher, Torquere Press, has closed under relatively questionable circumstances. The closing was announced December 12, 2016 and Charles does not seem to have posted alternate purchasing information. For further information, see: Victoria Strauss, “Torquere Press is Closing,” *Writer Beware* Weblog, entry posted December 13, 2016, <https://accrispin.blogspot.com/> (accessed May 17, 2017).

<sup>152</sup> “Aliens Made Them Do It,” *TVTropes.org*, accessed May 18, 2017, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AliensMadeThemDoIt>.

<sup>153</sup> Charles, *Secret Casebook*, 17.

aside, Robert notes many of the same feelings often invoked in the popular fanfiction trope, which can be used in consensual circumstances or not. Luckily, Robert and Simon had already felt an interest growing between them and decided to fulfill the ghost's last wishes. While the use of this plot device might have merely been convenient for the short story Charles had in mind, it nevertheless also pays homage to the history of her genre, a history Charles almost assuredly would have been aware of.

### **The Current State of M/M Romance**

While the trend in past years had been a derision of the women who write m/m romance by other gay male authors or readers, there has been a recent turn towards if not acceptance, than resignation that women are a large portion of the m/m romance genre and it is unlikely that they are going to be going away any time soon. When a group of gay men were asked for their opinion by a female m/m romance author on Reddit, the results were largely mixed.<sup>154</sup> Half of the responders did not read romance novels at all and of those who did, no one posed a particularly strong objection to anyone writing them. Users like Tarqon write, "Some of the best gay fiction I've read was by women, it really doesn't matter."<sup>155</sup> Others like IamKingTarquin replied: "Some stories are just plain fluff and/or *really* impossible, but then again, some are really really good that you get a book hangover – so, I guess, it doesn't matter if it's written by a woman or a gay guy; as long as the story keeps me warm/something to read before bed time – I'm up for it."<sup>156</sup> This is a common theme among respondents on this thread. Most do not care about who writes the romance novels as long as they are well written. Some users had objections

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<sup>154</sup> Quizicle, "Opinions about women writing gay romance?" *Reddit/Askgaybros*, N.D., [https://www.reddit.com/r/askgaybros/comments/34e434/opinions\\_about\\_women\\_writing\\_gay\\_romance/](https://www.reddit.com/r/askgaybros/comments/34e434/opinions_about_women_writing_gay_romance/) (accessed January 5, 2017).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

to the ways in which men were portrayed in the novels that often revolve around stereotypes of size and expected sexual roles: “I don’t mind having a difference between the two tbh but having the small one the bottom every single time is stereotypical and boring. The other part that usually surfaces with this trend is the bottom only seems to be the only one who is entered (he gives the top a bj, than is fucked And [sic] is either left to finish himself or is only ever jerked off by the top after the top gets his pleasure first). Hate that trope.”<sup>157</sup> Gay men on Reddit largely do not seem to have mistrust in women to accurately portray the relationship in an m/m romance.

The Askgaybros Reddit is not mainly composed of men who read much m/m romance. Those more heavily involved in the romance community have become almost more resigned to the notion that women are not going to cease production of m/m romance and that these women are pretty cemented in the genre as it stands now. Jamie Fessenden points out to his readers: “I want romance. And for that, I turn to MM Romance, which has always been a genre dominated by women. *Always*. There has never been a time when the majority of writers in this genre were gay men. So the question of whether women should be writing MM Romance is utterly absurd.”<sup>158</sup> While some might have some objections to the way in which women portray gay relationships in m/m romances, Fessenden reminds readers that these women are not taking anything away from gay men by writing in this genre. In fact, it emerged mainly by the work of these women, not any kind of gay m/m romance ancestor. In a response of Fessenden, Meeker advocates for a furthering of the inclusion and perhaps embrace of women into m/m romance and moving beyond the tired argument of whether they have the liberty to write in the genre at all. He writes, “I believe this respectfully inclusive, ‘room for everyone’ approach will take us forward into a fecund, more emotionally powerful genre than any of us can presently

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., user Bryek.

<sup>158</sup> Fessenden, “My take on women writing MM Romance.”

imagine.”<sup>159</sup> There will always be the stalwarts of the genre who believe that women have no right to be writing or reading m/m romance, but other authors like Fessenden and Meeker advocate a more accepting approach that acknowledges the realities of the situation and allows them to move beyond the relatively basic argument about whether authors should be allowed to do something.

An acknowledgement of the existence and popularity of m/m romance novels allows for the formation of a more nuanced argument about what these authors actually want. One popular subject in recent years has been the differentiation between m/m romance novels and gay literature. Though the two genres do not have a definitely dividing line, much work has been done by gay men to begin to categorize the two different genres. In attempting to delineate the two, Marshall Thornton proposes the following differences:

There are very few absolutes to hold onto and a lot of “I know it when I see it.” Certainly publication date is one of the few absolutes. Since m/m sprang out of slash fiction, an Internet phenomenon, any work written before the advent of the Internet is almost certainly gay fiction. If a book is written with a gay male audience in mind, it is gay fiction. Especially, if it lacks a strong element of romance and ignores the rules of the romance genre entirely. If a book is written with a heterosexual female audience in mind and adheres to the rules of the romance genre it is m/m romance.<sup>160</sup>

Another distinction Thornton highlights is about the central tenets of each genre: “Gay fiction at its core is about the formation of an individual identity (the basic coming out story) or the formation of chosen-family focused on adults...M/M at its core is about the formation of a committed relationship...or the formation of a family focused on child rearing.”<sup>161</sup> These are a set of relatively basic differences between the two genres; however, their overarching definitions

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<sup>159</sup> Meeker, “About Who Writes MM Romance.”

<sup>160</sup> Marshall Thornton, “M/M Romance and Gay Fiction Duke It Out,” *Marshall Thornton* Weblog, entry posted October 6, 2011, <https://marshallthorntonauthor.com/thoughts-and-ideas/mm-romance-and-gay-fiction-duke-it-out/> (accessed January 18, 2017).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

make it easier for readers to categorize the novels they are invested in. Romance author Brad Vance adds in the consideration “*scope* is the divider. Most lives include ‘romance,’ but most romance novels dial in only on the narrow portion of time in those lives between ‘They met’ and ‘They married.’ Most literary novels avoid this entire section of time – many of them are about a ‘marriage under the microscope,’ about everything that goes wrong later, after the HEA.”<sup>162</sup>

These detailed separations between the genres is helpful for readers and authors attempting to determine where their books lie; however, Vance makes the difference between gay fiction and m/m romance novels remarkably simple: “What romance delivers is escape. What fiction delivers is realism, at least compared to how much of that you get in romance. In the case of Gay Fiction, it’s truth – the truth about gay men’s lives. Gay Romance gives its audience what they dream of, but, as gay men, only Gay Fiction gives us what we need.”<sup>163</sup>

Based on these differentiations, we can see that gay fiction is generally written by gay men, with them and their experiences in mind. They might not always have the happy endings that are indicative of romance novels, but they nevertheless strive to display a fundamental truth about the lives and lived experiences of gay men that might one day be instructive to others. These generally are novels about being gay, rather than simply being a gay romance, which perhaps is why critics like Taylor have a great deal of contempt for the latter. Gay or m/m romance on the other hand is written, as we know, with a primarily female audience in mind and caters more to their desires and fantasies than it does with accurately portraying the lives of gay

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<sup>162</sup> Brad Vance, “In the matter of: Gay Fiction v. Gay Romance,” *Brad Vance Author Weblog*, entry posted January 21, 2016, <https://bradvanceauthor.com/2016/01/21/in-the-matter-of-gay-fiction-v-gay-romance/> (accessed January 30, 2017). There are a number of connotations when referring to gay fiction as “gay literature.” It primarily highlights the reputation given to romances novels in general as being less than quality and “trashy books,” as opposed to referencing gay fiction as “gay literature,” which carries with this perceptions of a more elevated status. These are not connotations this paper wishes or intends to uphold.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

men. While these authors might strive for authenticity in their writing, there is some leeway that would not be present in gay fiction, if they do not manage achieve it all the way.

This distinction may at first seem a little arbitrary to those who do not care if they read gay fiction or m/m romance. However, it proves to be a necessary one. According to members of the publishing industry, “although it would seem like gay male readers would be an obvious untapped market for M/M romance, John Scognamiglio of Kensington Press is quoted by [Josh Lanyon in his book *Man, Oh, Man! Writing M/M Fiction for Kinks and Ca\$h*] as saying, ‘It’s two different audiences. Readers who are reading M/M fiction aren’t reading gay fiction. It’s two different types of books.’”<sup>164</sup> Thornton seems to agree with Scognamiglio, stating: “You could also say this discussion is little more than an academic exercise. I don’t believe it is, though. I believe the distinction between gay fiction and m/m is vitally important. Why do I think that? Because readers don’t sort it out.”<sup>165</sup> He proceeds to give examples of readers thinking they are getting one genre and actually getting another, causing harm to both either by romance readers leaving bad reviews on gay literature or gay literature enthusiasts only finding m/m romance and thinking that gay literature as a whole had died. Others, like m/m romance author Erastes oppose this kind of thinking and feel that the level of crossover is fairly high: “I know gay guys who are writing gay romance or m/m – and 95 percent of my readers’ letters i [sic] get are from gay men. So to say the people who are reading m/m aren’t the same people who are reading gay fiction is frankly silly.”<sup>166</sup> However, in this comment Erastes herself seems to confuse the two genres. Her readers being gay does not necessarily impact their reading habits and imply that they are reading gay fiction.

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<sup>164</sup> Dick Smart, “Straight Women/Gay Romance,” *Lambda Literary*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/sandbox/features/06/08/straight-womengay-romance> (accessed March 3, 2017).

<sup>165</sup> Thornton, “M/M Romance and Gay Fiction Duke It Out.”

<sup>166</sup> Smart, “Straight Women/Gay Romance.”

Another important reason to differentiate the two genres is concerned with the popularity and financial power m/m romance has compared to gay fiction. Vance admits to being guilty of writing Gay Romance instead of Gay Fiction. He cites one of these reasons as the relative profitability of m/m romance as opposed to gay fiction: “Gay Fiction is not a profitable career, nor it likely to become one. It’s more like being a poet, one best suited to those with day jobs or grants or employed spouses or a willingness to (and the good health to be able to) live on the financial margins. But we need more of it.”<sup>167</sup> With the prevalence and economic motivation of m/m romance, authors often find it difficult to justify writing a more gay fiction identified piece, when there is simply an easier way to make a living in m/m romance. In addition to economic motivations, the call to write m/m romance instead of gay fiction can lay in the writers’ ability to get published. Fessenden observes: “without it, most of the gay authors currently publishing in MM Romance would not be published, or at least they would have to resort to self-publishing...MM Romance publishers have provided another avenue for gay male authors—a *lot* of gay male authors... We have to adapt to what sells if we want our stories to sell. That’s just marketing common sense.”<sup>168</sup> It seems for many gay authors m/m romance can be a double edged sword. It offers them the ability to publish their work through a publishing house in a way in which they might have not been able to do before; however, it also limits what they can write if they still want to be considered within the genre and be able to sell their books. By acknowledging the difference between m/m romance and gay fiction, we are able to identify the economic considerations that underlie each genre and the ways in which m/m romance might offer gay men more opportunities as writers at the same time as it almost forces them away from writing gay fiction.

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<sup>167</sup> Vance, “In the matter of: Gay Fiction v. Gay Romance.”

<sup>168</sup> Fessenden, “My take on women writing MM Romance.”

This paper will conclude with recommendations from male writers and readers within the romance genre to make it what they would perceive to be a better, more inclusive genre for all readers. In addition to proposing a differentiation between m/m romance novels and gay fiction and offering critics of women's involvement within the genre in general, romance novel authors and critics have been providing a number of what they consider to be improvements that it would behoove the romance genre to adapt in order to further advance it. These recommendations generally fall into two different categories: further delineating the difference between gay fiction and m/m romance and altering the m/m romance genre itself to make it more accessible to a wider number of readers.

Both Thornton and Vance are concerned with the equation between gay literature and m/m romance. Thornton offers what appears to be more simple advice of the pair:

It would be terrible though to watch m/m romance choke off the growth of gay fiction. So, what to do about this? Obviously, it's not going to sort itself out overnight. But, I think if writers and publishers become aware of the problem and begin to correct themselves and their product things will slowly improve. In the past, I've called myself an m/m romance writer. I'm really not. And this is definitely my first step in removing that label. Hopefully, at least some, m/m romance writers will follow my lead and stop calling themselves gay fiction writers when they're clearly not. Ultimately, I think it's beneficial for everyone.<sup>169</sup>

While this seems like a relatively easy feat to accomplish, there is the distinct possibility it will be difficult, as some m/m romance novelists might feel that they are afforded more prestige when calling themselves gay fiction writers when, as Thornton points out, they are clearly not. Vance extends Thornton's advice for a further division between gay fiction and m/m romance novels to encompass outside of the romance novel community of writers and publishers into large moguls that unexpectedly influence both genres, such as Amazon. According to Vance, "when you look at the Gay Fiction section on Amazon, the bestsellers and the new releases aren't really Gay

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<sup>169</sup> Thornton, "M/M Romance and Gay Fiction Duke It Out."



Fiction, not as gay men have known it for decades. They're Gay Romances. They're not really about the lives of gay men, not the way that *Dancer* or *Grief* is. There are rarely any signposts in a Gay Romance that show us how to live, how other gay men are living and how we can learn from them."<sup>170</sup> Though his blog post was published over a year and a half ago, Vance's statements about the state of Amazon's best sellers list for Gay and Lesbian books still ring true. Of the twenty spots, most are dominated by m/m romance novels, with two devoted to lesbian romances and two dedicated to menagerie stories featuring two men and a woman.<sup>171</sup> If Amazon was able to come up with a better way of making their best sellers list, gay fiction might be highlighted in a way it currently cannot be when overshadowed by the genre powerhouse of m/m romance novels.

Additionally, Vance also offers a suggestion for the books found in the gay fiction genre. According to him, there need to be more diversity in the novels that are being written and published now in order to revive the genre. He gives a variety of examples to his readers: "Nope, we don't need any more novels by gay white men about escaping the sticks for the Big City, where they get nice jobs in publishing and summer on Fire Island. We're full up there. I think what we need is a novel from a gay person in Uganda, for instance...Or more novels like *Grief*, about getting older in a subculture devoted to youth and beauty."<sup>172</sup> This would mean sacrificing the traditional form of gay fiction, one that works well and is almost expected by readers of the genre. Gay fiction authors must begin to incorporate aspects of our LBGT reality, rather than allowing the most popular gay fiction to have been written at least over thirty years ago. This also means attempting to diverge away from the siren song of romance, because as Vance points

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<sup>170</sup> Vance, "In the matter of: Gay Fiction v. Gay Romance." The two books mentioned here are *Dancer from the Dance* (New York: William Morrow, 1978) and *Grief* (New York: Hyperion, 2006) both by Andrew Holleran.

<sup>171</sup> This list was observed on May 22, 2017.

<sup>172</sup> Vance, "In the matter of: Gay Fiction v. Gay Romance."

out: “There are lives that never have any romance, but they’re still interesting. There’s still resonance in those lives for the rest of us.”<sup>173</sup> While writing exclusively in gay fiction would be no easy task for authors, separating the genre more fully from m/m romance would allow for readers to better find the novels that might connect more fully with their own lives, rather than be bombarded with a staggering amount of romance novels that they might not have the inclination to read.

Within the genre of m/m romance itself, gay male authors and readers call for a variety of changes in order to shake the reputation of being exclusively for women while still providing space for female authors and readers to engage with this genre. Jamie Fessenden calls for more recognition of the interplay between female and male authors. Fessenden is adamant in his refuse to drive women out of the genre at all. Instead, he advocates for more open and honest communication between the two groups to promote an organic change from within: “Ultimately, if there are things gay authors don’t like about the MM Romance genre, we’re in a good position to affect some change within it...by depicting ourselves honestly in good stories. If our stories are good, they’ll have an influence. Also by talking about ourselves honestly with other authors in the genre. Female authors aren’t the enemy. They want their stories to be authentic.”<sup>174</sup> Fessenden seems the overall role that women play in the m/m genre—and it is a large one, to such a degree that attempting to kick them out of the genre entirely is not only going to be beneficial in the long run, but actually more detrimental overtime.

Another seemingly general approach to changing the genre is presented by Lloyd Meeker. He has nothing against female authors in the genre and states that the fact that their stories are different from those by gay men are to be expected rather than reviled. Rather from

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Fessenden, “My take on women writing MM Romance.”

Meeker, differences within the genre are what allows it to have the amount of diversity that it does and it seems pointless to call either female or male authors “better” or “more real” than one another. Instead he advocates for an expansion of the genre itself, “expanding the parameters of romance beyond the rule inherited from het romance with its overwhelming emphasis on the story of deliriously happy monogamous dyads fading to black before the argument about squeezing the toothpaste tube in the middle begin. Not abandoning all the ground rules, necessarily, just expanding our scope.”<sup>175</sup> One of the explicit ways Meeker mentions this might be accomplished is by writing characters with a higher level of emotional maturity. Often he finds male characters over age twenty-five are still written with the emotional maturity of a twenty year old. In order to correct this, he writes: “I believe that writing main characters emotionally older than 25 will force us to address the depth and complexity of the mature masculine in our stories. The downside is that an emotionally mature male character might take more work from the author to realize than opting for some familiar character shortcuts to emotional conflict that are plausible for an immature protagonist.”<sup>176</sup> Meeker calls for more diversity within the genre, which includes at the same time celebrating the differences that seem to exist between male and female authors. Both seem to bring something to the table within the genre of m/m romance that Meeker regards as positive and necessary for the genre to be able to grow and provide fresh material in the future.

Taylor on the other hand calls for a much more radical change within the m/m romance genre. His often times scathing blog post calls into question the queerness of m/m romance novels and their ability to market themselves as such. Instead, he posits that books within this genre are often times centered on two straight man who are in a relationship with each other,

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<sup>175</sup> Meeker, “About Who Writes MM Romance.”

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

rather than the relationship between two queer men. The way in which these novels are presented offer a kind of disconnect from his reality as a queer person. He comments: “I am not saying that gay romance novels have to be a realistic in order to be good [sic]. I don’t think that’s true. What I do think is that if gay romance novels are going to be about gay men, queer men, then they ought to endeavor to render a more genuine portrait of the ways we live and fall in love.”<sup>177</sup>

Some female authors would make the claim that they do their fair amount of research, either by watching gay porn, talking to gay men, or getting a sensitivity read-through of their novels.

Evidently this would not be enough for Taylor, if all they are doing is continuing to follow the same formula as each other. It is not enough for these novels to replace a female character with a gay man and call themselves an m/m romance novel. Instead authors must pay more careful attention to the ways they are even fundamentally constructing their characters. It does not do to strip the m/m romance novel from its queer aspects in order to make it more palatable for a straight female audience. Taylor is not calling for a destruction of the genre itself, but more of a restructuring in the minds of readers and authors alike, in order to present these gay and queer male characters in a more authentic way.

Still a relatively new development, the romantic subgenre of m/m romance is still experiencing growing pains. Some of these might just be inherent in the fact that novels about gay men are being read and written primarily by straight women; it is difficult to imagine that naysayers will ever be fully pleased. However, these women all have their different reasons for coming to the genre and engaging with it again and again. Most of the issues presented, often by gay men, about the limitations of the genre contain a number of valid critiques that must be worked through as m/m romance grows in popularity. Issues of fetishization and questions about

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<sup>177</sup> Taylor, “Gay Romance Novels Are Not Queer Romance Novels.”

women's ability to even accurately write an m/m relationship in their novels are being called into question and negotiated every day. It is unlikely that we will ever reach the end of this self-awareness that m/m romance novels seemed to have been born with. By looking at K.J. Charles as a sample author, we were able to see the way these issues were being actively negotiated throughout and within the novels as new debates strung up and older ones seemed to be resolved. The current status of m/m romance is still constantly in flux, with a myriad of different suggestions being offered from all corners of the internet. The advent of the Internet helped give this genre its popularity and now allows us to see the negotiations happening in real time. While it is impossible for reader and authors to see what the future of m/m romance novels will hold, we can nevertheless be assured that our understandings and practices will shift as a close-knit community, with a better understanding of our own place as a genre.

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