

Writing the Happy Ever After: An Interview with Anne Gracie

by Lisa Fletcher

Published online: October 2014

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: Anne Gracie and Lisa Fletcher met at the 2013 Romance Writers of Australia Conference at the Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Australia. The interview took place in a quiet alcove of the hotel on the afternoon of 17 August, 2013.

About the Author: Lisa Fletcher is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. She is the author of *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (Ashgate, 2008) and the co-author (with Ralph Crane) of *Cave: Nature and Culture*, a forthcoming volume in Reaktion Books' "Earth" series. She is currently co-writing a monograph, *Island Genres, Genre Islands*, for Rowman & Littlefield's new series, "Rethinking the Island." Lisa is the Teaching and Learning Editor for the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*.

Keywords: Anne Gracie, Australian popular fiction, historical romance fiction, popular romance fiction

Anne Gracie is one of Australia's most awarded popular historical romance writers and a past president of the Romance Writers of Australia (2006 – 2008). Her first novel *Gallant Waif*, published by Harlequin, was a finalist for the RITA Award for best first book in 2000 and won the Romance Writers of America (RWA) National Readers Choice Award in 2001. Her second novel for Harlequin, *Tallie's Knight*, won the Australian Romantic Book of the Year (awarded by the Romance Writers of Australia) in 2002 and *The Romance Journal's* 2001 Francis Award for Best Regency. *An Honourable Thief*, released in the UK in 2001, the USA in 2002 and Australia in 2003, won the 2002 RWA National Readers Choice Award for Best Regency. In 2005, Anne published her first novel with Berkley, *The Perfect Rake*, which was a finalist for American and Australian romance awards. Originally intended as a stand-alone title *The Perfect Rake* became, to Anne's great surprise, the first book in her much-loved four-book Merridew Series. *Romantic Times* awarded the heroes of the second and fourth books K.I.S.S. awards (Knight in Shining Silver). The final Merridew novel, *The Perfect Kiss*, was a 2008 RITA finalist. Her five-book Devil Rider's series was published by Berkeley between 2008 and 2012. The first book, *The*

Stolen Princess, won the Romance Writers of Australia RuBY Award for Romantic Book of the Year in 2009 and the fifth, *Bride By Mistake*, was a 2012 RITA finalist for best historical romance. The first book of her new Chance Sisters series, *The Autumn Bride* was published in 2013, and was a RITA finalist.

Lisa Fletcher: *I want to begin by discussing the distinction between popular fiction and literary fiction. The Australian academic, Ken Gelder, argues that popular fiction and Literature (he uses a capital L to distinguish it from the broader category of literature which includes both popular fiction and Literature) are distinct, even opposed, fields. He goes so far as to say they're antagonistic. For Gelder the distinction between popular fiction and Literature only makes sense if we realize or recognize that these fields value different things; they've got different values.[1] In other interviews you've said that, for you, the purpose of romance is entertainment and you've stated quite emphatically that it is not literary fiction. So, can you explain what you mean when you say that popular romance novels are not "literary"?*

Anne Gracie: I'd actually like to adjust that claim. I would say that the relationship between popular fiction—in my case genre fiction romance—and literary fiction is best illustrated with a simple Venn diagram. I would class some writers, for instance Barbara Samuel, absolutely as literary fiction in terms of my idea of what literary fiction is: ideas are explored and beautiful language is encouraged. She also tells a good story, which would place her in the overlap part of the Venn diagram. In genre fiction, there must be a good story. In popular romance, which is what I understand best, I think storytelling trumps language every time. Think, for instance, about the big fuss over *Fifty Shades*. People have said that it's clunkily written, but clearly the storytelling has worked for many, many readers. I would say another difference is the relationship between the reader and the text. In romance, the reader has to be emotionally engaged in the text. They have to be emotionally—not necessarily committed to—but empathetic towards the heroine, particularly, and barracking for the hero and the heroine to earn their happy ending.[2] Romance readers want to go on that emotional rollercoaster ride and, if they don't care about the heroine, they won't bother finishing the book. For readers of literary fiction whether you like or dislike the main character is irrelevant, whereas I think it's crucial in romance.

LF: *When I teach my students about the difference between popular fiction and literary fiction, I show them a very simple Venn diagram with two intersecting sets. One set represents literary fiction, the other popular fiction, and there is a zone of overlap in the centre. I then like to ask them, what about if I want to put the word "classics" in this Venn diagram? Where do I put it? The point of asking such questions is, of course, to suggest the potential for texts to shuttle back and forth between the two sets.*

AG: Absolutely, and if you asked a bunch of romance readers about "classics," they wouldn't be talking about the same texts as your students, except maybe *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. Mostly though, they'd be talking about different classics: books such as Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm* and Loretta Chase's *Lord of Scoundrels*, or

her *Mr Impossible* which regularly top readers' lists of all time favourite romances. Of course there are many more.[3]

LF: *I think you're right: different literary fields have different canons. Popular romance has its canon, which might include the novels fans call "keepers," and literary readers have their canon and they rarely intersect. Where they do intersect is with the literary antecedents of today's romance genre romance novels. You've already mentioned Jane Austen and the Brontës; both names which have come up many times at this conference.*

AG: However in the nineteenth century they didn't distinguish between popular fiction and literary fiction in quite the same way we do today.

LF: *Do you think it's a twentieth-century distinction?*

AG: Yes, it's a twentieth-century distinction. In fact in my talk tomorrow, I'm actually quoting Dickens, who I think of as the ultimate popular fiction writer, but now has a firm place in people's minds as a literary writer.[4] Or at least, a 'classic' writer.

LF: *I want to focus a little more closely on the question of popular romance and literary fiction by talking about your latest novel, *The Autumn Bride*. [5] *The novel begins in London in 1816. The heroine, Abigail Chantry, is a governess and she is running late after spending her half-day off in a bookstore, "lost in a story—The Monk—deliciously bloodcurdling."* [6] *Reading, and in particular the pleasures of reading, strike me as key theme in this book. Not only does Abby love to read, but also she introduces other characters to the pleasures of "thrilling tales" and establishes a "literary society for people who don't want to be improved."* [7] *I love that quotation! What do you think? Were you deliberately playing with ideas about reading and pleasure in this novel?**

AG: In a way. I think these moments in the novel are, partly, my reaction to something that has developed in society. I read very widely—romance and other genres as well as literary fiction—but I think there's a cultural belief in Australia that reading needs to be serious, reading needs to be hard. I was in a bookstore in Bendigo a couple of months ago with a friend who was looking for a book.[8] I was just waiting around and browsing, when three young women came in to the store. They were clearly having trouble choosing a book. One of them said, "I like the books we do in book-club, of course, but for once I just want to find something that's fun to read." It's like people think that reading needs to be difficult and 'worthy', but we don't tend to have the same ideas about watching movies. Sure, we distinguish between art-house movies and pure bits of fun, but people have no shame about saying they went to see a light-hearted romantic chick flick. Many Australians would rather die than admit they'd read a romance. So *The Autumn Bride* does include a little bit of tongue-in-cheek poking fun at the hiving off of novels that are worthy to read from the great variety of literature.

LF: *One of my thoughts reading the book was that you were using it, in part, to making an argument for romance; it seems to me that you're speaking up for the genre within the pages of the novel.*

AG: Yeah, sort of... *[laughs]* It's also just fun and you know I'm not really taking it all that seriously.

LF: *Nevertheless, I would argue that this novel uses the subplot of Abby's success with a "fun" reading group to make a case for the value of the genre to which it belongs. I especially like the scene when a book literally saves Abby's life: she's carrying a novel when attacked in an alley and her assailant's knife cuts into the book's cover rather than her body.*

AG: I never thought of that *[laughs]*. Completely unplanned. I needed her winded, not stabbed and the book was the obvious solution because she's a reader, and like most readers, carries a book wherever she goes.

LF: *It's also a comical scene. The hero, Max, teases Abby, "And they say an addiction to novels is bad for you." [9] Popular romance has always impressed me as an extremely self-reflexive genre, even when it doesn't know that it's doing it. Heroes often protest that they are not romantic; heroines reflect on the failure of real life to live up to their romantic dreams; and so on. Do you agree, and do you think that this type of self-reflexivity is one of the appeals of the genre?*

AG: Yeah, I think it is. I think a lot of the readers of romance think this and enjoy novels that play with the conventions of the genre, but I didn't deliberately plan to have a literary theme in this book at all.

LF: *Do you now agree with me that it's there?*

AG: Oh yeah. As you were speaking and reading the quotations, I was thinking, "Gosh, yes, wow! *[both laugh]* I didn't know I did that!" but I'm often surprised by readers' interpretations of my novels. I have a reader in America who writes to me after every book and tells me my themes and it's very interesting because I frequently have not intended or noticed them myself. There may be some thematic things that I'll deliberately emphasise, but I don't sit down and think, "What's my theme?" or anything like that. When writing I'm just trying to make the story work and make it fun, but there are clearly things happening in the brain that are pulling it all into line.

LF: *I guess as a literary critic, my job is to find patterns in and between texts, which is partly about identifying themes, and as a writer your job is to make patterns.*

AG: I studied literature at Melbourne Uni, *[laughs]* so I do get it. And I remember arguments in tutorials about whether writers intended particular themes and now I'm on the other side! *[both laugh]*

LF: *I'll be fascinated to hear if you intended any of the other ideas I've identified in your work. I would like to talk a little more about the representation of reading in your novels. For more evidence that The Autumn Bride presents readers with a defense of romance I'd turn first to the minor character of Sir Oswald Merridew, who tells Max that what Abby and her friends*

have created is “not like the usual sort of literary society—all allusions and metaphorical whatsits and epigrammatic thingummies—frightful bore, that kind of thing, too clever for me by half.”[10] At moments like this it seems to me as though the novel is issuing an invitation to readers to evaluate their own views about reading and types of reading; of course, readers are not required to accept the invitation to engage with the text at this more intellectual level, but I do think the option is there. Do you think that this is a valuable approach for scholars of popular romance fiction—to look within the novels and consider what they might be saying about the genre?

AG: I don’t know. It is about supporting the notion that people can just read for pleasure without having to justify it by entering into an intellectual discussion – literary salons were around in the Regency and there’s a parallel with today’s book clubs certainly, but it’s also a subtle reference to some of my earlier novels. Sir Oswald is a character from previous books. In the series with “perfect” in the title, he is the great uncle who the sisters fled to in order to escape their violent grandfather.[11] A lot of people loved him as a character and I wanted to make that connection, but another reason why I’ve included the literary society is historical. During the Regency, much of highborn society tended to scorn education. Girls, in particular, were valued for being *more* ignorant and they didn’t go in for any of that book-reading nonsense. So it’s obvious fodder for comedy.

LF: *So you were playing simultaneously with a historical idea about attitudes to gender and reading during the Regency and a contemporary idea about the romance genre.*

AG: Yeah, but I wasn’t playing deliberately with the modern idea of the romance novel. I was just really playing with historical notions about reading and it turns out to be in a romance novel. It’s also relevant that *The Autumn Bride* is loosely based on *Pride and Prejudice*. Each book in this series is going to take one of Austen’s texts as their cue, but it’s meant to be very, very subtle. Loose, even. [*laughs*]

LF: *The Austen reference is right there in all the epigraphs. Every chapter begins with a quotation from a different Austen novel.*

AG: Yes, but the fact that this novel takes its cue from one Austen story is less obvious. There are only a couple of lines from *Pride and Prejudice* that are actually quoted.

LF: *So there are layers of intertextuality in the novel. I wonder how this relates to the three categories of readers you identified in a romance-writing workshop in 2002: “A passive reader will easily put down a text. An active reader will reluctantly put it down. A challenged reader all too often tosses it across the room.”[12] Can you explain in more detail how an “active reader” engages with a romance novel, or rather how you imagine the active reader that you’re writing for engaging with the novel?*

AG: As I said earlier, one of the big things about popular fiction is that readers engage emotionally with the text, and invest in the world of the text. I gave that workshop at one of these conferences. It focussed on writing techniques for encouraging active reading and for writing a page-turner. For instance, planting “questions” throughout the novel prompts

readers to make hypotheses about how the story will unfold and then to read on to find out whether their guess was right. Readers use their imagination to engage with novels. When I write, I can only go so far; the rest of the story building happens through the link to the reader's imagination and a really good reader has a really good imagination. More imaginative and committed readers become deeply involved in the story; they make connections within the world of the story they're reading and pick up the references to other texts. For some readers, Sir Oswald Merridew is just a funny old bloke who attends the literary society, but to a whole lot of people who have read those other books he offers, just for a moment, a return to a world with which they are already familiar.

LF: *You're talking about a couple of different models of reader engagement, I think. The appearance of Sir Oswald in *The Autumn Bride* is an example of cross-referencing within your own work, which allows dedicated readers to more actively immerse themselves in an imaginative, inhabitable world, but the earlier type of engagement you were talking about is more about the structure of individual novels. While you were talking, I began thinking about the mid-twentieth century clue-puzzle crime novel or "whodunit," most associated with Agatha Christie. The writer plants "clues" to actively encourage forward reading and keep the reader moving through the text. Is this prioritising of forward momentum—of page-turning—opposed to a literary kind of writing which encourages readers to pause, think, reread passages?*

AG: Yes. I want to engage my readers on as many levels as possible. There's no reason why you can't read popular fiction in that more reflective way, and some novels lend themselves to that more than others. When I'm writing I'm conscious of the danger that if people have to work too hard to engage with my novels, they may put down the book and not come back. The same if they get bored. The main purpose of reading romance fiction is not to ponder and think; it's to be entertained.

LF: *The Autumn Bride is a story, not a book of ideas.*

AG: Exactly. There's no reason why there can't be ideas in a story, but the story has to work primarily. Of course, I'm basing my comments on my own expectations when I read romance. I tend to read popular fiction when I'm stressed and I just want time out, when I want to stick my head in a book and just read without having to think too much. That kind of pleasure is for when I'm more relaxed and when I just want to sink into a text and not escape from the world. It is a different reading experience.

LF: *Is Abby, in *The Autumn Bride*, an active reader?*

AG: Yes. But the term 'active reader' is more about how the writer writes, not how a reader reads.

LF: *She also teaches others how to read actively—how to engage their heads and their hearts in their reading.*

AG: She uses books and then the literary society as entertainment, but her initial aim with the society is as a devious scheme to introduce her marriageable sisters to society, when they've been expressly forbidden to go into society. She brings society to them. So, to an extent the literary society is just a plot device.

LF: *But she's also genuinely passionate about reading.*

AG: Yes, she loves her stories.

LF: *She loves a good story and she knows how to tell a good story, so she's both an active engaging storyteller and an active reader herself. I'm also interested in the hero's aunt, Lady Beatrice, who Abby rescues Aunt Bea from cruel servants. One of the main ways she helps her to recover her love of life and sense of humour is by reading novels to her, aloud. I think I've found characters that model active reading in some of your other novels as well. In *The Stolen Princess*, for example, the heroine, Callie, adores "frivolous reading matter." [13] She learned to love stories from her beloved nanny, Miss Tibthorpe or "Tibby", who "was an avid reader of novels and romantic poetry" and so ignored Callie's father's opposition to stories and "Filling girls' heads with nonsense." [14] Why did you make these characters lovers of novels?*

AG: Callie had a cold and heartless upbringing with her father and she needed someone to teach her that there are other ways to live. Romantic literature was a bond between governess and pupil. But I also wanted to have fun with Tibby and her man. I wanted to play with a romance between an older spinster governess and a big hunky illiterate man-of-action and that became the subplot romance between Tibby and Ethan. Their story went over two books and Ethan learnt to read in that time. I've taught literacy all my life, since I was nineteen at university and took on a volunteer role. Reading has brought me so much pleasure in my life and so I teach adult literacy; my thinking about the two things came together in *The Stolen Princess*. I also liked the dynamic of using the subplot romance to balance the main plots of this book and the next. [15] And I had a lot of fun playing out the "Young Lochinvar" thread. Also, I do think that, in that era and still now, people escape from the grimness of their lives into genre stories of some kind.

LF: *I want to ask you about escapism and romance. My sense is that, even when your characters don't explicitly state their passion for gripping fiction—when they're not readers like Tilly, and Callie, and Abby and so on—your novels speak up for the genre in other ways. In particular, it seems to me that your heroines understand the value of escaping into fantasy narratives and worlds. For example, Nell, the heroine of *His Captive Lady* feels that she has lost everything, so she "live[s] on fantasies, dreaming her life was different. It was foolish she knew, but sometimes fantasy kept hopes alive. She needed that more than anything." [16] In an interview with Kate Forsyth, you linked the genre's popularity to its, in your words, "Pure, feel-good escapism." [17] I can see a similarity between the "escapism" that you say your novels offer readers and Nell's fantasies in *His Captive Lady*, Isabella's daydreams in *Bride By Mistake* [18], the stories Prudence tells her sisters in *The Perfect Rake*, even in Grace's immersion in renovating Wolfestone Castle in *The Perfect Kiss*. I'm wondering whether I understand what you mean by "escapism." Can you explain your understanding of this term,*

and do you agree that the pleasures and other benefits of escaping into stories might be a theme within your novels?

AG: My heroines often fantasise and dream of what things might be. I think that's a very human, perhaps very female thing to do. Creating fantasies to escape into is a way of keeping hopes and dreams alive, keeping you going in difficult circumstances. My heroines' tendency to daydream also helps readers to connect with them; they can empathise and sympathise with her fantasies. It's a way to encourage emotional engagement with the character and her story.

LF: *This connects with what you were saying earlier about positioning the reader to barrack for the heroine; to do this, the reader must know the heroine's hopes and dreams.*

AG: Absolutely, ensuring that readers understand the protagonist's goal is quite an important process in writing popular fiction. Many writers will argue that the goal needs to be tangible, but I also think that dreams and hopes must count in romance fiction. As a romance reader myself, I want to know what the heroine's dreaming and hoping for.

LF: *I want to turn now to the question of defining the genre, which is a pressing issue in popular romance studies. In an article for WriteOn magazine, you wrote, "romance must have a happy ending." [19] As a literary scholar, my job is to interrogate ideas that are taken for granted. I've become increasingly fascinated by the cultural and political implications of romance's insistence on the Happy Ever After. What is a "happy ending"? What are its requirements? And why do you think is it a requirement of the genre?*

AG: Booksellers and publishers often present books as romances that I would call "romantic fiction." The difference between "romantic fiction" and "romance" is that romance fiction ends happily. Romantic fiction can be all about love, can even tell a love story, but if a main character dies at the end a dedicated romance reader will feel gutted. The happy ending is not particularly narrowly defined ... well, no, it is! A happy ending will mean that the hero and heroine will be together. They don't have to be married, but the reader has to feel convinced by the end of the story that these two people will go on into the future, and live a happy life, and remain committed to each other. In some romances the achievement of "happy for now" is enough. Another important genre expectation is that the hero and heroine must go through a fair bit of difficulty to achieve that happy ending.

LF: *So the happy ending is a reward? The characters have to work for it.*

AG: The happy ending is the reward. This is not inconsistent with the demand for a satisfying ending in other popular genres. For instance, I often make a comparison between the conventions of romance fiction and other classic popular genres. At the end of a traditional crime novel, justice is delivered. And in adventure fiction, characters take physical risks, and they are rewarded ...

LF: *In adventure fiction, the hero typically receives some kind of monetary reward. He often also gets the girl, but romance isn't the main through-line.*

AG: No, often it's just a placeholder girl, a token female, because finding love is not the hero's principal objective. In romance fiction, by contrast, emotional justice is delivered. Romance heroes need to take emotional risks. They may face physical risks as well, but, in order for the romance to succeed, they must confront some of their inner demons, especially the kind of inner demons and hang-ups that have prevented them from being able to make a successful relationship in their past.

LF: *The Happy Ever After then, if you think about it in terms of the temporal structure or chronology of the story, is both the reward for the way that characters overcome obstacles depicted in the plot, but it is also recompense for the pain or loss of past events or relationships.*

AG: Yes, the back-story is crucial to understanding the Happy Ever After.

LF: *So, just as the Happy Ever After makes readers a promise about the future of fictional lovers, there are always also lines of causality going in the other direction as well, towards the characters' imagined pasts.*

AG: Sure, absolutely.

LF: *I think scholarship on the Happy Ever After sometimes forgets that the conventional structure of romance requires that the narrative reach out in both directions—towards the imagined future and the implied past.*

AG: Yes, the back-story in popular romance is crucial, because what has happened to the characters in the past, and how they've interpreted the past, is almost always what is blocking them from getting that happy ending. I often tell people about my mum and dad, who met on the steps of the 1888 Building[20] when they were both nineteen. They fell in love then and there, got married a few years later and were happy right to the end. Terrific real-life romance. Crappy story. It was too easy. Characters overcoming difficulties to achieve true love and happiness is what makes a romance story interesting. In a classic genre romance, the relationship *is* the story.

LF: *Of course, happiness only ever makes sense in relation to unhappiness. Does this explain why, if a story has a "happy ending" that is not balanced by the possibility or experience of unhappiness, it's not a romance?*

AG: A romance must have drama in the story and everyday banality, no matter how pleasant it is, is not drama. Romance writers and readers want their books to depict *more* than everyday life, as do readers of most genre fiction. So our characters have more things happen to them, more bad things happen to them, than truly happy couples like my parents.

LF: *In her book, The Promise of Happiness, the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed examines how happiness is defined and understood in contemporary culture. She says, "Happiness is often*

described as a path, as being what you get if you follow the right path,”[21] which is effectively what we’ve just been saying. The hero and heroine have to behave in the right way to be rewarded with happiness. The reverse is also true: the villain in a romance is often a character who is stuck in the past and cannot move forward.

AG: There is, however, a growing tendency amongst some authors to make the villain of one book in a series the hero of the next. I think this is a really interesting development, which relates to the importance of the back-story. The villain can be reinvented as a hero because, in the moral world of popular romance, to understand all is to forgive all. Mary Balogh wrote a terrific novel, *Courting Julia*, in which the anti-hero, Frederick Sullivan, kidnaps the heroine, who is his distant cousin.[22] He is desperate and plans to marry her for her money. Frederick is not the classic villain, but because he behaves badly, his plan fails. In the next novel in this series, *Dancing with Clara*, Frederick is even more desperate for money and he marries a disabled heiress for her money.[23] The heroine is quite aware of Frederick’s motivations and understands that, in a way, she is buying herself a beautiful man. She knows he doesn’t love her, but he pretends he does. Then she calls him on it and he’s just mortified and it’s wonderful! It’s the beginning of his transformation, as he learns to live with what he’s done, and treat her honestly. And in the process, he falls in love.

LF: *For Ahmed, happiness is an extremely difficult concept to define, but one that researchers should take seriously. What do you think “happiness” means in the context of the popular romance genre? If you were to write an emotional primer for a budding romance writer, what does happiness mean?*

AG: In the case of most of my books, happiness is being loved—being loved truly and unconditionally. Happiness comes from meeting—not necessarily a “soul mate” —but a partner who can laugh along with you, and share things, and with whom you will make a family. Almost all of my books are about the relationship between happiness and the family. I tend to write heroes and heroines who are outsiders. Through their relationship they become part of a family, whether it is a “made-up” family like in *The Autumn Bride*, or an actual family that welcomes outsiders. In the Merridew Series, the heroines are sisters and the heroes are all outsiders. So, in my books, an important part of happiness is belonging somewhere.

LF: *Happiness then, as you depict it in your novels, is both tied to the experiences and feelings of individuals and a social concept.*

AG: It is absolutely a social concept. And yes, it’s both.

LF: *The happy couple can’t exist or function in isolation, but must be integrated into a broader social structure.*

AG: Yes, yes... Being unable to interact in society would be a kind of prison, don’t you think?

LF: *I'm noticing that social or familial connections are becoming a more significant aspect of romantic happiness as the series starts to dominate the genre and industry. Do you think this is the case?*

AG: Yes, I think so. When I first started writing in the genre, I noticed the prevalence of "happy family" themes in successful novels. I remember wondering whether the appeal of romance's focus on family might be explained by increased divorce rates, or perhaps by the fact that people are physically scattered, not just across the country anymore, but also across the world. In my own life too, I noticed people making their own families, moving beyond the biological family to create a family of friends. And I especially like writing stories about outsiders who find love and a home. My heroes and heroines are rewarded with security, which can be interpreted in many ways, but for my characters often includes financial security. I have a friend who has read my books, but is not a natural romance reader at all. She says, "These people are always so rich! Why can't she just live in a cottage?" But that's not the fantasy! The fantasy is being rich, or at least financially secure for the rest of their lives. A lot of my characters have had difficult beginnings at some stage and been without money and so understand poverty and powerlessness and unhappiness. Being financially secure may not be the goal, but it is the icing on the cake. Happiness is defined by them, by the characters.

LF: *While there is a broad definition of happiness, happiness also means different things for different characters and sets of characters.*

AG: Of course, happiness is individual, for each of us. We each have to define and seek our own happiness. That works for fictional characters as well, I think.

LF: *In my book, Historical Romance Fiction, I offer an alternative definition of romance, which I've never tested on a romance writer before so you're my guinea pig.[24] In short, I argue that the genre is defined by the necessity of the utterance "I love you" to each and every romance. I actually think the conclusion of your novel Bride By Mistake makes this point: "He was as hungry as she was for the words, Bella saw. She kissed him, moving lower each time. 'I. Love. You. Luke. Ripton.'/ 'I like your punctuation. Do it again.'"[25] What do you think about my idea that a romance must include a sincere declaration of love, usually in the words "I love you"?*

AG: I think that is one of the "beats" that we look for in a romance. What is the difference between two people living together, getting married, building a family and never saying those words, and a couple who does all of the same things, but openly declares their love? I think it is about commitment. To actually say the words is an act of emotional courage. It is an important step towards the happy ending.

LF: *Emotional courage ties back to what you were saying about emotional justice. Is saying "I love you" evidence that a character has negotiated the obstacles in the path of true love, deserves the reward of the happy ending?*

AG: Interestingly, in popular romance fiction, it is particularly the hero who we look for to state their commitment. Usually, the heroine finds it much easier to say, “I love you.” The man’s declaration is always right towards the end of the novel. It can’t really come much earlier because if his declaration is made in chapter three [*laughs*], the story’s over.

LF: *Yes, the hero of romance novels is often extremely reluctant to say, “I love you”; the heroine must hear these words for the novel to end. A good example of this is Harry in His Captive Lady: Nell knows he loves her physically, but she “crave[s] to hear the words from him.”[26] Similarly, in The Autumn Bride, Aunt Bea tells Max that, if he wants to keep Abby, he must say “I love you”: “My dear boy,’ she said gently, ‘women need to hear the words. They don’t need the world conquered for them, but they do need a man to speak the words that are in his heart.’”[27] So obviously you agree that female characters in romance are typically more comfortable—at least at first—with declaring their love, but why do you think this is the case? Do you think this is just a representation of what is a gender actuality or is it part of the conventions of the genre?*

AG: A bit of both, I think. I do think that women are generally more comfortable than men in talking about feelings. In romance novels it is part of the convention because, to some extent, the heroine is a placeholder for the reader. I don’t mean that the reader must identify with the heroine in every detail, but identification is part of the reading process. Fiction is, of course, about characters changing and often in romance the character who needs to change the most is the hero. The story is powerful and moving because it depicts the journey towards *his* final commitment to the heroine.

LF: *In your novels, I think it is fair to say that the reader knows from the beginning (unless, I guess, they are entirely new to the genre) that the reticent hero will declare his love by the end. This takes me to another question about the appeal of romance reading, which I think is fraught territory for romance scholarship, but something that we still need to think about: the predictability of romance. One way to think about all of this is to say that, because the reader knows how it will turn out in the end, there must be quite particular pleasures in the predictability of plots. Reading The Perfect Rake though, I started to think about this a little differently. In that novel, the hero and the heroine are so poor at interpreting each other’s words and actions that their relationship becomes comical. The reader of this novel, I think, is therefore both offered the pleasure of predictability and placed in a position of superiority to the characters; that is, the novel assumes the reader will recognize and understand signs of love and desire when the characters themselves are clueless. The reader is positioned in a similar way in The Perfect Kiss, I think, but through the play with Gothic literary conventions, rather than through the more obvious comedy of The Perfect Rake. Is this a deliberate strategy to encourage active reading, or do interpret it in another way?*

AG: No, I just enjoy it! And misunderstandings between people — especially lovers or potential lovers — is fine fodder for comedy.

LF: *But isn’t the reader positioned to think, “I know what’s going to happen to these characters and I know what’s going to happen long before the characters do.”*

AG: In that sense, it is an example of active reading, but I don't think I deliberately planned it as such—I was just having fun. Active reading, as I think about it in relation to my actual writing practice, is more important to me during the editing phase. When I teach writing I say, "First comes the draft, then comes the craft. Just tell the story the best you can and then use craft to make it better." I didn't deliberately highlight the predictability of the plot as an active readership technique, but playing with the conventions is something that I enjoy.

LF: *The predictability of the plot, or the reader having greater insight?*

AG: The predictability of the plot. I think romance writers walk a bit of a tightrope. We need to please readers who love the genre, so there are certain predictable elements in the plot, but with every novel the aim is to make it fresh and unique. There is a really interesting tension in romance between predictability and freshness. Tweaking the predictable plot to surprise the reader: that's the game really.

LF: *I want to talk about sex now! You once wrote, "If sex belongs anywhere, it's in a romance novel." [28] I've been thinking lately about the conventions and the meanings of sex scenes in romance novels. Analysing the representation of sex should begin, I think, by paying attention, not to the sex scene itself, but to the scene when the hero and heroine first meet, because I think that actually establishes the promise of a physical relationship.*

AG: Yes, it introduces the sexual tension, though it's not always the promise of sex-to-come, if that's what you mean. Plenty of non-explicit romances follow the same conventions.

LF: *I'm really interested to know how you would describe the conventions of this stage of romance: the first encounter.*

AG: It's one of the beats that we anticipate and enjoy. There's a real pleasure in recognizing the hero and the heroine and their first encounter.

LF: *You mentioned the "beats" readers expect earlier. Are you talking about the rhythm of the text?*

AG: A lot of what is really useful for talking about writing popular fiction comes from screenwriting, which works in "beats," so I've just pinched that term. One of the beats that readers love and anticipate is the "enter the hero" moment in which eyes might meet across a crowded room, or the heroine overhears a Darcy-like figure describe her as too plain, or sparks fly after a carriage accident. These scenes should depict instant sexual tension. Reading them, we just *know* that we've started the adventure, the journey towards the happy ending. The anticipation is part of the pleasure.

LF: *The "enter-the-hero" moment, to use your term, often focuses on the power of the hero's gaze and, in particular, its capacity to breach the distance from social space to intimate space. There are countless scenes depicting a heroine trembling or shuddering as the hero's eyes rake over or lance through her body. These moments clearly anticipate sex scenes.*

AG: This is also another example of the necessary difference between romance and reality. Romance novels must build anticipation from the very beginning, but it doesn't necessarily have to do with sex. It's one aspect of the fantasy we were talking about earlier, but don't forget I'm writing in the Regency era when they didn't just say, "Hey babe, how about it? Wanna get laid?"

LF: *Sure, and that relates to my next question. I want to ask you about the metaphoric link between desire and violence in first encounter scenes. When in *The Stolen Princess* Gabriel sees Callie's face for the first time—on a moonlit path on a cliff-top—his reaction reminds him of the dozen times he's "had the breath knocked out of him" and the time he was "kicked in the head by a horse": "Seeing her face in the moonlight was like all of those rolled into one. And more. Gabe's breathing stopped. He forgot how to speak. He was unable to think." [29] Similarly, in *The Autumn Bride*, the first time Max and Abby are alone (another "beat"?), he can't decide if he wants to kiss or "strangle" her, but he recognizes he finds her "damnably arousing." [30] What do you think?*

AG: The first encounter is cataclysmic. The French call it the *coup de foudre* and the metaphors of violence are a way of prompting readers to imagine the power, the impact, of "love at first sight." The characters don't necessarily recognise their feelings as "love" at this stage.

LF: *No, the characters' inability to name or interpret their emotions enables the reader's active engagement. The reader is able to recognise the signs of love immediately, as a kind of flash-forward. The characters can only interpret them retrospectively, often near the novel's conclusion.*

AG: But that's like life anyway. Most of the time we don't reflect on our own lives terribly well, but it's really easy to analyse other people's. *[both laugh]*.

LF: *I still want to keep taking about sex, because there's one thing I keep noticing that I'm very curious about. Romance heroines always "shatter" at the moment of climax. I think I've read the verb "to shatter" in this context in every romance novel I've read in the last six months. In fact, two Australian academics are currently editing a book about popular erotic fiction called *Shattering Releases*, so I'm not the only one who's been thinking about the connotations of this word. [31] I've got a theory about this, which I'd like to test on you. The beats I'm interested in at the moment—if we keep with this idea of beats—are the "enter-the-hero" moment (which relates to the moment of first touch, the moment of first kiss), the first sex scene, the first orgasm, and the *Happy Ever After*. I think there is a chain of causality in your novels that runs from the moment the hero and heroine first meet through the sex scenes—strengthening in scenes depicting orgasm—to the *Happy Ever After*. In simple terms, the overarching narrative arc described by this chain is one of tension to release. This helps explain all of the shattering: the heroine is disassembled—she is blown apart—so that she can be reassembled as part of a couple.*

AG: Yes, it's a phoenix metaphor. Clearly I haven't thought about it enough if *all* of my heroines are "shattering" *(laughs)*.

LF: *There's "shattering" and there's "cataclysmic brightness"...*

AG: I may have had a few heroines shatter but I have *never* used "cataclysmic brightness." But it is a really hard experience to describe isn't it? And I don't want to use the word "orgasm," partly because it is not a term that would have been available to my characters. The term that was often used, "the little death" (from the French) is not what many modern readers would understand either. Or think romantic. It depends partly on point of view. When depicting the heroine's point of view, I try to limit myself to the kind of words and images that she would use. The heroine of my second book *Tallie's Knight*, is very young and naïve, so she would describe climax very differently from another more experienced heroine.[32] Also, the words that I use for orgasm are often metaphorical, because I write historical fiction about people who didn't have the language we do today, and these scenes should evoke their thoughts and feelings.

LF: *Orgasms in historical romance are almost entirely described through metaphor. They're not described anatomically really very much at all.*

AG: Anatomical descriptions are not appropriate – they'd sound horribly scientific or clinical. When we're in the throes of sex and orgasm, do we think anatomically? We probably don't think at all, but somehow I have to try and convey that state. There are some "ripples" and "shudders" ... but my characters are never going to "shatter" again! Probably. You are making me think, that's for sure, about how I write. [*laughs*]

LF: *Do you agree with me that there is a link between conventions for representing of orgasm and the expectation of a Happy Ever After? It seems to me that the depiction of orgasm as an experience of absolute sensual plenitude lays the foundations for the reconciliation of the heroine's warring mind and body, which in the terms of romance, is one precondition for being happy in love.*

AG: Yes, yes. But sometimes sex actually makes things worse between the hero and heroine – bringing up more problems. It's not a quick fix, by any means. But part of the Happy Ever After promise is the promise of fabulous sex. Or in non-explicit romances, the implication of it.

LF: *The conflict between mind and body is one of the things that fascinate me about depictions of romance heroines, certainly in historicals. When the heroine first meets the hero, she is typically overwhelmed by her bodily responses and sensations. She doesn't know how to interpret them, but the experienced romance reader does. The reader knows exactly what's happening.*

AG: Yes and there is a pleasure to be had in that recognition, because it connects to readers' experiences of love and sex. I hope. And with orgasm, it is also like her bonds are shattering. At least, it's a metaphorical shattering. Clearly it is, otherwise there wouldn't be a happy ending.

LF: *That's another dimension of the metaphor, isn't it? The heroine is being emotionally, psychologically, physically shattered or undone, so that she can be rebuilt anew into her Happy Ever After and her future as part of a couple, which is a new unified unit.*

AG: Yes, but it is also a simple metaphor of just letting go, letting go the bonds and opening up to him, to everything, to all the new possibilities. It's also a sign that he is responsive to her, which is important.

Lisa and Anne would both like to thank Jennifer Kloester for introducing them.

[1] See Gelder, Ken. *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

[2] The verb "to barrack for" is the Australian equivalent for the American "to root for."

[3] Kinsale, Laura. *Flowers from the Storm*. New York: Avon-HarperCollins, 1992. Print; Chase, Loretta. *Lord of Scoundrels*. New York: Avon-HarperCollins, 1995. Print; Chase, Loretta. *Mr Impossible*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2005. Print.

[4] Gracie, Anne. "Rockpools: The Power of Detail." Riding the Waves: Romance Writers of Australia Conference. Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Australia. 18 August 2013. Breakout Session.

[5] Gracie, Anne. *The Autumn Bride*. Melbourne: Michael Joseph-Penguin, 2013. Print.

[6] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 8.

[7] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 175-6

[8] Bendigo is a regional city in Victoria, Australia.

[9] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 195.

[10] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 248.

[11] The Merridew Series: *The Perfect Rake*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2005. Kindle; *The Perfect Waltz*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2005. Kindle; *The Perfect Stranger*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2006. Kindle; *The Perfect Kiss*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2007. Kindle;

[12] Gracie, Anne. "Active Readers" Notes for Workshop conducted at Romance Writers of Australia Conference, Melbourne 2002. *Anne Gracie*. Web. 26 July 2013.

[13] Gracie, Anne. *The Stolen Princess*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2008. Print. 17.

[14] Gracie. *The Stolen Princess*. 40.

[15] Gracie, Anne. *His Captive Lady*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2008. Kindle.

[16] Gracie. *His Captive Lady*. n. pag.

[17] Gracie, Anne. Interview by Kate Forsyth. *Kate's Blog*. 14 February 2013. Web. 26 July 2013.

[18] Gracie, Anne. *Bride by Mistake*. New York: Berkley-Penguin, 2012. Print.

[19] Gracie, Anne. "Romantic Myths." *Anne Gracie*. Web. 26 July 2013. First published in *WriteOn*, the Magazine of the Victorian Writers Centre, Melbourne, Australia.

[20] Historic building on Grattan Street, Parkville, in the state of Victoria, Australia. Formally known as the Melbourne College of Education and later as the Melbourne State College, the 1888 building has been part of the University of Melbourne since 1989.

[21] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Kindle.

[22] Balogh, Mary. *Courting Julia*. New York: Signet Regency, 1995. Print.

- [23] Balogh, Mary. *Dancing with Clara*. New York: Signet Regency, 1995. Print.
- [24] Fletcher, Lisa. *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. Print.
- [25] Gracie. *Bride By Mistake*. 306.
- [26] Gracie. *His Captive Lady*. n. pag.
- [27] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 289.
- [28] Gracie. "Romantic Myths." n. pag.
- [29] Gracie. *The Stolen Princess*. 15-6.
- [30] Gracie. *The Autumn Bride*. 110.
- [31] The editors of this book are Kristen Phillips and Claire Trevenen. See <http://blogs.curtin.edu.au/elizabeth-jolley-conference/2013/05/cfp-shattering-releasesthe-pleasures-and-politics-of-popular-erotic-fiction-edited-collection/>.
- [32] Gracie, Anne. *Tallie's Knight*. New York: Harlequin, 2000.