

Teaching with *Love Between the Covers*

I've had the chance to teach with *Love Between the Covers* in three of my recent undergraduate courses on popular romance fiction at DePaul University, and it's a great addition to the syllabus! The first time I brought the film in at the end of term, and students lamented that they hadn't seen it earlier, so the next two times, I scheduled an in-class viewing right at the start of the quarter. Community groups and book groups might also make good use of the approach that I've taken and the questions I had students think about as they watched.

In order to focus student attention on the film, and to help them become conscious of their preconceptions about romance—some of which the film addresses head-on, and others of which it touches on more indirectly—I started the viewing by handing out a sheet with four questions on it. I had each student put their name on the sheet in order to turn it in to me at the end of class; that way I could ensure that notes were taken, and also could collect their thoughts about interesting quotations and issues raised by the film, so that I could use these as springboards for paper topics and discussion prompts in the class days that followed.

Here's the handout I used:

Viewing Notes: *Love Between the Covers*

To focus your viewing of this film, here are four questions to think about and answer as you watch.

- 1) What in the film confirmed your suspicions or expectations about popular romance (the books, the stories in them, their authors and readers, the romance industry, etc.)?
- 2) What in the film surprised you, or was different from your expectations, teaching you something new?
- 3) What were some interesting scenes, ideas, and quotations? (These could be things you want to remember, to ask me questions about, or simply discuss?)
- 4) Were there any gaps or silences in the film: for example, topics you wanted to hear or learn more about, or issues that you felt were being played down or avoided?

Jot down brief notes and quotes below, and on the back of this page. You will have time after the film to amplify and gather your thoughts.

The first two questions work as a pair to help students be aware of their own preconceptions—always an issue in courses on romance—and to pay attention to what in the film either validates or complicates those initial frames of reference. The second two questions invite students to put the film to use, whether by pulling out significant terms and ideas for future discussion or by becoming more aware both of their own curiosity and of tensions between the version of the genre they see in the film and the one that appears in the syllabus. For example, students often note the fact that the film discusses queer romance through the life and work of Len Barot, who writes lesbian romance, while our classes routinely also include m/m romance, some of it by male or genderqueer authors. How, students will sometimes ask, do such works complicate any account of the genre as “for women, by women, about women”?

Based on the topics that students raise in response to the film, and the “scenes, ideas, and quotations” that they pull from it, I can draw up discussion questions and paper topics for the novels we discuss. Here are three examples, pulled from my most recent romance course—as you’ll see, both the format (quotation, then question) and the particular questions can be adapted to just about any novel, and I did in fact adapt these three questions for subsequent paper topics on Sherry Thomas’s *My Beautiful Enemy*, Alex Beecroft’s *Blue Steel Chain*, and Alexis Hall’s *Prosperity*.

- 1) Near the start of *Love Between the Covers*, Jayne Ann Krentz argues that “it’s in popular fiction that we preserve our society’s—our culture’s—core values. You know, people complain they’re not taught in school. People complain nobody goes to church anymore. People complain that nobody knows what core values are anymore, but that’s baloney. We read them. We know exactly what a hero is supposed to do. We may not do it ourselves, but we sure know what—what the truth is; and we learn that not so much from the institutions, but from our popular fiction.” Consider either *Homecoming* or one of the stories from *The Brightest Day* as a text that teaches “core values,” including “what a hero is supposed to do.” What values does it teach, and what kind(s) of heroism? What specific scenes or passages illustrate this teaching activity? Keep in mind that a character of any gender may count as a “hero” for this question, even if technically she is a “heroine.”
- 2) Near the middle of *Love Between the Covers*, Kim Castillo says that romance fiction “taught me what normalcy was.” To Castillo, normalcy means that “you don’t have to date your married boss, you don’t have to meet men in bars...you can have a man who loves you unconditionally and treats you like a princess.” What does either *Homecoming* or one of the stories from *The Brightest Day* teach its readers that “normalcy” means? That is, what is “normal,” according to this text, and what is not “normal”? *Keep in mind that we have multiple stories in the novel—two heroines (whose experiences are different); family stories; community stories, etc.*—so your answer will need to contain some multiplicity as well.
- 3) In the closing scene of *Love Between the Covers*, novelist and publisher Len Barot says that “literature is both a product of where we are and a portent of where we are going, because literature has a tremendous freedom. I love fiction because it’s fiction. You know, fiction is not real, and it’s not supposed to be. Fiction is a dream. Fiction is a desire. Fiction is hope.” How might this quotation help us to understand *Homecoming*, which is published by Barot’s press (Bold Strokes Books)? How might it help us to understand a story from *The Brightest Day*, or the project of the anthology as a whole?

Please feel free to copy and / or adapt my handout and these questions for your own classes or community events! I’d love to hear from anyone who’s put them to use, and simply to hear about romance courses and book groups, all around the world. I’m easily found at DePaul University (eseling@depaul.edu), through the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* (executive.editor@jprstudies.org), or on Twitter (@jprstudies.org).