

Introduction

“Popfiction is nothing if not predictable.” Walter Nash (1990, p. 4)

Consumerism is a large part of contemporary western society. Consumption is directed by artificial needs created for the purpose of increasing consumerism. One aspect of consumption is entertainment and the entertainment business is growing as leisure time increases, as are the choices in entertainment. In the last few years, there has been a considerable growth in the reading of popular fiction as a form of entertainment. The book market is expanding as different genres and sub-genres are formed in order to accommodate the various needs created by the entertainment business. This growth is considerable especially in the genres of fantasy and romantic fiction.

According to Kristin Ramsdell (1999), the world of popular fiction is a romantic one: “It portrays the world as it ought to be, not as it is, and is, therefore, unrealistic – or romantic” (p. 4). Nash (1990) uses the term popfiction for popular fiction and describes it as having

[certain] merits, and they are by no means negligible. They are shown in the ability to tell a tale, to devise its episodes with such skill that the reader cannot bear to put the book aside, to touch on common sympathies, to understand the judgements and desires of ordinary people, to offer the keen experience of danger, of anxiety, of love, of sorrow, of triumph, but all without the intruding shadow of the actual. (pp. 2-3)

Popfiction does not demand careful reading or repeated reading; moreover, rereading does not enhance our understanding of the subject, which can be quickly read and quickly forgotten (Nash, 1990, p. 3). As Nash (1990) argues, the principal characterisation of popular fiction is its disposability: “We do not want *again*, though we want *more*” (p. 2).

Because popular fiction is to a large extent forgettable, it has to be able to entice the readers. The art of popular fiction is to be able to grab the readers from the first moment (Nash, 1990, p. 81). Paperbacks need to be irresistible from the first paragraph. The readers know what is to be expected and are more or less confident of what they will get in return: a moment to escape into a fantasy, to be entertained. Popular fiction is often defined by what it is not. However, the trouble with trying to establish what

popular literature is *not* is that the genre appears as a perverted form of something instead of being valued for the “escapist” characteristics as aspects of an artistic type with its own purpose and justification (Cawelti, 1976, p. 13).

The conflict between high culture and popular culture has been prominent in literature. There has been the tradition to divide literature into the two cultural groups, many terms being used for this purpose: literature and non-literature, serious, or classic fiction and popular fiction (Goade, 2007, pp. 3-4). Brynhildur Heiðar-Ómarsdóttir (2000) points out in her article “Riddarinn á hvíta hestinum hittir manninn með gylltu byssuna [The Knight on the White Horse Meets the Man with the Golden Gun]” that high culture is conventionally described as standing outside a culture and creating what constitutes a culture, or creating new elements. However, popular culture is not seen as creating any new cultural elements (pp. 14-15).¹ I agree but it is my belief that both high culture and popular culture contribute to their own culture, each one in their own way.

Árni Bergmann (2005) notes in his article “Hver skammast sín fyrir lestur? [Who is ashamed of reading?]” that both the publishing houses and the genres being written for today’s market are being adapted to the various needs of the readers. The mixing of genres has diminished because genres are being divided into either high culture or popular culture (p. 88).² More importantly, the general reader does not exist in today’s market (Bergmann, 2005, p. 101). Therefore, the reading market has expanded and the division between high culture and popular culture has become more apparent.

Candice Proctor (2007), a romantic fiction writer, argues: “All genre fiction is formulaic by definition [...]. Yet for some reason, romances are criticized for being formulaic when other genres are not” (p. 13). The critics of romantic fiction criticize the genre by comparing it to classic literature. As Proctor indicates, a comparison between romantic fiction and classics is unfair. Both genres should be valued for what they are and not what they should be, according to some preconceived notions. Romantic fiction

¹“Hámenningu hefur verið lýst sem svo að hún standi fyrir utan menningu og sé menningarskapandi.

Lágmenninguna eða afþreyingarmenninguna teljum við hins vegar ekki skapa neitt nýtt.” Translation by Helena María Smáradóttir.

² “Síðar er sem bókaútgáfa og skáldsagnasmíð fari að laga sig æ meir að mismunandi þörfum, einatt kenndum við hámenningu og lágmenningu.” Translation by Helena María Smáradóttir.

is a form of entertainment and should be valued as such. As Þráinn Bertelsson (1978) says, it is difficult enough to tell a good novel from a bad one, without relying on ingrown conservatism and prejudice (p. 41).³

The romance element is exploited in various forms in the mass media, not only in the genre of romantic fiction. As Bridget Long (2007) argues, “Romantic story lines exist in a wide array of media. Movies, television, music, fine art, and literature have all used the subject of romance” (p. 4). Therefore, it is important to note that romantic fiction is influenced by various elements. Jeanne Dubino (1993) notes that both women and men have from childhood been “bombarded by stereotyped representations that are not just contained between the pages of romantic fiction; they proliferate in all the popular media” (p. 106).

The prejudice against the genre of romantic fiction has been prominent since the early 1970s (Greer 1970/2001, Modleski 1982/1990, Radway 1984/1991) and has increased with the boom of romantic fiction, both brand-name and single-title, in the 1980s. As Dagný Kristjánsdóttir (2002) notes in her article “Ást á grænu ljósi: fjöldaframleiddar ástarsögur hafa aldrei verið vinsælli! [Love at a green light: Mass-produced romances have never been more popular!]”, the prejudice and snobbery are obvious when it comes to assessing romantic fiction, but it is hard to tell whether the scorn is aimed at the genre or at its readers (p. 47).⁴ There has been little research conducted on the readers of romantic fiction in the past but the studies that are available, gathered information about the readers of the genre by conducting questionnaires and interviews (Radway 1984, Thurston 1987, Owen, 1997). Furthermore, there has been no research conducted on Icelandic readers of romantic fiction.

In this thesis, my main focus is to try and establish the combination, main interests and distinctive features of the Icelandic readers of brand-name romantic fiction. Defining brand-name romantic fiction, Kristin Ramsdell (1999) describes it as “typified by the series romance lines published by Harlequin and Silhouette [and being] essentially a love story written to a particular pattern. These patterns are determined by

³ “Vandinn er að þekkja góða bók frá vondri, án innangróinnar fíldssemi og fordóma.” Translation by Helena María Smáradóttir.

⁴ “Fordómarnir og snobbið eru augljós og má ekki á milli sjá hvort er fyrilitið innilegar bækurnar eða konurnar.” Translation by Helena María Smáradóttir.

each publisher and are series-specific” (pp. 46-47). The study is based on three types of research: a personal interview with Marta Richter, the director of the Library of Mosfellsbær, an interview with Rósa Guðmundsdóttir, owner of *Ásútgáfan*, a publishing house of translated brand-name romantic fiction in Iceland, and my survey of Icelandic readers of brand-name romantic fiction. In chapter one, I will introduce the genre of romantic fiction, look briefly at the history of the genre and the tradition of romantic fiction in Iceland. In chapter two, I will examine the production of brand-name romantic fiction by *Harlequin Enterprises*, both abroad and in Iceland. In the final chapter, chapter three, I will report the results of my study conducted in order to examine the characteristics and motivations of Icelandic readers of brand-name romantic fiction.