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'There's only one bed', 'fake dating' and 'opposites attract': how tropes took over romance

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12–16 minutes

Opposites attract. He falls first. Coffee shop. Forced proximity. Sports romance. University sports romance. Ivy League university sports romance! Best friend's brother. Brother's best friend. Slow burn. Age gap. Amnesia. Wounded hero. Single father. Single mother. Language barrier. The bodyguard. Fake dating. Marriage of convenience.

If this list means nothing to you, you're not a romance reader. Tropes, as these bullet-point ideas have come to be known, have taken over romance. Those who write, market and read romantic fiction use them to pinpoint exactly what to expect before the first page is turned. On Instagram, Amazon and bookshop posters you'll find covers annotated with arrows and faux-handwritten labels reading "slow-burn" or "home-town boy/new girl in town". Turn over any romance title and they'll be there listed in the blurb.

"They are the easiest way to signpost what a book is," says Lucy Stewart, commissioning editor for romance at Hodder. "As soon as I say 'enemies-to-lovers' in an acquisition meeting, I've already communicated so much to a room full of people in just

three words: I've told them it's a romcom, what the hook is and where it sits in the market.”

Tropes have always existed in romance, but only in recent years have specific categories developed as a way to categorise, market and even consume romantic fiction, and of course these have accumulated and evolved. A “hot billionaire”, for example, is always popular, though in recent years his style has shifted from Prince Charming to a bit of a beast, kind and generous giving way to reluctant and dangerous. “There's only one bed” has given rise to “Oh no, now there are two beds”; or if you prefer historical romance, “There's only one horse”.

Publishers market their authors in this way, and often romance writers will write with particular tropes in mind, but it can be hard to know exactly where to draw the line. “Is love itself a trope? Is motherhood? Is marriage the same as ‘only one bed’?” posted the author Rainbow Rowell [on Instagram](#), in the run-up to her new novel, *Cherry Baby*.

Or take the new TV show *Heated Rivalry*, adapted from the novel by Rachel Reid about ice-hockey players on opposing teams who fall in love. It's fairly obvious that the “enemies-to-lovers” trope is at play here – and “sports romance”, too. But there has been much discussion about the book's representation of “MLM” (men loving men). Is that really a trope, or simply queerness represented?

You can reduce anything down to tropes – grumpy v sunshine, pride v prejudice – but should we? What does it mean for the way we read – and for the ways we think about art? For tropes are, of course, not unique to romantic fiction. Mystery novels have them; as does science fiction. “The butler did it” is a classic trope.



📷 'There's only one bed' ... Illustration: Inès Pagniez/The Guardian

Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, now 22 years old, popularised the idea that there are no new stories; and his book drew on a theory of archetypes that Carl Jung developed a century ago. The psychoanalyst believed that some stories were so fundamental to the human experience they were essentially ingrained into the psyche from birth. Tropes exist in all fiction; indeed in all storytelling.

"Anything you read is made of tropes. Shakespeare loved tropes. So did Dickens, Austen – anyone you can think of. It's all tropes, all the time," says romance writer Laura Wood. Before *Romeo and Juliet*'s "star-cross'd lovers" there was *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Fairytales offered a long line of hot, mean, rich men long before Mr Darcy became shorthand for an arrogant millionaire with a secret heart of gold.

Not everyone is a fan of the way these archetypes have been appropriated for marketing purposes, however. "I completely despair at the way books are reduced to their tropes," writer and reader of romance Eleanor Vendrell tells me, "as if a menu of characteristics is in any way representative of a story." But aren't

they simply a way for readers to navigate a busy library or crowded online store? More books are being published than ever before, and they have never been easier to access. We are drowning in content: things to watch, things to hear, things to read. We have to have some way of categorising all these words, and all these ideas. “Tropes might make me pick up a book,” another romance reader tells me, “but I’ll stay or go for the writing.”

“As soon as you start thinking about them, you realise you’re being fed them all the time,” a book publicist says. “If you click on a film on a streaming service, for example, it’ll tell you the tropes in the description so you know what to expect before watching.” There are, apparently, more than 36,000 different codes on Netflix – Small Town Scaries, Twisted Christmas, One-Weekend Watches – to ensure the viewer is always presented with just the right content at just the right time.

In literary terms, though, it’s mostly romantic fiction that has come to define itself by tropes – and to be derided for them, too. Of course, romantic fiction has always been at the frontline of a kind of culture war. “Reading romances”, or even just “novel-reading”, has been cause for concern among the cognoscenti for the best part of 300 years: Mr Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is horrified that the Bennet sisters would rather read something from a travelling library than hear a sturdy sermon.

Are today’s criticisms really so different? These books are derided as un-literary, formulaic. And what has happened to the thrill of stumbling on an indefinably brilliant novel by chance? “I don’t think that anyone needs to apologise right now (or ever) for seeking comfort in the familiar,” counters Wood. The world is full of chaos. There has to be room for reading as pure pleasure, for reading as escape. The genre of romantic fiction acts as a

kind of playground for the reader. If the same basic plot point can unfold in a thousand different worlds in a thousand different ways, the reader can try a thousand different lives.

“I rarely seek out tropes,” says Stewart. “[But what] I really love to find is a voice that embraces, celebrates and plays with the structures of a romance plot we already know really well.”

“The – wrong – assumption,” she continues, “is that these tropes make romance books repetitive or boring or predictable. Brilliant writing – which exists in abundance in romance writing – knows how to surprise and trick the reader, even while doing something we think we already know. So, rather than feeling dulled when I see a trope in a romance book, I get a thrill out of seeing them coming. Oh, they’re on a road trip in a storm, are they? We are definitely driving head first into an only-one-bed scenario and I genuinely cannot wait to see how we land there ... and what happens to the couple once we do.”

If critics fear that trope-based storytelling is a threat to the delight of discovery and surprise, they might think of it as that stormy roadtrip: familiar landmarks, new detours, foreign snacks and lightning strikes. We fear it in the romantic novel most, perhaps, because only the romantic novel leans in. As in the best love affairs, these books and their readers wear their heart on their sleeve.

Asking someone for their favourite trope is a deeply personal question – I, myself, could not have it waterboarded out of me – but there are dozens of forums and message boards where people share their most specific desires. Mostly, those books already exist. Mostly, there are *many* people who share those dreams, or at least, can help a reader find what they’re looking for.

A trope is to narrative as form or brushstroke is to a painting. It is possible, even usual, to like one more than others. I will always stop to look at a floral still life with big, deep colours and tiny little bugs. I like them old and Dutch. Dragging my mother round the Fitzwilliam Museum, one rainy day last autumn, we stood in mutual incomprehension before an exceptionally beautiful Rachel Ruysch. In vain I pointed out the beetle; the orange; the reflection of the 17th-century sky in the polished surface of the jug. "I think it's lovely that you love it," my mother said, generously. "I'm glad it's here for you."

Which is, obviously, the only way to approach all art: it's all for somebody. It's all here for all of us, in infinite and glittering variety. The trope is a shortcut to delight. Here it is, the thing you wanted. Here is the thing you like best, the perfect book for you: something, somehow, as familiar as a friend, and as shiny as a jewel.

Ella Risbridger is the author of *In Love With Love: The Persistence and Joy of Romantic [Fiction](#)* (Sceptre).

True romance

Classics reframed for a modern reader, by Sarah Moss and Sinéad Mooney

Billionaire romance

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

Four sisters growing up in 19th-century New England long for artistic fulfilment, exciting love lives, new clothes and good food. We meet them at Christmas, fantasising about brilliant futures while knitting socks for soldiers in the American civil war and preparing to give their Christmas dinner to starving refugees.

Unfortunately, dreams of fulfilment and glamour contradict their parents' Puritanism, so the girls will have to catch husbands without appearing to try. Meanwhile, over the garden fence, teenage Laurie is the heir to his grandfather's immense fortune, and luxuriates daily in exotic fruit and ice-cream, playing his grand piano and fencing. Meg is too old for Laurie. Beth dies young. Jo can't repress her queerness enough for anyone but a middle-aged German professor who needs help with his boys' school, but once pretty blond Amy gives up her dreams of an artistic career, Laurie's wall-to-wall carpets and opera tickets are all hers.

Fake dating

The Wings of the Dove by Henry James

Kate Croy needs money. Her secret fiancé Merton Densher needs money. They need a plan to enable them to marry. Solution: fake date a dying American heiress. Enter Milly Theale, who is rich, radiant and not long for this world. Kate encourages Merton to marry Milly so that they can eventually live happily ever after on his inheritance. Unfortunately, Merton catches real feelings, and Milly catches on to the scam. Fake dating becomes moral panic in a Venetian palazzo. Awkward, but everyone remains terribly polite, in extremely long sentences.

Friendzone to lovers

Far from the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy

Bathsheba Everdene inherits a farm. Her most reliable employee, Gabriel Oak, saves dying sheep, gives good agricultural advice, and quietly becomes her emotional support. After she rejects his proposal, he does the mature thing and

sticks around, saving her hayricks from lightning and being respectful and competent in the background. Bathsheba, meanwhile, disastrously samples the local dating pool. Sergeant Troy is good at swordplay, bad at farming and in love with someone else: a walking red flag in a uniform. Obviously, Bathsheba marries him anyway, with predictably chaotic results. Troy fake-dies after gambling the farm into near ruin, then really dies when one of Bathsheba's other ill-advised exes goes mad and shoots him. Throughout, friendzoned Gabriel remains loyal, practical and emotionally literate. Eventually Bathsheba realises that a man who fixes stuff and never causes problems is ... really attractive.

Sunny v grumpy

To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf

Mrs Ramsay's daughters dream of "a wilder life", perhaps in Paris, "not always taking care of some man or other", but she herself is literally and figuratively married to the English bourgeoisie, and determined to enjoy it no matter how moody her husband and his tedious friends. She has her best epiphanies while knitting and weeding. Unlike many straight women in literature and perhaps life, she has found a way to love men without eroticising power. Mr Ramsay doesn't notice the flowers she grows or the meals she cooks. She knows that he often thinks he would have written better books if he hadn't married her, but even so he has "an eye like an eagle's", and somehow admiration for his great thoughts fuels her enduring sunshine.

Holiday romance

A Room With a View by EM Forster

Lucy Honeychurch arrives in Florence with her cousin Charlotte. They are meant to enjoy Italy in a respectable way, which means avoiding excitement, physicality, and anything Italian. Fortunately, the unsuitable George Emerson appears – brooding, impulsive and oblivious to social rules. Italy does what it always does in English novels: it causes inconvenient emotion. Lucy faints at a murder, George catches her mid-swoon, and they later share a kiss in a field of violets – an event so shocking that it nearly destroys the British empire at one fell swoop. Lucy, oscillating between desire and decorum, immediately suppresses the memory and flees back to England, where she becomes engaged to Cecil, a man with all the charm and spontaneity of an income tax form. George inconveniently reappears, reminding Lucy that passion, sunlight and honesty exist, even in the home counties.