

MORE THAN JUST SURVIVAL LITERATURE

**The Influence of Midcentury
Lesbian Pulp Fiction on
Contemporary Romances**

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INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that queer romance is seeing an unprecedented increase in popularity. Despite making up only four percent of romance books sold in print in 2021, traditional retail outlets sold roughly 850,000 queer romance books that same year. This number is more than twice what was sold the previous year, and shows a 740 percent increase from five years prior.¹ From May 2022 to May 2023, queer romance sales grew by forty percent—the largest increase in any genre by more than double.² Queer fiction as a whole is seeing a surge in popularity, with sales in 2023 up 200 percent from 2019.³ But it hasn't always been this way.

Queer fiction—and especially queer romance—has long been viewed by the publishing industry as a niche genre, with too small of an audience to make any real profit.⁴ This meant that, until the rise of digital romance publishing in 2010 allowed publishers to take on riskier projects with smaller financial consequences, queer love stories were often left on the sidelines, published only by small queer presses.⁵ Yet, the last decade or so does not mark the first time books with amorous lesbians on their covers were readily available.

In the mid-twentieth century, for a very brief period of time between the debut of the Kinsey scale in 1948 and the Stonewall Riots in 1969, queer pulp fiction emerged from the otherwise largely exclusionary publishing industry.⁶ Though the collection of queer pulp

¹ Elizabeth A. Harris, "I Just Want Something That's Gay and Happy': L.G.B.T.Q. Romance Is Booming," *Books*, *The New York Times*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/30/books/lgbtq-romance-novels.html>.

² Ashley Carter and Christine Larson, "What's behind the Astonishing Rise in LGBTQ+ Romance Literature?," *The Conversation*, February 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAI.3nqtghptw>.

³ "A 'Renaissance of Gay Literature' Marks a Turning Point for Publishing," *NBC News*, December 9, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/lgbtq-fiction-gay-literature-publishing-turning-point-rcna127922>.

⁴ "Creating a Literary Culture: A Short, Selective, and Incomplete History of LGBT Publishing, Part II," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 11, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/creating-a-literary-culture-a-short-selective-and-incomplete-history-of-lgbt-publishing-part-ii>.

⁵ Carter and Larson, "Astonishing Rise in LGBTQ+ Romance."

⁶ Katie Schwab, "Publishing Queer Literature: A Comparison Between the Adult and Young Adult Markets from the Cold War to Present Day," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2023): 249–62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-023-09959-9>.

prominently featuring men from this period is far vaster and more well-preserved today, a not insignificant catalog of lesbian pulps also found its way into the world. Officially written for male audiences, the depictions of relationships in lesbian pulp fiction were often non-monogamous, melodramatic, and steeped in self-hatred—and they rarely ended happily.⁷ But despite the quality, accuracy, or intended audience of the genre, lesbian pulps—which were widely sold in public spaces across the country—did much to establish lesbian communities in the United States and show these women that they were not alone.⁸

It also laid the groundwork for future works of lesbian fiction. “For the first time, [lesbianism] was put in the spotlight, and even though that didn’t translate into acceptance, it carved a path for the future of lesbian fiction.”⁹ And when censorship codes of the 1960s and the obscenity laws of the 1970s hit the publishing industry, lesbian pulp fiction did exactly that—splitting off and evolving into the romance and erotica genres we recognize today.¹⁰

RESEARCH QUESTION

How have works of midcentury lesbian pulp fiction impacted the queer publishing industry? How do contemporary lesbian romance authors and publishers explicitly reference or deliberately subvert the visual and textual tropes of these works in their cover designs and use of genre tropes?

⁷ Christopher S. Nealon, “Invert-History: The Ambivalence of Lesbian Pulp Fiction,” *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 745–64.

⁸ Jennifer Miller et al., *Chapter 11: LGBTQ+ Literature*, n.d., accessed December 8, 2025, <https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/introlgbtqstudies/chapter/lgbtq-literature/>.

⁹ Mariana Dias da Costa, “The History of Lesbian Literature: An Exploration on the Evolution of the Genre,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2022): 649, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-022-09917-x>.

¹⁰ Schwab, “Publishing Queer Literature.”

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES & MANUFACTURED REPRESENTATIONS

Queer readers are long-practiced at finding themselves in texts and other pieces of media where no direct representation of their identities is present. As theorists Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill write, “Queer people survive by learning to read implicitly coded messages—where even the presence of coding can be disputed, so that both senders and receivers can be protected from the consequences of their decodings. Queer readers learn to read signals that others cannot read.”¹¹ This process takes many names, depending on which scholars you examine—reparative reading, perverse reading, reading against the grain, etc.—but is a widely documented phenomenon, especially among queer readers. This is related in large part to the historic lack of published and accessible queer literature.

Research on pleasure reading tells us that those who experience life in ways that are subject to stigmatization, or are fundamentally different from societal norms, often read to escape perceived or actual social isolation.¹² When people read purely for pleasure, they want to feel connected to a book’s plot, characters, and literary devices. They find satisfaction in seeing themselves represented. For queer readers, though, this representation has *always* been lacking, leaving many unsatisfied. And, as Suzanne Juhasz writes about seeing oneself represented in literature, “The less this happens, the more it tends to matter.”¹³ Thus, queer readers—and, more specifically, lesbian readers—have been forced to learn how to find representation in literature, even when none exists. They’ve had to learn how to read between the lines in order to undermine and reinvent the texts before them.

¹¹ Kay Turner et al., *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (Wayne State University Press, 2012), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=3416515>.

¹² Jen Pecoskie, “Reading in the ‘Grafted Space’: Public/Private Pleasure Reading and Sexual Identity,” *Mémoires Du Livre / Studies in Book Culture* 3, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1009349ar>.

¹³ Suzanne Juhasz, “Lesbian Romance Fiction and the Plotting of Desire: Narrative Theory, Lesbian Identity, and Reading Practice,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 17, no. 1 (1998): 65–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464325>.

This is what made the emergence of lesbian pulp fiction so impactful. For perhaps the first time in history, lesbian representation was not just available, but widely so. It could be found in drug stores and train stations, magazine stands and bus terminals. It was easily recognizable by its colorful covers and their depictions of women.

Throughout history, lesbians have not had a subculture nearly as strong or tangible as that of gay men. In many ways, this is still true today. Though not *all* of the more than eight hundred gay bars in the United States cater exclusively to men, many of them do.¹⁴ Yet, there are only thirty-six lesbian bars across the entire country.¹⁵ In the mid-twentieth century, with the exception of an even smaller number of bars and the occasional softball team, there was no lesbian subculture—at least not one discoverable to those not already deeply in the know.¹⁶ Though the widespread accessibility of lesbian pulp did not necessarily create new *physical* communities, it certainly created what Benedict Anderson would call an *imagined* community—a sense of camaraderie, understanding, and belonging even amongst individuals who had never (and would never) meet or truly know each other.¹⁷

SURVIVAL LITERATURE: A HISTORY OF LESBIAN PULP

Often credited as the “first candidly lesbian novel,”¹⁸ Tereska Torrès’s *Women’s Barracks*, was the first instance of lesbian pulp fiction in the United States—translated from French for mass production in 1950.¹⁹ The largely autobiographical tale follows the day-to-day lives

¹⁴ Greggor Mattson, “The Changing Mix of Gay Bar Subtypes after COVID-19 Restrictions in the United States, 2017 to 2023,” *Socius* 9 (June 2023): 23780231231181902, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231231181902>.

¹⁵ “The Lesbian Bar Project | List of the 36 Remaining Lesbian Bars in the U.S.,” The Lesbian Bar Project, accessed May 10, 2026, <https://www.lesbianbarproject.com/bars>.

¹⁶ Rabinowitz, Paula. *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street*. Princeton University Press, 2015, 188.

¹⁷ Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. (Benedict Richard O’Gorman). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2016.

¹⁸ “Women’s Barracks,” Feminist Press, accessed December 8, 2025, <https://feministpress.org/products/9781558614949-womens-barracks>.

¹⁹ “Archives Center Lesbian Pulp Fiction Collection | Smithsonian Institution,” accessed December 8, 2025, <https://www.si.edu/es/object/archives/sova-nmah-ac-1513>.

of five women serving in the Free French Forces as they strip naked for medical evaluations, partner with each other, and—in one woman’s case—commit suicide. Two years after its publication, *Women’s Barracks* was denounced as an example of the ways in which the paperback industry was “promoting moral degeneracy” by the short-lived House Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials.²⁰

This condemnation did very little to quash the popularity of the novel, especially since mass market pulp fiction was already widely regarded as trashy and cheap. Instead, *Women’s Barracks* went on to shape the foundational formula of the early lesbian pulp fiction genre. As in Torrès’s cornerstone text, lesbian pulps often ended in suicide, insanity, incarceration, or an ultimate return to relationships with men. However, not all lesbian pulps ended this way or featured narrow-minded and one-dimensional depictions of lesbian characters. In Patricia Highsmith’s 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, the protagonists remain together at the end. In Ann Bannon’s *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles*, characters exist on a spectrum of butch and femme presentation, stretching beyond stereotypical depictions. Many of these more positive or ‘pro-lesbian’ instances of pulp fiction did not occur until the second-wave of the pulp fiction boom, though.

In this sense, lesbian pulp fiction became a form of survival literature, a term first coined by author Joan Nestle to describe the genre’s impact and importance. Consumption of lesbian pulp became such a common step in lesbians’ journey to understanding and realizing their identities in the mid-twentieth century that it even became a trope within the second wave of the genre itself. In Valerie Taylor’s 1963 pulp novel *A World Without Men*, the protagonist’s moment of lesbian realization occurs while she reads a pulp novel: “It was a world along whose borders she had walked for a long time, without ever really finding a gate that opened in.”²¹ For so many women, the emergence of lesbian pulp opened that gate, allowing them to desperately search for *any* representation of lesbian life.²²

²⁰ “Women’s Barracks,” Feminist Press.

²¹ Meredith Miller, “Secret Agents and Public Victims: The Implied Lesbian Reader,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 1 (2001): 37–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.2001.3501_37.x.

²² Miller, “Secret Agents.”

In addition to offering a gateway toward self-discovery, lesbian pulp fiction also provided a blueprint. Sensationalized as they may have been, depictions of lesbians in pulp fiction were some of the only ones readily available in existence. And because of their more erotic subject matter, they focused a great deal on clothing and, of course, *unclothing*. “The details accruing in these tales—details about the artifacts of clothing, down to bras and slips—did more than imagine new romantic and erotic possibilities; they also served as fashion manuals for young lesbians, especially those living far from gay centers like New York’s Greenwich Village.”²³ Even for those who never purchased a work of lesbian pulp and instead simply looked at the covers, these books were ripe with examples of how to dress like a lesbian—and how to signal your sexuality to other women.

Despite the genre’s large and ever-growing lesbian audience, though, its primary market was always men. Lesbianism was used as a trope in pulp fiction, first and foremost, because it sold. It was a sales tactic and an act of exploitation, not a push for inclusion or diversity. Works of lesbian pulp fiction were often published under pseudonyms for the authors’ safety, and it wasn’t until the 1960s—when it became clear that “novels with lesbian plot resolutions seemed to sell just as well as novels with heterosexual plot resolutions”²⁴—that a handful of publishers began considering lesbian audiences and interests. It was only once the genre was established in its popularity that this became allowed, if tenuously. Out of these more “pro-lesbian” works of pulp fiction came the texts which are most widely treasured, celebrated, and reprinted today.²⁵ Namely, works by authors like Ann Bannon, whose novels are often separated out by critics condemning the genre’s voyeuristic and exploitative representations of lesbian relationships.²⁶

Many scholars write off lesbian pulp fiction because of these harmful representations, as well as the genre’s “low-brow” status. While these characterizations may arguably be true, it is impossible to deny the impact lesbian pulp fiction had not only on lesbian

²³ Rabinowitz, *American Pulp*, 189.

²⁴ Miller, “Secret Agents.”

²⁵ Yvonne Keller, “‘Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 385–410.

²⁶ Miller, “Secret Agents.”

communities, but on the publishing industry as a whole. Out of the genre came “the largest generation of self-defined lesbians up to that point,” who later went on to do critical activist work during the Gay Liberation Movement and care work during the AIDS Crisis.²⁷ The genre also brought lesbian storylines, however inaccurate, into mainstream publishing for the first time.

POST-PULP PUBLISHING: LESBIAN FICTION AFTER 1965

Just as *Women’s Barracks* was the catalyst for the first wave of lesbian pulp fiction, Ann Bannon’s *The Beebo Brinker Chronicles* kicked off the second wave. Published from 1957 to 1962, Bannon’s works are some of the most widely recognized and celebrated examples of lesbian pulp fiction. Though they were still required to provide a “quota of mental collapses, acts of self-destructiveness, bitterly regretful women, and sham marriages,”²⁸ the *Beebo Brinker* books also depicted butches who weren’t villainized and characters coming to terms with their lesbianism and happily surviving. Where *Women’s Barracks* was the first instance of lesbian pulp fiction in the U.S., *Beebo Brinker* was the first *successful* instance of such fiction.

By the early 1960s, lesbian pulp novels were actively advertising themselves as such, not just relying on an audience that can read between the lines. Titles were more blunt, storylines more hopeful. Yet by 1965, the boom of lesbian pulp was all but extinguished. Film production codes relaxed in the late ‘60s and, even though the resulting representations of lesbians were often tragic, it meant that pulp novels were no longer the only source of representation. A small handful of more socially acceptable, literary lesbian

²⁷ Keller, “Was It Right?”

²⁸ Mark Harris, “How Did Lesbian Pulp Fiction Thrive in the 1950s and ‘60s?,” *T Magazine*, *The New York Times*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/04/t-magazine/lesbian-pulp-fiction.html>.

novels made their way into print and onto the screen, and pulps were no longer necessary for survival. In order to retain their “thrill,” pulps had to become more explicit—a shift which didn’t resonate with audiences.²⁹ Publishers ran from the genre as quickly as they had arrived.

But the death of lesbian pulp fiction was far from the death of lesbian literature overall. In the 1970s, the growing second-wave feminist movement led to an increase in the publication of lesbian literature—literature which was finally allowed to move away from the tragic tropes characteristic of the majority of midcentury pulp. For the remainder of the twentieth century, lesbian books sold by larger publishers were more literary in nature, exploring themes of race, identity, and history. In the ‘70s, this looked like Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In the 1980s, we saw works like Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.³⁰

These groundbreaking works were few and far between from large publishers. For larger catalogs of these theory-driven and community-specific works, one still had to turn to “special interest” publishing houses. Cornerstone works of lesbian theory and literature like Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* and Allison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For* were published in the 1980s by Firebrand Books, a feminist and lesbian publishing house.

In the 1990s, readers began to find lesbian themes branching out into genre fiction for the first time—stories where characters’ sexualities are major themes, but not the driving force behind plot developments.³¹ This shift brought about instances of lesbian detective novels like Katherine Forrest’s *Amateur City*, lesbian fantasy novels like Gael Baudino’s *Gossamer Axe*, and even lesbian romance novels like Beatrice Stone’s *Entwined*. Though all of these novels were still published by smaller presses like Firebrand Books or Naiad Press, a small handful were picked up by larger houses. Melissa Scott’s 1994 lesbian cyberpunk novel *Trouble and Her Friends*, for example, was published by the Macmillan imprint Tor. However,

²⁹ Harris, “How Did Lesbian Pulp Fiction Thrive in the 1950s and ‘60s?”

³⁰ da Costa, “The History of Lesbian Literature.”

³¹ da Costa, “The History of Lesbian Literature.”

works of lesbian romance, though not entirely absent, were few and far between—and they were *always* relegated to smaller, more niche publishers.

LOOKING AT THE LESBIAN READER

“Somehow I had to find a way of reading *round* those elements I reject whilst discovering a means of reading my way to the ones I needed and increasingly suspected must be there in *some* books, *somewhere*.”³² Though Alison Hennegan penned this line about becoming a lesbian reader in 1998, it is a phenomenon so well documented among queer individuals and scholars alike that it has countless names. To an extent, it is something that everyone does, especially as children—picking through books and other pieces of media for the pieces most relevant and related to their own lives in order to further their own understanding of themselves and the world around them. But for lesbian readers, it is a crucial part of the reading process.

Lesbian authors have always existed. Lesbian characters have always existed. But until recent history, they have been relegated to subtext and implicit understandings, leaving lesbian readers to pick up clues and make meaning out of the minimal. This is what made the midcentury boom of lesbian pulp fiction so critical to lesbian life. As tragic as the tropes were and as harmful as the stereotypes became, they offered explicit, unarguable depictions of lesbians in books. And, perhaps equally as important, they had visible depictions of lesbians on their *covers*. Even for women and girls who never bought one of these mass market paperbacks—who never even opened one—they were a gateway toward recognition, understanding, and knowing. Even just recognizing these book covers for what they were was an act of decoding. It wasn’t until the latter half of the lesbian pulp fiction publishing boom that the books began outwardly marketing themselves as lesbian stories, so early readers had to pick up on visual cues alone.

³² Hennegan, Alison, “On Becoming a Lesbian Reader” in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender, and Popular Fiction*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), 169.

Today, though lesbian readers have a much larger catalog of representative books to choose from, many of their reading practices are the same. In a 2012 study on public and private pleasure reading amongst queer women, Jen Pecoskie found that “participants used the stories they read and the interpretations they made of these stories to feel connected to a wider community and not to feel alone with their claimed identity.”³³ Lesbian reading is solitary, offering participants an increased understanding of themselves and their identities; and lesbian reading is social, offering access to ‘imagined’ communities and understanding of niche social norms—but it is more than that as well. Lesbian readers don’t just reap the benefits for themselves. They have the power to bring about true societal impacts and change the nature of the stories being published. This is something that scholars and theorists in the late twentieth century recognized, and it’s something that we can see today.

Hennegan concludes her analysis of becoming a lesbian reader with the following statement: “Our growing visibility within the reading population at large persuaded mainstream publishers that it was worth identifying and meeting our needs, persuaded some of our own number that specifically gay and lesbian presses could survive.”³⁴ And she is not the only one who thought so. Pulp fiction and the romance genre have both been hailed as representations and reflections of society during their respective eras, a sort of birds-eye view of a moment’s culture. But they’re more than just glimpses into the norms of their time. In *American Pulp: How Paperbacks Brought Modernism to Main Street*, Paula Rabinowitz writes the pulp novels “point to, even reflect, a democratizing literacy and the new forms of identity and community that emerged in mid-twentieth-century America.”³⁵ In *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, Catherine Roach writes that romance fiction is “an incredibly rich cultural site that yields much insight into changing norms for gender roles, sexuality, partnership, and romance.”³⁶

³³ Pecoskie, “Reading in the ‘Grafted Space,’” 7.

³⁴ Hennegan, “On Becoming a Lesbian Reader,” 189.

³⁵ Rabinowitz, *American Pulp*, 22.

³⁶ Catherine M. Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Indiana University Press, 2016), <http://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/monograph/book/44894>, 22.

In picking up and reading these stories—in the midcentury and today—lesbian readers are not only gaining an increased understanding of themselves and their communities, they’re also shaping the future of publishing.

LESBIAN ROMANCE TODAY

Despite the transformative power and potential of lesbian romance, research on it is lacking. Though, perhaps ‘lacking’ is too generous of a term. It seems, as far as I could find in over six months of searching, to not exist. There is, however, a notable amount of research on the romance genre as a whole. In Janice Radway’s 1991 *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*—the stepping stone upon which much future romance research builds—she suggests from interviewee responses that women read the romance genre primarily for an escape and a sense of release or relaxation.³⁷ Historically, women have turned to the romance genre as a way to bring excitement to and diversify the habits of their day-to-day lives. Romance novels have served as both a welcome break in these women’s days and as a way to identify with a protagonist whose life is different from theirs in some way that they see as positive.

In many ways, the romance genre also offers reparative benefits. Roach suggests that its storylines “try to make up for the costs to a woman’s psyche of living in a culture that is still a man’s world.”³⁸ Like pulp fiction, contemporary romance novels offer a glimpse into a time’s gender roles and societal norms—and often even challenges them. Nineteenth century romances presented narratives of self-discovery through love. Contemporary romances do the same, but they also offer fantasy safe spaces to work through anxieties around patriarchy and power in a setting where everything works out and ends happily. Time and time again, romance publishers have proven to be some of the more progressive in the industry. As some of the earliest adopters of ebooks, this is true of technological

³⁷ Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. 2nd ed. University of North Carolina Press, 1991, 88.

³⁸ Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 25.

advancements, but also of moves toward diversification. They are far from perfect, of course, but romance publishers are consistently moving to work *with* changing times rather than against them.³⁹

Changing times have led to more explicit romance novels—so much so that readers have developed a “spice level” rating to describe how sexual things get on the page—but they have also led to a shift toward more body and sexual diversity. This is what makes romance the perfect case study for lesbian fiction: it was one of the first genres to allow it to reach mainstream publishing in the twenty-first century.

At the end of the day, queer women read romance novels for largely the same reasons heterosexual ones do. They provide an escape and a sense of self-identification, but they also offer a vessel through which to examine their own place within heterosexual and heterosocial society. These texts provide a way to examine patriarchal anxieties—maybe even more so considering that if men are present at all, they are almost always side characters—and they offer an escape from and examination of homophobic anxieties. Lesbian romance novels allow for one of two scenarios. Either homophobia is present as a secondary source of conflict and tension within the novel but is ultimately overcome, or the novel leans into the fantasy of a world without such opposition. They *also* allow for lesbian readers to see themselves without the requirement of reading between the lines or parsing out cues or codes that may or may not have been intentionally included by the author.

Similarly, lesbian romance can act as a learning tool. Where pulp fiction often acted as a makeshift “how-to” guide for self-expression, today’s lesbian romance does, too. These novels present snapshots of how queer women dress, speak, and meet each other. They offer up tidbits of specific aspects of popular queer culture and history. Lesbian romance can also provide sex education lessons that readers may otherwise be lacking. Though there is some debate on whether or not romance fiction should be considered a form of pornography—or

³⁹ Olivia Tapper, “Romance and Innovation in Twenty-First Century Publishing,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2014): 249–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-014-9363-6>.

how explicit a book can get before that line is drawn—the simple truth is that a vast amount of adult romance novels include descriptions of sex. And while other forms of lesbian porn are usually curated for male gazes,⁴⁰ lesbian romance fiction today is largely *not* written by or for men. This gives the genre a somewhat unique opportunity to present accurate, pleasurable, and informative sex scenes and insights.

Discussing the 1998 Naiad Press romance *Keep to Me, Stranger*, Suzanne Juhasz writes “When lesbians’ stories are plotted before our very eyes, romances in which girl gets girl, we may be reading fantasy, but we are engaged in a real way with a story which we desire for ourselves.”⁴¹ For many today, these stories are further from a fantasy than they were in the ‘90s, but they are still crucial. Like pulp fiction, romance fiction is often written off as trashy or frivolous. In reality, it is anything but. And while contemporary lesbian romances are wildly different in almost all ways from their early pulpy predecessors, their influence can still be clearly observed.

BRIDGING THE GAP

There are two key ways in which contemporary lesbian romance pays homage to the previous era. First is in its standard cover design conventions. Thankfully, authors today are given marginally more decision power over the covers of their books, and artists generally create designs which accurately reflect the story inside them. For lesbian pulp authors, this was not the case. Not only were they allowed no input during the cover design process, but the designers were almost always men who had never read the manuscripts for which they were designing.⁴² Thus, they often leaned into and reinforced popular stereotypes, even if they were entirely unrelated to the stories themselves. There were, however, certain cues

⁴⁰ *Lesbianism and the Effects of the Male Gaze in the Porn Industry* | *The Review*, January 26, 2023, <https://udreview.com/lesbianism-and-the-effects-of-the-male-gaze-in-the-porn-industry/>.

⁴¹ Juhasz, “Lesbian Romance Fiction and the Plotting of Desire,” 68.

⁴² “Looking Past the Scandalous Covers of Lesbian Pulp Novels,” June 3, 2024, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/lesbian-pulp-novels>.

that readers could use to gauge whether or not they were looking at a lesbian book—even if it wasn’t advertised as one.

In *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction*, Ann Bannon lays out exactly what these indicators were:

“If there was a **solitary woman** on the cover, **provocatively dressed**, and the title conveyed her **rejection by society** or her self-loathing, it was a lesbian book. If there were **two women** on the cover, and they were **touching each other**, it was a lesbian book. Even if they were just **looking at each other**; even if they were simply **in proximity to one another**; even if they were merely **on the same cover** together, it was reason to hope you had found a lesbian book. And if a **lone male**, whether looking embarrassed, hostile, or sexually deprived, **appeared with two women**, you had probably struck gold.”⁴³

Though the cover designs of contemporary lesbian romance novels use a drastically different art style, they do still utilize a number of visual cues to indicate their queerness to readers. Anyone who has ever been in the romance section of a bookstore with me can attest to my habit of judging books not by their cover overall, but by what is (or isn’t) depicted. For this analysis, I will be focusing on cover designs on books produced by large publishing houses. There are *so many* lesbian romances that have been published by smaller publishers or self-

⁴³ Zimet, Jaye. *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction, 1949-1969*. Viking Studio, 1999, 12-13.



published authors. However, given the larger print runs, wider distribution, and increased accessibility of trade paperbacks from Big Five publishers—not to mention their market impacts—they allow for the most direct comparison to mass market pulp fiction.



By and large, there are **no men** on lesbian romance covers. Personally, I can't think of a single example—and while I am just one person, I have read a *lot* of them. Instead, lesbian romances tend to depict **two women**, typically in a **two-dimensional illustrated style**.

Often, the women are drawn with their **backs turned to the reader**, though they may have their **heads turned**.

Designers tend to favor a **bright color palette**, often using combinations of blue/purple/pink or orange/blue/yellow. Though not necessarily a design convention, several recent works of lesbian romance have utilized a character's full name in the book's title.

Contemporary lesbian romances also involve a number of setting and broad structure similarities to midcentury pulp fiction. Though modern authors are not circumscribed in quite the same way as pulp authors were, some of the same conventions remain. The times in which lesbian pulps were written necessitated that authors and their characters retained a certain amount of plausible deniability and discretion.⁴⁴ The first wave of lesbian pulp fiction was largely set in department

stores, boarding school or college dormitories, and military barracks—locations where women had nonsexual reasons for varying states of undress. Today, this takes the form of

⁴⁴ Rabinowitz, *American Pulp*, 186.

lesbian sports romances with moments in locker rooms like Katie Chandler’s *Backhanded Compliments* and Meryl Wilsner’s *Cleat Cute*. It also, to an extent, leaks into the “fake dating” trope as seen in Andie Burke’s *Fly With Me* and Alexandria Bellefleur’s *Written in the Stars*, where characters maintain some plausible deniability (at least at first) that is not strictly, societally necessary anymore. Many vacation romances like Alison Cochrun’s *Every Step She Takes* allow for this as well, given the relationship’s supposed natural endpoint. Finally, the quasi-public nature of many of these pulp settings can be seen exhibited in works like Casey McQuiston’s *One Last Stop*, where the protagonists have sex in an empty subway car.

Characters in lesbian pulps also often had unbalanced power dynamics, whether via their jobs, ages, or relationship to their partners. Though not exclusive to lesbian pulp or lesbian romance, it’s worth noting the frequency with which this trope continues to be used in the genre today. It can be seen in two of Meryl Wilsner’s books—*Mistakes Were Made* which features a significant age gap between characters and *Something to Talk About* where the relationship depicted is between a Hollywood producer and her assistant—or Ashley Herring Blake’s *Astrid Parker Doesn’t Fall* about an interior designer and the lead carpenter for her latest project.

Finally, there are notable comparisons to be drawn between midcentury lesbian pulp and contemporary lesbian romance in regards to their inclusion and depiction of butch–femme dynamics. Butch and femme gender roles and expressions in lesbian communities existed prior to the heyday of lesbian pulp—having become increasingly apparent during the 1940s when women were permitted to enter bars without male accompaniment⁴⁵—but the culture surrounding midcentury lesbian pulp fiction did a *lot* to reinforce them. Even though only a handful of second-wave lesbian pulp novels featured positive representations (or any representation at all) of butch characters, their cover designs often featured one

⁴⁵ Ellie Wilder, “A Brief History of Butch and Femme: Living Gender Outside the Binary,” Gender Justice Project, April 23, 2024, <https://genderjusticeproject.org/lgbtqia/2024/4/23/a-brief-history-of-butch-and-femme-living-gender-outside-the-binary>.

more “boyish” woman with an extremely feminine counterpart. While contemporary lesbian romances do a much better job of matching their covers to their content, the vast majority of them do not feature butch characters—even though many of them include a character with short hair on the cover. Though there are, as always, a handful of exceptions to this rule, lesbian romance still falls into the trap of taking on aesthetic signifiers of butchness, but only to the extent that the characters remain marketable as “girls.”

A PATH FORWARD

This hesitance to include butches in stories about their community is one of many ways in which the traditional publishing industry continues to fail its audience. But it’s not just gender nonconforming lesbians being left out of their own romance storylines. Yes, romance publishers are often some of the first to move toward diversity and inclusion, but they are still not moving nearly fast enough. There’s a reason my analysis of contemporary romance drew from such a small handful of authors, and it’s not because they’re my favorite. It’s because, at least from Big Five publishers, they’re just about all we have. There is a large and demonstrated audience for lesbian romance, just as there was for lesbian pulp in the mid-twentieth century. These books are not too niche to be profitable, and they are so much more than just a ‘happily ever after.’

Lesbian pulp fiction made ripples in the publishing world that can still be observed today, and they created communities out of isolation. Lesbian romance novels *will* do the same if given the platform they deserve.

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