**RECENTLY RETURNED:**

**Romance Books**

**s01e06**

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Kirsty: And welcome to Recently Returned. I’m one of your regular hosts, Kirsty, and I’m joined by Caroline

Caroline: Hello.

Kirsty: And Emily.

Emily: Hello.

Kirsty: And we’re going to be chatting about romance today. So when we were looking at putting this episode together, I found myself asking the question, what’s the difference really between a romance book and a love story and whether there was one and I did a little bit of research. I mean I’m a librarian, it’s what we do. But, I was just wondering what you thought?

Emily: I think there’s a difference. I think you can have love stories in lots of different genres and a romance book is where the love story is the point of the book.

Caroline: Yeah, I’d agree with that. I think there can be romance that’s part of another, like a mystery or a detective, for example, Agatha Christie that has two characters who fall in love but the prime purpose is the crime. So here, the prime purpose is the romance but sometimes you will get a mystery added onto the romance in an opposite. So, yeah.

Kirsty: Yeah. I think, I went on the Romance Writers’ America website and they defined romance as a genre as being about the love story and focus more on how the characters fall in love and what the obstacles in their way are that they have to overcome and that to be a romance book, it has to have a happy ending.

Emily: Yes, I agree. There’s no sad romances.

Kirsty: No.

Caroline: No, they’re love affairs, that’s an entirely different [unintelligible 00:01:57].

Emily: Yes, love stories with sad endings are in the literary fiction shelves and sometimes I read those too but they’re not my favourite.

Caroline: We want the happy ending.

Kirsty: So, you know, Romeo and Juliet would be a love story.

Caroline: Well that ended well didn’t it?

Emily: Without the happy ending, it’s not a romance.

Kirsty: It’s not a happy ending whereas Pride and Prejudice would be a romance.

Emily: Yes.

Caroline: Yes, very much so.

Kirsty: Maybe not what you think of when you think of a paperback romance.

Emily: Well we don’t put Pride and Prejudice on the romance spinners do we? We put Pride and Prejudice in the regular … I think even at Tarneit Pride and Prejudice was in language and literature for a little while.

Caroline: The reason being is that, generally, they use historical images on the front of the Austen books rather than the Fabio with the pulsating chest and the fluffy white shirt. I mean even the TV series where Colin Firth pops out of the water hasn’t really kind of made it to the front cover. That’s always like the classic look.

Emily: They don’t do movie editions of Jane Austen of all covers do they? I haven’t seen them, possibly they do and I just didn’t see them.

Caroline: Well, certainly not that one that I’m referring to.

Kirsty: So that’s obviously your more classic romance with Jane Austen but I think, Caroline, you briefly, briefly touched on Fabio and historical covers and, of course, historical fiction is one of the huge sub-genres of romance, but I know for one that you’ve explored many, many, many sub-genres of romance.

Caroline: Ah yes.

Kirsty: So can you tell us a bit about your summer of romance?

Caroline: Oh my summer of love, yes. Well, we had a staff summer read and being the competitive type that I am, I decided to participate and read as much romance as I possibly could, mainly because there’s a lot of genres that I’d never read and I thought, well this would be a really good way of learning about something I knew nothing and would then be able to offer greater advice in the library to patrons who said, for example, I would like a western romance and immediately I would go, oh OK, so I know that there is western romance, you can have both historical and modern. You can have your cowboys working the land and you can have your cowboys from back in the day and then you’ve even got your native American romance as well as the sub-genre of western romance.

I also found out that there is Amish romance, there’s multicultural romance, there’s time travel romance, we have military police and FBI romance. Christmas romance is very big and often finds its way into multiple genres of contemporary and erotic, oddly enough. But there’s also Christmas animal romance, which I didn’t know existed.

Emily: You need to clarify more what a Christmas animal romance is please Caroline.

Caroline: Well it’s not what one would think. It’s not about loving your pets. It’s about meeting the person you love because of your pet.

Emily: Ah, of course.

Caroline: At Christmas.

Emily: Yes of course, when else?

Caroline: Possibly receiving a puppy as a present is the start of a romance but not loving your pets. So I have now walked away with so much more knowledge about sub-genres that it becomes easy if someone says, oh look, I want a love-inspired romance that doesn’t have too much love in it but has more romance in it. Or if someone says, I want something very erotic, you can make that recommendation as well or they come in and say, I want paranormal erotic Christmas romance, it’s out there.

Kirsty: Do you have a favourite sub-genre?

Caroline: Oh look, I’m very much of the regency historical romance, mainly I think because I’m a big fan of Jane Austen that I love historical. So I’m quite critical sometimes when I do read romance because I think, hmm, well they wouldn’t have worn those clothes, you’ve got that wrong.

Emily: Very specific problems.

Caroline: Well, you know, the romance is on top of the talk about clothing. And they talk a lot about clothing in these books. So I think one of the things I like about it is the time period appeals to me. I couldn’t say why that appeals to me above any other but, you know, you like what you like as opposed to, say, medieval romance, which doesn’t appeal to me quite so much.

So reading outside of my comfort zone was a good thing. I learnt a lot, it was the summer of love, there was a lot of love. In some books there wasn’t a lot of love at all, there was just a lot of hand-holding. As I said, the Amish romance, which is the sub-genre of Christian romance is known as ‘bonnet rippers’ as opposed to ‘bodice rippers’ because there’s no Fabio on the front cover of those books.

Emily: No. Everyone has to wear clothes.

Caroline: Very much so and it’s all about finding spirituality as part of the love, I guess.

Kirsty: Emily, do you have a favourite sub-genre?

Emily: To be honest, I read mostly contemporary. I’m not sure if I would say that was my favourite sub-genre. I’ve read a lot of regency romances in the past and I’m very fond of them, but I also tend to prefer to read lesbian romances rather than straight ones and the vast majority of those are contemporary. I do have a couple of historical lesbian romances that I’m very fond of but, as a rule, I do enjoy the covers of the sports romances. I just love that there’s that series of sports romances at Tarneit and they’ve all got very specific covers and none of the men have heads, because they cut the picture off, blur the head.

Kirsty: I mean it is a nice change from the …

Emily: It’s a nice change from the headless women on all the book covers.

Kirsty: Yeah. But speaking of covers, do you read your romance books openly or do you read them in eBook or cover …?

Emily: I read a lot of mine in eBook but that’s mostly because I read my books in bed, well, the other people in my bed are asleep. That came out weird. I read books in bed while my wife and child are asleep in the room with me and so I tend to read on my phone, which is slightly less bright and less likely to distract them. It’s less about the cover shame though.

Caroline: Well I’m quite open about what I borrow but I can understand the people who perhaps feel reluctant to be so open about these books because I know that there are, some of the covers are, well, varied in what they offer and people can feel a little, well, you know, embarrassed. That’s why self-checkout is so good at the library because it means they can borrow without feeling that they’re being judged, which I think is a great thing.

Emily: Yeah, not that as a librarian I tend to judge what people checkout because, if nothing else, I probably bought the book for the library so I don’t have that many problems with it.

Caroline: Exactly. I did work with a person who used to put covers, put brown paper covers over her library books because she didn’t want people to know what she read and I think that’s unfortunate because I think if you’re reading something that’s your experience and go for it.

Emily: As a genre, romance is kind of … Romance is definitely the genre that has the least kind of status -

Caroline: Yes.

Emily: - and that’s still something that people do, they laugh at it.

Kirsty: Yeah, and yet it’s one of the most popular -

Emily: Yes for sure.

Kirsty: - types of book.

Emily: And one of the few genres where in recessions and financial crises, one of the few genres where book sales will go up. When eBooks first came out … eBooks are incredibly good for the romance genre as a whole. It’s one of the places where eBooks have really taken off and maybe it’s because people can then keep them on their phone and no one knows what they’re reading but I also think just because there’s so much romance out there that it’s extremely logistically difficult to have a bookshop with all those books in it.

Kirsty: Exactly, and with the eBook market, your sub-genres are going to find their exact audience a lot easier than someone going through the shelves at the bookstore and trying to find just that one, that one sub- sub-genre that speaks to them.

Emily: Yeah.

Caroline: And I think one of the other things is that we mentioned, I mean writers like Jane Austen who people feel confident to borrow, they feel this isn’t of that oeuvre so it’s something that perhaps, you know, they should be concerned, ooh I don’t want people to know that I read this. But some of it is incredibly well written, some of it not so much. Some of it is incredibly complex and deals with a lot more issues than one would first think just by looking at the cover. So I think it’s about giving people … It’s OK. Like we’re doing this podcast. Guess what people, it’s OK to read romance and it’s OK to borrow romance and I think things like this help say, OK, well, you know, it doesn’t have to be Jane Austen I can borrow something else.

Kirsty: Well I guess we might get onto some recommendations which, hopefully, people are looking forward to. Emily, we might start with you. Have you got a couple of books you want to talk about?

Emily: Yeah. So one of the books I wanted to talk about today is The Little Beach Street Bakery by Jenny Colgan. I know I said earlier that I prefer to read queer romances but both of these are not. Oh well. The Little Beach Street Bakery is one of those books that’s actually, usually, shelved in fiction rather than in romance but it’s definitely about someone rebuilding her life and also at the same time falling in love. A lot of Jenny Colgan’s books involve that kind of setup where someone has had a bad relationship or a job fall apart or something going wrong and they’re starting from the beginning. And they move to another part of the world and usually start baking or making chocolate or in some other way move into the food service industry. And this one, given the name, she opens a bakery.

Caroline: Awesome.

Emily: Yeah. There’s also a very handsome beekeeper because you like that kind of thing.

Caroline: Oh I like bees.

Emily: And a puffin that moves in and adopts her, which is very cute. And one of the other reasons I love Jenny Colgan’s books is, she tends to put recipes at the end so if you did enjoy the food that she talks about, you can make your own version of it once you get to the end of the book.

Kirsty: That’s awesome, have you done that?

Emily: Made some of the bread from the books? Not The Little Beach Street bakery but I’ve made … There’s a chocolate cake at the end of one of her books, which I’ve made and it’s pretty good.

Caroline: Wow.

Emily: Not a lot of gluten-free, sorry, guys. I feel like I shouldn’t be talking about a bakery with you guys. I am sorry. There’s no gluten in the book.

Kirsty: Oh good. I wasn’t going to eat the book anyway.

Caroline: Romance in the time of gluten. There you are.

Kirsty: I do apologise for bringing up such delicious things that you’re not allowed to have.

Caroline: I’m sure it’s adaptable, it’s fine.

Emily: And the other book I wanted to talk about today is called A Princess in Theory. It’s also contemporary despite the royals in it. She’s a secret princess, which I love, I love a secret princess in modern day New York. She was betrothed as a child to the King of Theselo, which is an African kingdom and then her parents left Theselo and they moved to America and she died. Sorry, her parents died and she got put in the foster system and so she has no idea. And so this dude turns up and is like, she starts getting emails about how she’s been betrothed as a child to the King of Theselo and she obviously assumes that they are some kind of scam and ignores them. She’s at work one day as a waitress and this guy turns up and she assumes he is the new guy and he’d only turned up to kind of yell at her because he was miffed about them trying to leave him behind and he falls in love, she falls in love. They have to work out what to do and how to become a less secret princess. I love it, it’s great.

Kirsty: I do feel like pointing out for all our listeners, if you receive emails claiming that you were secret loyalty, it probably is a scam regardless of how this romance turned out.

Emily: If you receive emails about you being a secret princess and then also a really hot dude turns up at your work and is like, I think you might be engaged to me, then look at your life, that’s fine, but if you only get the emails, that’s probably a scam.

Caroline: It needs that extra step I think.

Kirsty: Yeah. Once the prince turns up, then you can look into it a bit further.

Emily: That one’s also a series so I’m very excited to read … I’ve got the second one, A Duke by Default, which I’m reading now.

Kirsty: Some new characters for the other books?

Emily: Yeah, so the main character for the second book is the best friend of the secret princess in the first book and then I was looking it up before this podcast and there’s also a novella about the personal assistant of the prince and the romance that she had in New York while she was waiting for the prince to sort his life out.

Kirsty: A lot of royalty.

Emily: The series is called The Reluctant Royals series.

Caroline. I like that. I like that when you read you say, oh well I really liked that, I want to read more and there is more. So I like that.

Kirsty: Yeah, it sounds like a lot of fun. So Caroline, what have you got for us?

Caroline: Well I wanted to talk actually about an author, Stephanie Laurens. Now Stephanie Laurens obviously in my favourite ballpark category of the regency romance but what is appealing, I mean apart from the fact that she lives in Melbourne, which is, you know, support local authors.

I did a little bit of research. So she was born in Sri Lanka and she’s got a PhD in Biochemistry and lived for a while in London, came back to Melbourne and said, hey, you know, I’ve got something to say in the regency romance genre and is quite prolific in the amount of books that she has written. And she’s got stand-alone books, she’s got sagas of the [Sinster] family, their friends and relations and there’s the Casebook of Barnaby Adair and the Bastion Club. So she’s quite amazing with the amount of things that she’s written. But what I like about it is, I guess, is there’s something going on besides the romance.

The romance is there as the main thing but what necessarily brings the two characters together is sometimes a mystery or a crime or some kind of dilemma where the two of them must work together to create a happy ending. But then you don’t just lose them at the end of the book because what she does is, she brings in characters from other books in the midst of a crisis, all the characters from previous books.

Emily: Little cameos.

Caroline: Someone was brought into a family meeting to resolve a problem. So you’re not reading something that’s on its own. There’s a strong sense of revisiting previously well-loved characters. I like the way she writes. I love the romance, I love the physical romance, we won’t even go there. But what’s really driving this is these characters who meet each other and realise that there’s something more that they could be. There’s something more than just romance and getting married and going to balls, as in the regency ton. There’s something else going on there and they explore that world together. And, of course, there’s a happy ending but you also see the characters in other books later and you realise that that happy ending continues. It just doesn’t end with the book.

And, you know, the particular book that I’m reading at the moment called Where the Heart Leads, it’s one of the Casebooks of Barnaby Adair, who is not a Lord, he’s a private detective but is a friend of one of the many brothers. There’s a crime going on that needs solving. There’s Basil Stokes from Scotland Yard who comes in to help and assist them. There’s disguises, there’s running the Stews of London solving crime. So I like the addition to the romance, it appeals to me. And there’s a great deal of care and attention taken to historical accuracy, which also pleases me.

Kirsty: So, given that she brings characters across from other books, do you have to read them in any particular order or …?

Caroline: No. This is the beauty of it. They are not the driving force so you can pick up any of her books and they’ll be referenced in the background as being at a ball or being consulted about something, but each book focuses just on our main two protagonists and you can then start … The more you start reading the more you realise, oh that’s related to so and so and, oh they’re related and she will actually include in a number of the books the giant family tree so you don’t get lost with referring to who is who, which I find terribly helpful because I get lost sometimes.

So you can read one, you can read them all, you can read them in any order. You can go for historical timelines and start at the very beginning and read your way forward, it doesn’t matter. I think you can pick up one and just get lost in what that one book offers and then think, well I might pick up another one and that was fun too.

So I think I like that connectedness but I like the fact that the connectedness isn’t driving what the next book is about.

Kirsty: Excellent. Thank you. So I guess I’ll talk about a couple of books as well. I tend to fall slightly more onto the chicklet end of the scale. However, both of the books I’m talking about pretty much fall into the romance paperback category. The first one is called The Kiss Quotient by Helen Hoang and I accidentally picked up the second book in this loose trilogy first, but then when I realised this was the first book, I read this one instead. I have to admit, when I read the blurb I thought the premise was slightly cringy. It’s a reverse Pretty Woman.

So, what happens is, one of the main characters, Stella, she’s a woman on the autism spectrum. She has Asperger’s syndrome and she doesn’t like being touched, she can struggle with social cues and at the beginning of the book her mother is like, “When are we going to have grandkids?”

Caroline: No pressure.

Kirsty: No pressure, no pressure at all. So Stella decides to hire an escort to kind of do sex exposure therapy in a way. So she’s hired this man, Michael, to get her used to physical intimacy. And the book, with this kind of premise, is a little spicy. It alternates their point of views.

So Michael is a Vietnamese Swedish escort who is also a tailor, as you find out a bit later in the book, and he has a secret past of his own which he’s trying to outrun, trying to prove that he’s a good man, unlike his father, and this mystery of what his father did that was so wrong runs through the entire book. And at first he doesn’t want to accept an ongoing job with Stella, whose sex exposure therapy then morphs into ‘please teach me how to be a girlfriend and be my fake boyfriend’. But, of course, they start falling for each other, as you do. So it’s full of some funny situations and misunderstandings and some quite serious discussions as well around autism and acceptance and letting people in.

So while I found the initial premise a bit cringy, I was quickly sucked in and raced through it because I wanted to know what was happening and I got quite attached to the characters. So I’d definitely give this one a go.

The second … So, the trilogy, it’s like you mentioned with Stephanie Laurens. This first book is about Stella and Michael. The second book is about one of Michael’s cousins and his mail order bride and I think the third book has just come out and I’m not sure what that one’s about so I’ll give those ones a go, definitely.

Caroline: I like that connectedness where you’ve liked the characters and you can feel that you can follow that journey again. I like that.

Kirsty: So the second book I will talk about, I actually mentioned briefly in our mid-summer episode of the podcast but didn’t go into very much detail. So the book is called Ask, Tell by E J Noyes and I picked this one up because as I was processing some new items at the library the cover just really spoke to me. It was one of those like chopped of top of the face covers but the woman on the cover is in the army so she’s in her military uniform and I was just like, hmm, I need to see what’s going on here.

So the book follows Captain Sabine [Fleisher] who is a combat trauma surgeon, maybe not combat, she’s not actually going into the field, they’re bringing the wounded soldiers to her, during the don’t ask, don’t tell period in the military. So that was between 1994 and 2011 and basically, for anyone who doesn’t know, before 1994 the US Military had said you could not join the military if you were homosexual and during the period of 1994 to 2011 the legislation said, yes, homosexual people could join the military but only if they were closeted. If their sexuality was found out then they would be discharged from their post and I’m not going to get into it too much because it just makes me sad and angry.

But Sabine is a lesbian, she has a girlfriend at home who she can’t talk about to anyone who’s she’s working with and she’s also fallen in lust at first sight with her commanding officer, Colonel Rebecca Keane who by all intents and purposes is apparently straight. She wears a wedding ring, she doesn’t really talk about her private life and Sabine is happy to just get on with her life. She’s pining a bit, and then her girlfriend breaks up with her and things start to spiral and she starts noticing things about Rebecca that make her wonder if her commanding officer is actually flirting with her, if there might be something there. But even if there was, could they really make it work because, for one thing, don’t ask, don’t tell, but she’s also her commanding officer and you can’t be involved with your commanding officer anyway.

So this book is full of angst and pining, which can be really good if you know that there’s a happy ending coming.

Caroline: Always look forward to the happy ending.

Kirsty. And it is a bit, again, this one’s a bit spicy but there’s some scenes here which are just really sweet as well. There’s the football scene I would tell people to watch out for and I like the fact that it’s not just about the romance. There’s a lot in here about the deployment as well and there’s this heart-stopping moment of action at one point in the book that’s followed up with actual consequences, like physical and emotional consequences that actually go through into the sequel. But this one ends on a pretty happy note so if you want you can just be hopeful for them in the future and not go on … I have read the second book. The second book also ends happily.

Caroline: Oh good, oh good.

Kirsty: But, yeah, I just … I really enjoyed the setting, it felt really real. Like I actually tweeted at the author and asked about her research processes because she’s an Australian author but was writing about American Military life. And she said, just Google and I’m like, oh wow -

Caroline: OK.

Kirsty: - that’s some really good Google -fu. I was expecting something a bit more in-depth like maybe she spoke to people or other things like that. But, yeah, it feels very emotionally honest so, yeah, I’d definitely give this one a go.

Emily: Do we have that one as an eBook because I don’t know when I’m going to be back in a branch?

Kirsty: No, I think we’ve just got that one in hard copy.

Emily: Awesome.

Kirsty: You can get it delivered to your house though.

Emily: That’s true, I could.

Kirsty: We do have home delivery at the moment. I don’t know how they’d feel about staff putting in for home delivery.

Emily: See what [unintelligible 00:33:44] looks like. So I’ll put it down as my wife, my wife wants to borrow that book.

Kirsty: Yeah OK. And on that note, I think it’s about time to wrap this up. Thanks Emily and Caroline for your great recommendations. I think I’m going to go off and find something to read in the sub- sub-genre of romance sci-fi maybe. If you at home have any comments, questions or recommendations, you can send them through to us via our Facebook page at Libraries in Wyndham. As usual, you’ll be able to find the book list and transcript for this episode on our website. Lots of love from the library and, as always, happy reading.

Emily: Happy reading.

Caroline: Love heart reading.

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