

**Disenchantment and its Discontents:  
“Modern Love” and Irony in Popular Romance Fiction**

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**Introduction**

Popular romance fiction is sometimes said to preserve old-fashioned romantic ideals—for better or for worse, depending on who does the saying—and sometimes to offer a prospective, even utopian vision of what love might be. What, though, does the genre do with “modern love,” that nervous, knowing, disenchanted thing? In this essay, I explore how the books that Alan Bloom calls “cheap romantic novels, the kind that are sometimes stuck into boxes of household detergent” (Bloom 1993b: 25) engage with the modern impulse to debunk love in the name of science, demystify its politics, and deconstruct its discourse. Rather than vestigial remnants that “flourish among housewives who haven’t heard that Eros is dead” (Bloom 1993b: 25), I argue that these texts can be as knowing and artful as any reader might ask, from the “housewives” Bloom scoffs at to the “very cultivated woman” imagined by Umberto Eco, to whom a man can no longer say “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland” (Eco 2014: 531). Eva Illouz claims that the “formulas of romance now compel the belief only of the culturally deprived” (Illouz 1997: 293), but the novels I discuss do not try to “compel” their readers. Rather, in the words of Michael Saler, they invite us to be “enchanted, not deluded” (Saler 2012:

39) by love's prospects, not least by deploying "a measure of self-reflexive irony" about the discourses of love that they deploy (Saler 2012: 15). Modern lovers, Illouz proposes, inhabit an "ironic structure of romantic feeling" (Illouz 2012: 195), and modern popular romance novels sometimes do the same.

### **Modes of Disenchantment**

It might seem odd to speak of an "ironic structure of romantic feeling" (Illouz 2012: 195) in popular romance novels. "The romance narrative is not cynical or pessimistic" and "its tone is not that of irony," Catherine Roach declares (Roach 2016: 23), and novelists, readers, and scholars alike describe romance as bearing witness to a "religion of love" (Roach 2016: 22) in sincere, unambiguous ways. Yet irony need not be cynical or pessimistic; it may instead be poignant, playful, tender, or amused. The "ironic structure" (Illouz 2012: 195) that Illouz describes can play out in a variety of moods, taking fictional shape in plot twists, choices of point of view, allusions (by characters or narrators), metaphors, and so on. Always, however, it would seem to entail some ratio of what Illouz calls "enchanted" and "disenchanted" accounts of what love is, how it starts and feels, and how it should be expressed (Illouz 2012: 158-159). To begin, then, drawing on Illouz, I will outline three versions of romantic disenchantment, each illustrated with examples from popular romance. I will then explore three strategies used by romance novels to guide their readers through the shoals of modern love: a *disenchanted enchantment*, an *enchanted disenchantment*, and a *harmony of ironies*.

### **1: Scientific Disenchantment**

As Illouz explains in “Love and its Discontents,” the term “disenchantment” comes from Max Weber (Illouz 2010: 18-19). In modernity, Weber argues, reason “disenchants” the natural world, such that scientific explanations, however fragile or provisional or false, possess more truth value than appeals to tradition, revelation, or mystery. Illouz extends the argument. When it comes to love, she contends, the discourses of neuroscience, anthropology, biology, and psychology have “rationalized” our experience of the emotion, not by replacing accounts of love as an “ineffable, unique, and quasi-mystical experience” (Illouz 2012: 163), but by counterpointing those with a skeptical second voice that suggests we speak and think in terms of hormones and evolutionary pressures, of the family romance and emotional scripts, or of other “rational models of emotional self-regulation and optimal choice” (Illouz 2012: 159).

This skeptical, rational second voice finds a home in advice columns, as when American columnist Dan Savage reminds his readers that “there is no ‘the one.’ [...] You’ll meet a .64 or two if you’re lucky—if you’re really lucky you might even meet a .72—and it’s your job to round that motherfucker up” (Savage 2015: n.p.). But it also appears in romance novels. Compare, for example, these two moments of a romance protagonist first laying eyes on their beloved-to-be, the first from Francine Rivers’ historical romance *Redeeming Love* (1997), the second from the contemporary romcom *Bet Me* (2004) by Jennifer Crusie. The Rivers scene is explicitly and quite literally enchanted:

Michael Hosea was unloading crates of vegetables from the back of his buckboard when he saw a beautiful young woman walking along the street. She was dressed in black, like a widow, and a big, rough-looking man with a gun on his hip was at her side. All along Main Street, men stopped what they were doing, took off their hats, and watched her. [...]

Michael couldn't take his eyes off her. His heart beat faster and faster as she came near. He willed her to look at him, but she didn't. He let out his breath after she passed him, not even aware that he had been holding it.

***This one, beloved.***

Michael felt a rush of adrenaline mingled with joy. *Lord. Lord!* (Rivers 1997: 53)

This woman has a physical impact on our hero, just as she does on the other men who see her. Yet as that still, small voice in bold italic font reveals, the force that drives Michael Hosea to court her is God's providence, not his own desire. (God speaks in bold italics throughout the novel, as opposed to the bold-but-roman words of Satan.) An elaborate midrashic expansion of the Biblical book of Hosea, the prophet commanded to marry the prostitute Gomer, *Redeeming Love* embraces reason, reflection, and self-examination, but only insofar as these sustain and guide the believer. It uses one enchanted discourse (evangelical Christianity) to critique another (the religion of romantic love), but irony is absent and enchantment is preserved.

The phrase "*this one*" recurs in *Bet Me*, when Minerva "Min" Dobbs, minutes after being dumped by her feckless boyfriend David, first sees Calvin "Cal" Morrisey:

The navy suit was taller than David, and his hair was darker and thicker, but otherwise, from behind, he was pretty much David II. "I did that movie," Min said, and then he turned.

Dark eyes, strong cheekbones, classic chin, broad shoulders, chiseled everything, and all of it at ease as he stared out over the bar, ignoring David, who suddenly looked a little inbred.

Min sucked in her breath as every cell she had come alive and whispered, *This one.*

Then she turned away before anybody caught her slack-jawed with admiration. He was not the one, that was her DNA talking, looking for a high-class sperm donor. Every woman in the room with a working ovary probably looked at him and thought, *This one*. Well, biology was not destiny. The amount of damage somebody that beautiful could do to a woman like her was too much to contemplate. (Crusie 2004: 6)

Crusie's "*this one*" scene shows how a disenchanting discourse of biological determinism and optimal partner selection undercuts the idea of romantic "destiny"—even as, of course, we readers know that the hand of destiny *is* at work here, since the union of this couple is as much a given of the genre as the divinely ordained pairing of *Redeeming Love*. There is, then, at once a sardonic *tone* to the scene, thanks to Min's temperament, and a more upbeat ironic *structure* in which her disenchanting quips are only small parts of a whole, just as scientific discourse is only one of the novel's elaborate and contrapuntal discourse system, which also draws on fairy tales, movies, children's cartoons, Chaos Theory, and popular songs.

## **2: Socio-Political Disenchantment**

A second mode of disenchantment concerns the social-political world. To illustrate this mode, Illouz quotes Edmund Burke's lament over the French Revolution, which stripped away "all the pleasing illusions that made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life" (qtd. Illouz 2012: 157), and Marx's proclamation that in bourgeois capitalism "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profane, and [people] at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their kind" (qtd. Illouz 2012: 158). In the context of love, this socio-political disenchantment means that such "technologies of choice" as unmarried cohabitation, no-fault divorce, and dating apps

and websites have melted away not only the *inevitability* of any particular partner—the sense of finding “the one”—but also the *ineluctability* of romantic partnership itself. Waves of political critique urge us to “face with sober senses the real conditions” of our romantic and relationship lives. In particular, by inviting women “to become aware of power relations inside intimate bonds,” feminist critique has “fostered a new way of thinking reflexively about romantic practices,” casting a cold eye on real-world behaviors (courtship, seduction, marital dynamics) and their cultural representations (Illouz 2010: 30).

Socio-political disenchantment takes memorable form in Crusie’s post-divorce romance *Fast Women* (2001). “Marriage was a mystery, that’s all there is to it,” the novel’s middle-aged, jaded heroine Nell Dysart muses (Crusie 2001: 30), and the novel is set a run-down private detective agency specializing in what its jaded, middle-aged hero, Gabe McKenna, calls “relationship investigation” (Crusie 2001: 5): catching cheating spouses, and the like. As it pursues what makes marriages fail, sometimes murderously, the novel draws on multiple genres, including hard-boiled fiction, lyric poetry, and self-help literature, as though searching for the discourse that will clinch its happy ending. Few romance novels face love and marriage with such sober senses. Near the center of the novel, for example, the secondary female lead, Suze Dysart, muses that

They should warn the people who were getting married about what it was going to do to them. How it shaped your life and changed your mind and altered your reality until you didn’t know who you were anymore. How it hooked you on the presence of another person, maybe somebody you didn’t even like very much, maybe somebody you didn’t even love anymore, and made you need that person even when you didn’t want him at all.

Marriage was a drug and a trap and an illusion, and kicking it was hell. (Crusie 2001: 243)

Near the end of the novel, heroine Nell similarly mulls over the crimes that she and Gabe have uncovered, seeing the pattern that connects them:

All that death, Nell thought, all because Trevor didn't want to be married any more. Helena, getting ready to kill herself because she didn't know who she was if she wasn't married. Margie, hating Stewart but sticking with him because they were married, and fifteen years later, smacking him with a pitcher because she couldn't stand being married. Linnie, marinating in resentment because Stewart hadn't kept his promise to come back so they could get married. She and Tim, mutilating each other because they were stuck together, married. Jack imprisoning Suze and Suze not even trying to escape for fourteen years because they were married. *It should be harder to get married*, she thought. You should have to take tests, get a learner's permit, you should need more than a pulse and twenty bucks to get a license. (Crusie 2001: 333)

Even on the last page of the novel, as Gabe proposes, Crusie balances a disenchanting skepticism about marriage against her heroine's impulse to frame love, desire, and romantic union in enchanted terms. Notice the contrasting levels of diction in this scene:

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too," he said. "Let's make it legal."

He sat there in the sunlight, the devil made flesh, tempting her into an eternity of heat and light. Marriage is a gamble and a snare and an invitation to pain, she thought. It's compromise and sacrifice, and I'll be stuck forever with this man and his damn ugly window.

Gabe smiled at her and made her heart clutch. “Chicken.”

“Not me,” Nell said. “I’m getting married.” (Crusie 2001: 336)

It’s a long, long fall from “an eternity of heat and light” to “stuck forever with his damn ugly window,” from “the devil made flesh” to the childhood dare of “Chicken.” Only an ending that speaks both ways, however, can give compositional form to the “ironic structure” of this clear-eyed happy ending.

Crusie’s *Fast Women* offers a limit case of socio-politically disenchanting romance, waiting until the final sentence to say “I do” to its genre’s demands. Other romance novels show integrate disenchantment in a less estranging, more consoling way. Consider, for example, the opening of Alisha Rai’s *Hate to Want You* (2017):

*One night. No one will know.*

Those were the rules.

They weren’t romantic rules, but nobody had called Nicholas Chandler a romantic in a very long time. Love rarely conquered all, the true villains almost always went unpunished, and happily ever afters? Ha. Sometimes all you could hope for were secret stolen moments with one messy, royally bad girl.

Nicholas shut off the engine of his sedan. He preferred using terms that were clearly defined, so he shied away from adjectives like *bad*. *Bad*, especially when used to describe a woman, could mean too many things.

In this case, though, it meant she was bad for *him*. (Rai 2017: loc 310)

Although the romance trope of “rules” goes back to antiquity—the story of Cupid and Psyche, for example—modern romance novels use rules, especially rules to a sexual relationship, to set up a negotiated and demystified framework for the couples (or triad’s, or what-have-you’s)

encounters. Such a structure eliminates, or at least reduces, the ideological self-consciousness that might otherwise be associated with erotic power dynamics. Illouz may be correct that “Emotional contractualism – a relationship based on free will, equality, and symmetry— paradoxically entails *semiotic uncertainty*: that is, an ongoing preoccupation with the adequacy of one’s own conduct and the difficulty to grasp the right rules of conduct in a given interaction” (Illouz 2012: 193), but the romance genre has learned to create local contexts of semiotic certainty: a time, a place, a scene in which rules are known and meanings can be, in Illouz’s words, at once “shared and implicit” (Illouz 2012: 193).

Even as it offers local clarities, however, the trope of rules can also create narrative tension. When a novel *opens* by articulating a set of rules, the arc of the novel can trace how these protagonists learn, at least ostensibly, to leave their rules behind, moving from a formal, explicit, and contractual relationship to something more flexible and organic. In Rai’s novel, the rigid rules of the opening paragraphs are bound by proximity to Nicholas’s rejection of being a “romantic” man who believes in fairy tale “happily ever afters” and stories where love conquers all. Such rules cannot stand, and as *Hate to Want You* unfolds we watch the couple renegotiate them. “*One night*” turns to many, and not just nights; “*no one will know*” shifts to family knowing, then friends, then a grand public gesture; and in the metaphorical betrothal scene that ends the novel we witness a new contract being hammered out: “Let’s be scared together,” Nicholas proposes; “‘You’ll fight for us?’” heroine Livvy replies; “‘I’ll fight for us,’ he vowed”; and, finally, from Livvy, “‘I want a steady supply of cunnilingus. Not because you feel grateful, but because you actually enjoy it.’ She reflected. ‘Actually, you can feel a little grateful’” (Rai 2017: loc 5176-7).

Rai's engagement with socio-political disenchantment does not end with the trope of rules. Although it is a contemporary-set romance, *Hate to Want You* is structured by clear-eyed, sober reflections on three forms of history: personal history, notably Livvy's history of depression and suicidal ideation; family history, in which the marriages and businesses of the Chandlers, the Okas, and the Kanes have been entwined for three generations, including some exploitative business deals; and national history, via the story of Livvy's grandfather, Sam Oka, a Japanese American forced to sell off his business and live in an internment camp during World War Two. To use Burke's phrase, Rai strips the "pleasing illusions" from each history (qtd. Illouz 2012: 157), and since each is bound up in the others, Rai can treat them, in effect, as *versions* of one another. What is true of the nation is true of the family is true of the individual, and vice versa. This structure invites the reader to see the novel's core romance plot in political terms: an invitation reinforced in scenes where characters explicitly reflect on the power dynamics of love. "It was you who said 'I love you first,' I bet," Livvy's aunt Maile thus chides her:

"You who coaxed him into asking you out. You who kept your sadness a secret from him at the end, partly out of pride, but probably also because you didn't want him to be hurt." Maile grimaced. "Society tells women that they have to be responsible for the emotional health of their relationships and then tells them they're weak for feeling emotions. What kind of message is that?" (Rai 2017: loc 4223)

This scene of advice-giving marks the novel's place in the "intimate public sphere" of women's culture that Lauren Berlant discusses in *The Female Complaint* (Berlant 2008: ix), where the traditions of "sentimentality and complaint" so central to women's popular culture grow proximate to feminist critique (Berlant 2008: x). Whatever "message" Rai's novel purveys in its happy ending, the scene assures us, it will lie on the far side of this critique, partly by embodying

a less exploitative dynamic of emotional labor (that is, less like the business practices in the other narrative threads) and partly by reconfiguring emotionality as a form of strength: a transformation I will return to, as it involves the strategy of “enchanted disenchantment.”

### 3: Semiotic Disenchantment

Although she mentions it only briefly in *Why Love Hurts*, Illouz explores a third mode of disenchantment in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (1997). The middle and upper-middle class lovers Illouz interviews for this volume feel burdened by a “disenchanted knowledge” (Illouz 1997: 155) of how their emotional lives have been scripted and shaped by the media. Even as they articulate their feelings with imagery and gestures provided by fiction, films, and advertisements, her respondents find those feelings lacking in authenticity, “the pale shadows of powerful, machine-produced dreams” (Illouz 1997: 154-55). In this study, such “ironic semiotic suspicion” (Illouz 1997: 180) is a peculiarly *postmodern* experience, where romantic love has been “‘disenchanted’ by its very triumph in the mass media and consumer culture” (Illouz 1997: 293). By the later *Why Love Hurts*, however, Illouz will treat such “cultural reflexivity—vis-à-vis cinematic formulas and vis-a-vis the grip that cultural myths have on us” (Illouz 2012: 196) as one more instance of ironic modern love, and elsewhere Illouz calls *Don Quixote* “the first manifestation of an ironic, disenchanted condition of love” (Illouz 2012: 195), which suggests that *whenever* romantic idealization saturates a medium, it may provoke this response.

In *Glitterland* (2013), British romance author Alexis Hall braids semiotic disenchantment with the biological and socio-political modes. The novel is narrated by “Ash” Winters, an upper-class, Cambridge-educated detective novelist whose ability to love and be loved is threatened both by his bipolar disorder and by his having internalized hierarchies of sophistication in which

things linked to mass culture—from the “genre tat” he writes (Hall 2013: 49) to the generic tropes of romantic love—are to be treated with self-lacerating irony. He is, we might say, too *knowing* for his own good: a man who calls marriage an “outdated heteronormative construct that has no place in secular society” not as a serious critique, but as a received idea, a scrap of what Roland Barthes calls *doxa* (Hall 2013: 144). Ash describes Barthes as “one of my heroes” (Hall 2013: 136) and he nervously quotes the French critic to avoid uttering the “meaningless signifier” and “linguistic feint” that is the phrase “I love you” (Hall 2013: 193). Ash’s mental illness and his cultural reflexes are thus presented as two sides of the same joyless coin. Unable to trust his own responses, he musters instead the love-debunking discourses of modernity and post-modernity, reducing love to sex or to a “biochemical blip” (Hall 2013: 157) and using the flip phrase “this isn’t a fucking romcom” (Hall 2013: 155) to avoid chasing after and apologizing to the beloved he has betrayed.

So far, poor Ash’s case confirms Illouz’s observation that the ironic structure of modern love “deflates the pathos” of desire and is “incompatible with the emotional and bodily experience of passion and intensity” (Illouz 2012: 196). And yet, although in public Ash may brush off his love for the novel’s other hero, aspiring model Darian Taylor, an “idiotic glitter pirate from Essex” (Hall 2013: 49) who revels in fake tans, jewelry, sequined outfits, and elaborately-styled hair (Hall 2013: 13-14), their private scenes are neither ironic nor self-conscious, but passionate, playful, and imbued with pathos. So is the final love confession from Ash, in which he unconsciously slips, he is aghast to realize, into lines from the film *Notting Hill*:

His expression barely changed, but there it was. Finally. Some curve of his lip or the brightness in his eyes, like the gleam of light at the heart of a pearl. My Darian, my glitter pirate. The man I wanted. The man who wanted me.

I rushed on. “I know I have no right to be here, I know I have no right to ask, but I just thought if I came and...stood in front of you, and explained, and tired not to fuck it all up too badly, you’d see that I ... really like you, I’ve always really liked you, even when I’ve been awful, and, really, I’m just standing in front of you, asking you to—oh, shitting hell.” Where the fuck had that come from? Even if I were the sort of man to make those declarations, I’d like to hope I’d at least use my own words and not those of a cheesy romcom from the late nineties.

But Darian’s face lit up like Christmas. “Aww, I love that film.” He gazed at me expectantly. “Go on, then.”

(Hall 2013: 239-240, ellipses in original)

The ironies here are at Ash’s expense, but they are *affectionate* ironies, and Darian has no qualms about his partner’s loving by the book (here, by the film). Berlant calls the heterosexual love story “a conventional plot about conventionality” (Berlant 2008: 171), but this gay romance novel wears that critique as a badge of honor, and is ultimately no more troubled by the scriptedness of love than it is by the equally conventional image of something being “lit up like Christmas” (Hall 2013: 240). (I will come back to the religious resonance of that Christmas reference. *Notting Hill* and the New Testament are bedfellows at several points in this text, and the ironies of that need space to address.)

Given Ash’s (and his author’s) comfort with literary and pop cultural allusions, it’s not hard to imagine Ash’s declaration of love as an echo of, or commentary on, Umberto Eco’s

famous description of “the post-modern attitude” (Eco 2014: 531). Eco offers, here, a more optimistic account of semiotic irony than does Illouz—in fact, when Illouz quotes Eco in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia* (Illouz 1997: 179) she crops the passage to fit the dour mood of her interview subjects. Here is the text as she quotes it: “I think of the post-modern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly,’ because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. [He] loves her in an age of a lost innocence” (qtd. Illouz 1997: 179). This makes “lost innocence” sound rather sad, chiming with Illouz’s conclusion that “many people” now “doubt they are in love precisely because they have heard too much about it” (Illouz 1997: 180-81). Those brackets around “[He],” however, cut nearly three sentences from the middle of the passage, and it continues after Illouz cuts off. Here is the original, with restored material in italics:

...these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. *Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony. . . . But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.* (Eco 2014: 531; ellipses in original)

That irony can be game, that playing it can be a pleasure, and that through this game love can be both declared and received: all of this has been occluded by Illouz, yet all of it suits Hall's novel, and indeed those by Rai and Crusie. The ironic structures of popular romance may be playful, rather than mournful, and it is to that possibility that I turn next.

### **“As If” Love Were Real**

The “ironic structure of romantic feeling” (Illouz 2012: 195) described by Illouz springs from the sense that romantic love can no longer be experienced or understood in a single, exclusive way. Multiple, often contradictory discourses describe and inflect how love feels, is enacted, and gets represented, such that any enchanted, “quasi-religious view of love” (Illouz 2012: 161) will find itself in dynamic tension with skeptical, rational, political, disenchanted views of the subject. This tension creates a reflective self-consciousness, a *knowingness*, which in Illouz seems to lead more or less inexorably to disappointment (Illouz 2012: 216), yet which in Eco provides an opportunity to “play the game of irony” (Eco 214: 531) and, with it, the game of love. The acerbic version of modern love that Illouz sees exemplified in chick-lit differs, therefore, from the consoling version found in popular romance fiction, where an ironic consciousness about love actively fosters the happy ending this genre requires. To understand this ironic consciousness, let me close my Illouz and open Michael Saler's study of genre fiction and its readers, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. (My thanks to religious studies scholar Venetia Robertson for suggesting this turn.)

Published a year before Illouz's *Why Love Hurts*, Saler's *As If* does not speak of modern love, but it does discuss disenchantment—or, more specifically, *re-enchantment*—in the context of popular fiction. “The vogue for fantastic imaginary worlds from the fin-de-siècle through the

twentieth century,” Saler writes, “is best explained in terms of a larger cultural project of the West: that of re-enchanting an allegedly disenchanted world” (Saler 2012: 6). Emerging near the end of the nineteenth century, the genres of detective fiction, science fiction, and fantasy each invited fans both to imagine, and to discuss, such “virtual worlds of the imagination” as the London of Sherlock Holmes, the eldritch cosmos of H. P. Lovecraft’s “weird fiction,” and J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Fans of these texts did not simply read about these “avowedly fictional spaces” (Saler 2012: 7). Rather, in an act of the “ironic imagination” (Saler 2012: 14) they celebrated and discussed those fictive worlds with other fans: sometimes as if they were real, although knowing full well they were not; sometimes using those conversations as the opportunity to debate real-world political, scientific, and other topics. Like the romantic “game of irony” invoked by Eco, then, Saler’s “ironic imagination” does not lead to disappointment, but rather allows one “to embrace complementarities, to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance” (Saler 2012: 13).

Saler is not the first to describe this turn in cultural history. A “self-conscious strategy of embracing illusions while acknowledging their artificial status, of turning to the ‘as if’” (Saler 2012: 13) has long been identified in thinkers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Saler mentions its presence in Nietzsche, and readers of Wallace Stevens will recall poet’s famous reflection on the “final belief,” which “is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else,” and the “exquisite truth,” which is “to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (Stevens 1989: 189). Saler breaks new ground, however, in locating such ironic play in the texts of popular genre fiction and in the minds of the everyday readers who constructed “public spheres of the imagination” (Saler 2012: 194) around them. Transforming “as if” thinking from the “exquisite” experience of an elite, Saler domesticates and

democratizes it—and, in the process, its potential results, since the more at home one grows with the provisional truths supplied by an ironic consciousness, the more comfortable one may become with the idea that “the real world is, to some degree, imaginary, relying on contingent narratives that are subject to challenge and change” (Saler 2012: 21). Dwelling in possibility may be what poets do, but it’s a game that anyone can play, including the readers of “cheap romantic novels” (Bloom 1993b: 25), each of which contains an “imaginary world” (Saler 2012: 6) where, as the Romance Writers of America affirm, “lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship are rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love” (Romance Writers of America 2000: n.p.).

Suppose we assume, then, as a provisional truth, that romance novels beckon readers to use the “double consciousness of the ironic imagination” (Saler 2012: 22) to navigate the modern “ironic structure of romantic feeling” (Illouz 2012: 195). What might this invitation look like? What forms does the navigation take, either in terms of character behavior and dialogue or as choices of imagery, allusion, style, point of view, and so on? Is there any evidence that romance readers *accept* the invitation? To address this last, Saler studies fan practices, including letters in SF magazines and talks at the American and British Sherlock Holmes Societies and the Tolkien Society. Because I am trained in literary analysis, rather than ethnography or sociology, I will focus here on textual questions, leaving those of reception—there are comparable archives for popular romance fiction, in print and online—for more capable hands.

Three invitations to ironic consciousness recur in romance novels. The first, following Saler, I call invitations to a *disenchanted enchantment*. In these, enchanted discourses of love are recast or reinterpreted so that lovers can enjoy their emotional extravagance and utopian promise without any loss of reason or critical purchase: a move we may witness in Crusie’s *Bet Me* and

its deployment of fairy tales. The second are invitations to enjoy *enchanted disenchantment*. Here, the discourses that Illouz associates with reason and critique—that is, feminist inquiry, therapeutic and other scientific discourse, and technologies of choice (Illouz 2012: 158)—are reimagined as enabling us to experience full-hearted passion, unstinting commitment, and a sense of providential design, rather than as undermining those experiences. Rai’s *Hate to Want You* exemplifies this strategy. Finally, returning to *Glitterland*, we may see how these two strategies overlap to produce a virtuosic *harmony of ironies* that leads the reader to something the novel, or at least its narrator, calls “joy” (Hall 2013: 199).

### **Disenchanted Enchantment**

The Romance Writers of America’s definition of the genre explains that every romance novel will contain “a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending”; that the love story will describe “individuals falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work”; and that “the lovers who risk and struggle for each other and their relationship” will be “rewarded with emotional justice and unconditional love” (Romance Writers of America 2000: n.p.). There is much to unpack here, from the disparate discourses soldered together in that phrase “falling in love and struggling to make the relationship work”—the first from the centuries-old discourse of romance, as David Shumway uses the term; the other from what Shumway calls the discourse of intimacy, which dates to the 1960s (Shumway 2003: 21; see McAllister and Teo 2017: 212-214)—to the most ingenious paradox where “unconditional love” is something that lovers receive only conditionally, as their reward for risk and struggle. One telling choice, however, lies in an absence. Who or what, after all, does this rewarding?

Romance novels give various names to the hand that shapes their ends. Some are religious: the many-titled (but consistently typeset) Hebraic God “*Yahweh, El Shaddai, Jehovah-mekoddishkem, El Elyon, El Olam, Elohim*” in Rivers’s *Redeeming Love* (Rivers 1997: 399); “Allah...the best of planners” in Na’ima Robert’s *She Wore Red Trainers* (Robert 2014: loc 2090); the Hindu deities who pop up in brief, strategic mentions in Sonali Dev’s *A Bollywood Affair*. Elsewhere, “destiny,” “fate,” and “kismet” take their nondenominational bows, and of course there is always a more or less personified “love.” Laura Vivanco argues that “modern popular romances are novels whose authors have assumed pastoral roles, offering hope to their readers through works which propagate faith in the goodness and durability of love,” no matter whether this love is understood in sacred or secular terms (Vivanco 2020: n.p.). This seems true, although on socio-politically disenchanted reading, Vivanco’s “love” can look a lot like what Elizabeth Brake calls “amatonormativity”: that is, “the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship type” (Brake 2012: 88). Some romance authors, however, do their pastoral work not by singing love’s praises, but rather by fostering an ironic “double consciousness” about the source of love’s triumph, at least *in a romance novel*: a workaround that lets them offer hope and propagate faith in love “as if” the genre’s premises were true.

In *Bet Me*, Jennifer Crusie uses several strategies to achieve this end. The first is to use playful excess to create what Saler calls “a measure of self-reflexive irony” (Saler 2012: 15) about the inevitabilities of love between the novel’s protagonists and their eventual happy ending. Everything in the novel is not simply overdetermined, but *visibly* overdetermined, from the names of the characters (Cal is Calvin, as in Calvinism, as in predestination; Min’s mother,

who is always telling her not to eat, is named Nanette, as in the musical comedy *No, No, Nanette*; her sister Diana, “clearly the princess in the family” [Crusie 2004: 195], and so on) to the titles and lyrics of songs that are mentioned (“It Had to be You” plays in lost snowglobe Cal finds for Min), to the string of mishaps and coincidences that throw the protagonists together whenever they try to escape what Min calls “this *thing* that’s haunting us” (Crusie 2004: 232). That “*thing*,” in turn, gets explained within the novel through several conflicting discourses, all of which map neatly (and ironically) onto the narrative. Cal’s friend Tony tosses out a bogus pickup line about love and chaos theory, but it still works to describe the events that follow. Cal’s ex, psychologist Cynthia, repeatedly describes a four-step “process of falling into mature love” (Crusie 2004: 24) that starts with the biological and family scripts that govern “assumption” (the unconscious cues that determine to whom we might potentially be attracted), moves into “attraction,” then into a neurochemically-induced “infatuation,” and eventually, thanks to different hormones, into “mature attachment.” This, too, maps onto Cal and Min’s progress, so that Cynthia is proven right, diagetically speaking, even as her efforts to manipulate the process and get Cal back fall flat. Finally, as the novel’s opening and closing phrases indicate, this is a story that runs from “*Once upon a time*” (Crusie 2004: 1) through “happily ever after” (Crusie 2004: 337), and through nicknames, metaphors, plot twists, and descriptions, Crusie brings motifs from a dizzying array of fairy tales and other enchanted “*mythoi*” (see Vivanco 2011: 75-108) into the novel, even as its characters debate what it means to “believe in the fairy tale” (Crusie 2004: 359; see 97, 217).

If the strategy of excess highlights the mechanisms and contrivances by which the illusion of kismet is achieved, disenchanting its enchantment through a playful irony, these scenes of debate and instruction offer a second version of disenchanted enchantment, this time

through a pragmatic re-interpretation of what “the fairy tale” entails. Min, an actuary, has no use for enchantment: “I don’t believe *that garbage*. *I do not believe in the fairy tale, okay?*” (Crusie 2004: 301). Yet as her friend Bonnie testifies, “believing in the fairy tale” is not an irrational (or ideological) delusion, but rather a decision to think and act *as if* one’s desires could be attained, since only such thinking (in this book) allows one to articulate and act on them. Crusie lays the foundation for this idea by having “as if” thinking show up first in purely practical contexts. Min, Bonnie, and a third friend, “love nihilist” Liza, meet twice a month for an “If dinner” (Crusie 2004: 59), where each has to propose an if / then scenario: “If my job doesn’t get any more interesting, I’m quitting next week,” for example (Crusie 2004: 73). In a moving passage at the heart of the novel, Bonnie adopts this rhetorical feint to ease Min past her skepticism. “What do you want, Min?” she asks. “If life were a fairy tale, if there truly was a happy ending, what would you want?” (Crusie 2004: 238); and, again, “If you could have anything you wanted, no explanations, no logic, just anything you—[...] Tell me your fairy tale” (Crusie 2004: 240).

To answer Bonnie, Min must thread a path between the Scylla of semiotic suspicion, of “feeling ashamed” (Crusie 2004: 238) about the sheer banality of the life she wants with Cal (twice she tries to call it “stupid,” twice Bonnie intervenes) and the Charybdis of socio-political disenchantment, of wondering “Why does it always have to start with some guy?” (Crusie 2004: 240). Invoking the novel’s one lesbian character, Bonnie offers an answer. “Because it’s a fairy tale,” she replies. “It all starts with the prince. Or if you’re Shanna, with the princess, but still. It starts with the big risk” (Crusie 2004: 240). From one sentence to the next, Bonnie dismisses the heterosexuality of “the fairy tale” as a trivial epiphenomenon, and then, just as quickly, translates the enchanted discourse of fairy tales into the rational and disenchanting discourse of the novel’s core metaphor, gambling. Min’s fairy tale may not be the same as Shanna’s or even Bonnie’s—

the friends are attracted to sharply contrasting men and future lives, Min's child-free and Bonnie's surrounded by offspring, etc.—but no matter the goal, says Bonnie, “The only illogical thing you have to do is believe. After that, you need brains” (Crusie 2004: 242). To “believe in the fairy tale” does *not* mean, in this novel, to set aside critical judgement and force life to correspond to enchantment. Poor Diana tries that, and nearly marries a cheating fiancé in the process. Rather, it means to believe that something causing happiness is worth envisioning, so that you will recognize and bid for it when the chance arises: a mindset the novel matter-of-factly compares to being prepared for lucky breaks in business (Crusie 2004: 171) or being ready to buy the right couch when you finally see it (Crusie 2004: 85). To live otherwise, always already prepared for disappointment, is in effect to be “hopeless” (Crusie 2004: 171), Bonnie declares.

A skeptical scholar or reader might well push back against this formulation, and Crusie knows it. As Christina A. Valeo observes, she hints in several novels that the popular romance author is not unlike a card sharp or con artist, providing “Happily Ever Afters that work as long as no one gets a closer look under that third card” to readers who “have willingly paid to play” so they can, undeceived, watch deft hands at work (Valeo 2012: n.p.). That said, Crusie has been quite explicit about her hope to inculcate resilience in their readers, and characters in several of her novels pragmatically discuss the usefulness of stories that are “unreal, but not untrue,” as a means to rebuild optimism (Crusie 1996: 1). That phrase comes up at several points in Crusie's early novel *The Cinderella Deal*, functioning both diegetically, to advance the plot, and metafictionally, to advise the reader on how to think about the romance genre—and it sums up nicely the ironic consciousness implied by her use, throughout her work, of disenchanted enchantment.

### Enchanted Disenchantment

A second approach to encouraging ironic consciousness in romance readers comes at the task, so to speak, from the opposite angle. Rather than disenchant the enchantments of romance so that they can be put to practical use, as Crusie does, some romance authors imbue disenchanting, practical ideas about love and romance—notably those drawn from therapeutic discourse—with resonance, scope, and heroic mystique. One such author is Alisha Rai, whose *Hate to Want You* vividly illustrates this strategy of enchanted disenchantment.

As we saw a few pages ago, the novel begins with its hero, Nicholas “Nico” Chandler, grimly rejecting the promises of popular romance. “Love rarely conquered all,” he thinks, as he waits to meet heroine Livvy, “the true villains almost always went unpunished, and happily ever afters? Ha” (Rai 2017: loc 313). The genre-competent romance reader knows where this is headed: if Nico starts by scoffing at the thought that love conquers all, he will see it triumph; if he doubts that true villains will be punished, he will watch them come to justice; and if he starts by rejecting happily ever afters, he will end up enjoying one, just as Min does at the end of *Bet Me*. Likewise, if a romance author opens her novel with a reference to fairy tales—in this case, the phrase “happily ever after”—it’s likely these will recur, so that Nicholas’s progress from start to finish can be tracked by how this motif evolves. Crusie’s proliferation of fairy tale plot points and references marks an extreme case of this genre convention, as does her characters’ overt discussion of what belief in “the fairy tale” means, but subtler, more scattered versions of both are not uncommon, whether the novel adapts some twice-told tale (see Vivanco 2011, 91-109) or uses one to comment on the nature, appeal, or promise of romance genre (Vivanco 2011: 110-113).

At first, Rai follows these well-worn paths. We learn that Nicholas and Livvy, in their younger days, had been “a magical couple, young wealthy royalty destined to unite two powerful families” (Rai 2017: loc 662): a sentence that combines a fairy tale gesture with a nod to *Romeo and Juliet*, the second of the novel’s three intertextual reference points. (The third is American soap operas, since to be “royalty” here is to be the scion of a national supermarket chain, once co-owned by two now-warring families.) We see Livvy, like Nicholas, refuse to think in enchanted ways, slapping her hopes down with a stern “No ifs. Ifs opened a land of possibility, led to a universe where anything was doable. Where the children of feuding families could unite and overcome the odds and ugly history between them. If was a word for fairy tales, not reality” (Rai 2017: loc 2609). We watch a second, contrasting, disenchanting discourse of love take shape, this one focused on issues of *health*, both literally—Livvy suffers from depression; Nicholas grew up emotionally abused by his father—and more figuratively, in terms of eating and not eating various sweets. (Rai has fun with the sexual connotations of the latter. Nicholas is fond of cannoli.) And, of course, we find passages where the sternness begins to slip. When Livvy’s brother Jackson warns her that “It’s not healthy to be here” and that she is “living in a fantasy land” if she thinks otherwise, her silent is to see it as “*Not a fantasy*,” but rather “*A fairy tale*. As much as every cynical part of her believed him, she couldn’t stop the tiny kernel of desperate optimism unfurling inside her” (Rai 2017: loc 2973).

By the end of the novel, however, Rai unsettles our expectations. As Livvy and Nicholas falter forward to their happy ending, the disenchanting discourse of health and illness, not the enchanted one of fairy tales, takes center stage. Livvy fears Nico cannot truly love her, given her depression: “It’s a chronic condition,” she reminds him. I can manage it, and I’m in a good place now, but I can’t be cured” (Rai 2017: loc 5128). He, in turn, confesses that his emotional health

is shaky, given a lifetime of belittlement and manipulation by his father. “I’m not a prince,” he says. “This is not a fairy tale. This is reality, with all its problems and hassles and issues and absurd family dynamics, and I want you to be with me” (Rai 2017: loc 5157). Why, then, does this final *rejection* of fairy tale discourse feel so different from the ones we’ve witnessed earlier in the novel, such that we feel the same sense of rightness, symmetry, and encouragement that *Bet Me* provided when Min learned what it might mean, rationally, to *believe* in the fairy tale?

First and foremost, Rai brings about this effect by having Nicholas’s lines be ironic, not univocal. He means them—but we readers know that, in this novel, the plot element that seems to define the fairy tale has been *fighting*, rather than the happy ending, as it was for Crusie. (In *Bet Me*, Bonnie uses the phrases “if life were a fairy tale” and “if there truly was a happy ending” as synonymous [Crusie 2004: 238].) When Livvy snaps at Nicholas that she “wanted to fight for you, and I wanted you to fight for me, and that didn’t happen, because *that shit only happens in fairy tales*” (Rai 2017: loc. 3649, my emphasis), the connection is made clear, but we can see it brought up tangentially elsewhere, as when Nicholas stands up to his father and discovers that “this magical land of not giving a fuck was pretty cool” (Rai 2017: loc 4553). By the end of the novel, we have seen Nicholas fight for Livvy on several occasions, and moments before he insists that “this isn’t a fairy tale” we hear him vow to “fight for you” in the future (Rai 2017: 5086). We know, then, though he doesn’t, that this *is* a fairy tale: a context which gives an enchanted cast to the practical and disenchanting discussions of oral sex and emotional labor that follow.

We have also seen Rai weave the rhetoric of fighting, which is to say of fairy tale heroism, which is to say of *enchantment*, into the treatment of mental health. Just as Crusie offers scenes of instruction through Min and Bonnie’s conversations about “the fairy tale,” Rai

shows us how Livvy manages her mental illness. After arguing with Nicholas, for example, Livvy realizes that “her feelings were too big and overwhelming, and they were leaking right out of her. Time to contain them” (Rai 2017: 3810). Physically tracing a box around one of her tattoos, she runs through a set of steps her therapist has taught her: “Put the negative thoughts into the box. Find a counter thought.” A set of affirmations follow—“*I deserve compassion*,” for one—and although Livvy “wasn’t sure if she fully believed the words her therapist had given her to keep in her arsenal,” they seem to help (Rai 2017: 3810). That metaphor of an “arsenal” frames the practical steps of her cognitive-behavior therapy in the language of battle, and this language returns a few chapters later, as Livvy realizes that whatever happens with Nicholas, she has managed to rebuild connections with her estranged mother and Aunt Maile, such that if another failure with Nicholas sends her into a depressive episode, these connections will help her “battle the darkness” (Rai 2017: 4491): rhetoric as appropriate to a fantasy novel or fairy tale as it is to a therapy session.

This strategy of enchanted disenchantment adds an additional layer of irony to Nicholas’s declaration “this is not a fairy tale” (Rai 2017: 5134). His words are framed by echoes of Livvy’s exchange with her Aunt Maile in the “battle the darkness” chapter. First the other woman’s words come to her mind: “*You can be strong and have moments of incredible despair. These moments are not weaknesses. They are simply moments. And they are not you*” (Rai 2017: loc. 5156; see loc. 4434). Then, after Nicholas speaks, she tells herself “*I deserve compassion*” (Rai 2017: loc 5143), just as she did after hearing her aunt’s advice (Rai 2017: loc. 5276). The two mental health plots in the novel, Nicholas’s fight with his father and Livvy’s battle with depression, are thus juxtaposed, and the reader is invited to think doubly of them. We see them rationally as practical, messy dealings with a disenchanted world of “reality,” as Nicholas calls

it, but we experience them emotionally “*as if*” they were the sort of noble, heroic, enchanted struggle that “only happens in fairy tales” (Rai 2017: loc. 3649), a genre to which this romance novel thus does and does not belong.

### **Conclusion: A Harmony of Ironies**

The central fact of the romance novel would seem to be that it is a love story, rather than a tale that plays out within an elaborately detailed, explicitly fictive realm like Holmes’s London, Lovecraft’s cosmos, or Tolkien’s Middle Earth. As we have seen, however, the whole of the romance genre system can be seen as a “secondary world” (a term Saler borrows from Tolkien): a fictional universe where love is triumphant because, whatever the reasons locally given, such are the rules of the game. Through strategies of disenchanted enchantment, as in Crusie’s *Bet Me*, and of enchanted disenchantment, as in Rai’s *Hate to Want You*, romance novels incorporate and encourage their readers to adopt an upbeat “ironic consciousness” when it comes to modern love: treating enchanted, premodern versions of the emotion *as if* they were simply ways to speak of a more self-conscious, rationally-considered affection; or treating a scientifically, politically, and semiotically undeceived version of the emotion *as if* it could, in Illouz’s words, “engage and mobilize the totality of the self” (Illouz 2012: 162), transmitting and sustaining something sacred.

Which approach structures *Glitterland*, the novel which, a few pages ago, was seen to touch on all three forms of modern disenchantment? Having taught the novel several times, I still cannot say for sure. Both ironies are active throughout the novel, and Hall brings them into such close, sustained harmony that a reader’s decision about whether this is a disenchanted romance in enchanted guise or the other way around depends almost entirely on how we interpret its final

phrase, “I decide to call it joy” (Hall 2013: 199). The book deserves extended treatment; briefly, though, for my conclusion, let me trace how Hall sets up this phrase and what its resonances might be.

*Glitterland* is narrated by literary-turned-detective novelist Ash Winters, a man whose ability to love has been cut down by the one-two punch of mental illness and semiotic suspicion. To redeem both Ash and romantic love, the novel offers an unlikely savior: Darian Taylor, the “idiotic glitter pirate from Essex” (Hall 2013: 49) who “finks” marriage is “totes romantic” (Hall 2013: 144) and who doles out tender, unflappable pronouncements that console Ash even as he dismisses them as “Hallmark wisdom” (Hall 2013: 134) and Darian himself as “Yoda” (Hall 2013: 51). To call Darian a savior may, therefore, be a slightly outrageous gesture, but if it plucks him out of his natural discursive habitat (popular culture), it sets him down squarely in Ash’s range of reference. Both men may be atheists who’ve never read the Bible (Hall 2013: 40), but Ash has enough “cultural consciousness” (Hall 2013: 40) to pepper his narration and the books he writes with apposite allusions. Depression feels like the “alpha and omega” (Hall 2013: 13), he observes near the start of the novel, and his most recent novel about detective Rik Glass is called *Through a Glass Darkly*: a title that Darian recognizes from an Annie Lennox song, but which Ash quickly glosses with the full quote from 1 Corinthians (13:12): “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” He does not mention the verse that follows—“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity”—but anyone who shares his education, or at least his general “cultural consciousness,” will know that this gesture places Ash just verses away from the “love is patient, love is kind” passage trotted out at so many weddings, since the King James Version’s “charity” is *caritas*, or love. (Does Ash know it? He notes, near the end of

the novel, that he feels “as jangled as a bag of cymbals” when he tries to talk to Darian: a simile that echoes Paul’s admonition, in the same epistle, that without love even eloquent words are just “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” [1 Corinthians 13:1].)

Hall uses this pattern of Biblical allusions to set up the novel’s bleakest moment. At a posh Cambridge wedding reception, the terrified Ash tries to avert the scorn of his college mates by speaking of lower-class Darian, his plus-one at the party, as “like a fuck buddy, but without the tiresome buddy requirement” (Hall 2013: 154). Darian hears this, leaves, and as Ash says to his former boyfriend Niall, “all it needed was a crowing cock to end the scene” (Hall 2013: 159). Niall scoffs at Ash’s equating “being a bit rude at a wedding and Peter’s denial of Jesus Christ” (Hall 2013: 159), but twenty pages later, he makes the same connection: “‘You know that bit in the Bible when they’re all like, ‘Yo, Peter, do you know this Jesus bloke?’ and he’s like, ‘Hell, no.’ It was like that, but even worse’” (Hall 2013: 171).

How shall we read this comparison? An “enchanted disenchantment” approach will take the joke seriously, turning the novel into a fine, old-fashioned tale of Ash’s Progress that starts with our narrator in a hell of abulia and despair, teases him out of it with the first fresh stirrings of eros (desire for Darian), then leads him into philia (the two grow close as friends, not just lovers), and finally, in their reunion, graces him with heavenly agape. Ash may be as disenchanted as a romance hero comes, and the story quite secular, but Hall has filled that secular skin with holy wine—and, to encourage the irony, he has sprinkled the text with clues that this is what it’s doing. “Pilgrim and burden,” Ash calls Niall and himself, early on (Hall 2013: 4), triggering the allegory, and the novel’s closing phrases, where a kiss from Darian “feels a bit like fear and tastes a bit like tears, but it’s bright and sweet as sherbet and I decide to call it joy” (Hall 2013: 199), clinches the reading nicely. “Joy,” after all, is what C. S. Lewis decided to

call the “the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing” that urged him to Christ long before he knew what was happening or how to name it (Lewis 2017: 72); or, in the words of a different Inkling, this could be the “sudden and miraculous grace” that hints at “evangelium” in J. R. R. Tolkien’s “Of Fairy Stories”: a “piercing glimpse” of “Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief,” and so on (Tolkien 1983: 153).

You don’t have to be an English professor to read the book this way. Consider this post by romance blogger Elizabeth Lane. “In Ash,” she writes,

I recognized myself in my brokenness and desperation and in Darian, I recognized Christ as I know Him. If I'm honest, I'm unable to process that story any other way. I can tone it down. I can use non-Christian, non-theological terms to express what I thought about it and how I felt about it. I've been doing it for a week, in fact: talking about mental illness, intellectual snobbery and class differences. But that was the intellectual taking over. The gut-level reaction was a relieved sigh: that love and redemption is offered to everyone, even the most messed up and selfish of us. (Lane 2014: n.p.)

That the novel conjures such intense and such disparate “intellectual” and “gut-level” reactions testifies to its ability to evoke a twofold, ironic consciousness in its readers, and indeed to its deftness as a work of enchanted disenchantment.

This is, however, not the only way to read the novel, nor are these the only allusions. Ash, our narrator, knows a *lot*, and the attentive reader will spot *Hamlet*, *Grease*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Notting Hill*, a 2010 hit by pop artist P!nk, and many other references. Darian’s eyes may “light up like Christmas” (Hall 2013: 193), which fits the allegory, but a page before those eyes were “as infinitely blue as the promise of high windows” (Hall 2013: 192): a image (drawn from Philip Larkin’s poem “High Windows”) that in its original context suggests

religious nostalgia, resolute atheism, and a dizzying sense of existential freedom. As for Ash's declaration that Darian's kiss "feels a bit like fear and tastes a bit like tears, but it's bright and sweet as sherbet and I decide to call it joy" (Hall 2013: 199), certainly this *might* call to mind Lewis's or Tolkien's Joy, but the phrase "I *decide to call it joy*" (my emphasis) might equally call our attention to the act of choosing, as though to use enchanted discourse were a leap of linguistic, not erotic, faith. The novel invites and exceeds a Christian reading, in ways both agnostic and knowing.

The full range of allusions in *Glitterland*, can, perhaps, be folded back into an enchanted reading. As Madeline L'Engle says, "There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred," from a Glitter Pirate to *Grease* (L'Engle 2016: loc 715). Likewise, we can see the Christian bits of the novel as simply one more thread in its fabric of allusions: a time-worn though time-honored way to articulate the same hope for redemption, whoever we are, that we find in *Notting Hill* or the chorus of P!nk's "F\*\*kin' Perfect." (There is nothing so sacred, after all, that it cannot also be secular.) Or, of course, we can refuse to make the choice, and put down the novel instead as moved by Hall's accomplishment as we are by Ash's redemption. In *Glitterland*, that is to say, the landscape of modern love begins to resemble the purgatorial terrain sketched by W. H. Auden in "New Year Letter," where "over its ironic rocks / No route is truly orthodox," but where we lovers still "set out, / Our faith well balanced by our doubt" (Auden 1976: 179). A harmony of ironies may not be the norm in popular romance fiction, but it is there, for those with ears to hear it.

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