

Christian Romance Novels: Are They Our Harmless Little Secret?

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She was an intimate friend, and I was in her confidence from the beginning. She was feisty and quite pretty, but not in a fussy way. Life dealt her some hard blows, but she was self-sufficient and didn't need a man to take care of her—or at least, so she thought. I could have told her the right man would be the answer to all her problems, but she never seemed to listen. I suffered with her through tragedy and trembled when her life was in peril. And I felt a vicarious delight when *he* came on the scene—the strong, handsome, masculine hero that would rescue her from her lonely, cold existence and teach her all about *real* love. Oh, and I almost forgot—they went to church sometimes.



That's the plot, more or less, of every Christian romance novel I've ever read. In the past, I read a lot of them. If you are like most believing women I know, at some point you've read one, too. Obviously *someone* is reading them. One major Christian bookseller has over 2,000 current titles listed in this category. There are several clubs that send members a new Christian romance novel every week. While you are waiting for the mailman to deliver the next selection, you can surf to an author fan site or one of dozens of sites that review and suggest books in this genre.

So, is this a harmless area of Christian liberty? I'll let you decide. But it wouldn't hurt to look more carefully at what we are reading and how it might—just *might*—be a problem for some of us.

Have you turned off your intellect? When researchers asked women why they read Christian romance, an overwhelming majority said they valued the books because they inspired an emotional response. That's not necessarily wrong, but we need to be discerning even when reading fiction. For example, whole series of novels are written that are "Christian" in name only. The characters are practical atheists who may attend church, but their faith does not impact their decisions. We don't want to passively accept this as normative Christian behavior.

We also have to remember that in these books, God behaves in the way the author causes Him to behave. The theology illustrated in the book is always fallible because the author is fallible. It's easy to get discouraged when we read over and over about God speaking audibly to the characters in a novel, or when we see that their loved ones always get saved before the last chapter. It's also worth mentioning that some romantic situations in these books may actually be adultery,

depending on the author's view of divorce and remarriage. If you read them, do so with your head as well as your heart, and don't let them shape your understanding of God.

Does it teach idolatry? I know that sounds harsh, but hear me out. If the heroine in your novels is always saved by a lover, that's a false redemption. Christ is our Redeemer, and God is our ever-present help in time of trouble. Our hope is in Christ, not in Prince Charming. No mere man can fix all our problems. Accepting this idolatrous view of romantic relationships will cause you to place pressures on your husband that will end in deep disappointment, if not disaster. Only Jesus can be your Savior.

Is it changing your expectations? This is a subtle problem and nearly impossible to self-diagnose. Do you think that God will always wrap up all the loose ends in your life in a timely manner? Do you expect your life to always be exciting, or your work always fulfilling? Should you always be the center of attention? Do you fantasize about being rescued by a man from a situation in which you feel helpless? If so, you may have been influenced by reading Christian romances.

Is it a form of emotional adultery? God has designed our relationship with Him, the marriage relationship and our relationships in the church to meet our deep need for emotional intimacy. We may unintentionally circumvent this plan by vicariously identifying with heroine after heroine in these novels, selfishly meeting our own emotional needs instead of letting those needs drive us into real, sometimes messy, relationships.

Is it a steady diet? Finishing a Christian romance novel is a little like taking the last bite of a hot fudge sundae. We usually feel a little sad that it's over. The fantasy has ended and we return to our comparatively boring, unglamorous, meat-and-potatoes lives. The temptation is, of course, to immediately pick up a new book and immerse ourselves in a new fantasy.

In the same way that we should not allow a steady diet of hot fudge sundaes, we should not allow ourselves a steady diet of popular fiction. If we do so, we miss the chance to read books that will teach us good theology, help us grow as believers, and develop realistic expectations about relationships and spirituality.

Instead, I urge you to try reading biographies of Christian women like Ann Judson, Amy Carmichael or Sarah Edwards. Many women have found the books *Stepping Heavenward* and *Pilgrim's Progress* to be helpful works of fiction. Ask your pastor or a trusted older woman in your church to recommend more titles. Challenge yourself to read books of substance.

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