



## An Interview with Susan Elizabeth Phillips

by Eric Murphy Selinger

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**Abstract:** On April 17, 2014, novelist Susan Elizabeth Phillips joined Eric Murphy Selinger at the Popular Culture Association National Conference in Chicago for a public conversation about her work and the romance genre. The room was packed, and many audience members chimed in with questions, notably Sarah Frantz Lyons, founder of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance (IASPR) and former PCA Area Chair for Romance.

**About the Author:** Eric Murphy Selinger is Professor of English at DePaul University. He is the author of *What Is it Then Between Us? Traditions of Love in American Poetry* (Cornell UP, 1998) and co-editor of several anthologies, including *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays* (McFarland, 2012, co-edited with Sarah Frantz Lyons) and *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* (Ashgate, forthcoming, co-edited with William Gleason). Eric is the Executive Editor of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*.

**Keywords:** American romance fiction, popular romance fiction, Susan Elizabeth Phillips

When Susan Elizabeth Phillips began writing and publishing romance novels in the early 1980s, the American market was dominated by the blockbuster historical romances that followed in the wake of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (Avon, 1972) and Rosemary Rogers's *Sweet Savage Love* (Avon, 1974) and by contemporary-set "glitz and glamour" sagas, a genre of women's fiction with strong romantic elements associated with Judith Krantz, among others. Phillips' first half-dozen novels—*The Copeland Bride* (written in collaboration with Claire Lefkowitz, under the pen-name "Justine Cole"), *Risen Glory*, *Glitter Baby*, *Fancy Pants*, *Hot Shot*, and *Honey Moon*—explored the conventions and possibilities of both genres, and all were well received, but her reputation in popular romance fiction rests primarily on the contemporary-set romance novels she began publishing with Avon in the mid-1990s. Beginning with *It Had to Be You* (1994), the first of her "Chicago Stars" novels centered around a fictional Chicago football franchise, Phillips has offered an innovative, influential mix of comedy, Americana, and nondenominational narratives of redemption through love. (Her novel *Dream a Little Dream* may be the only

one set in the allegorically-named town of Salvation, North Carolina, but themes of forgiveness and reconciliation recur across her oeuvre.)

*It Had to Be You* won the Romance Writers of America's "Favorite Book of 1994" award, and since then, Phillips has won five more RITA awards from the RWA, as well as the organization's Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award. Her novels routinely appear on American readers' and reviewers' lists of the "best" or "top" romance novels, and her reception by the academy has also been warm.[1] In 1997 Bowling Green State University invited Phillips to give the keynote address at their groundbreaking conference on "ReReading the Romance," and foundational romance scholar Tania Modleski singled out Phillips as "a true *auteur*" whose work she "enjoyed enormously." [2] Papers on her work have been presented at several of IASPR's international conferences on popular romance culture, as well as at the Romance Area panels of the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association's national conferences.

When the PCA/ACA conference came to Chicago, near Phillips' home, the chance to do a public interview with her was too good to pass up, and she very graciously accepted the invitation to speak with Eric Murphy Selinger and take questions from the audience.

**Eric Murphy Selinger:** *In your essay "The Romance and Empowerment of Women," published in the Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women anthology, you say that you started reading romance fiction in the early 1970s and that you fell under the spell of the historical romance novel. How did you go from being a romance reader to being a romance writer?*

**Susan Elizabeth Phillips:** I was at home at that point, a former high school teacher with two little children. My best friend Claire [Lefkowitz] is two doors down the street. She has a degree in French, and she's home with two little kids. This was when *The Flame and the Flower* and Rosemary Rogers' books first came out. Claire and I had always been big readers and we read everything—literary fiction, popular fiction. When those historical romance books first appeared, we were just like, "Oh my gosh." We couldn't get enough.

Claire and I were both feminists, and those early books, you may remember, were the rape-and-pillage-of-the-heroine books. I still defend those books. I know this will horrify the younger people here, but I think some of you closer to my age will understand why I defend the rape fantasy in those stories. Claire and I were raised to be good girls. Neither of us had suffered from sexual abuse, so that whole idea of a hero taking you against your will meant "You're still a good girl. It wasn't your fault. You just happened to be so beautiful and desirable and meek and mild that he couldn't help it." It's interesting to me, looking back on it: Claire and I both have strong personalities, and the heroines of those books are pretty wimpy, certainly compared to today's heroines. Yet we were so drawn to them.

The Romance Writers of America used to say, "Please don't go out and tell the public that you started to write romance novels because you read a bad one." Yet that's exactly what we did. I remember Claire came to the door one evening, waving a paperback romance that I'd lent her (I don't know what the book was—I wish I remembered), and she said, "This is the worst book I've ever read. We can do better than this. We're going to write a book." That night I was unloading the dishwasher. I called her and said, "Claire, I know that we're not going to write a book, but if we were, I love books where the heroine is

disguised as a boy, and I love the marriage of convenience...” We started writing purely from the viewpoint of readers, writing what we wanted to read. I had a real cranky two-year-old, and I’d put him on the back of the bike—no helmet, of course, in those days—and Claire would get on her bike, and we would just ride and talk about the plot.

Claire’s degree is in French, mine was in Speech and Drama. We were not products of the English department; and there was no RWA at that time, no romance writing seminars, so we were just writing the book we wanted to read. That was 1979, the book was *The Copeland Bride*. There have been several revisions to that book since. One of them involved taking out the sentence, “He raped her violently.” I remember I stole that sentence from—do you remember Anya Seton? I think it was *The Winthrop Woman*. I’m not sure. But I just thought, “Oh my gosh, what a sexy sentence.” [3]

**Audience member:** *Wow.*

**SEP:** [Laughing] I know! Don’t ever invite me if you don’t want honesty! And of course over the years that sensibility has changed so much, although I think what we’re finding in the whole erotica movement is the same kind of emotion and experiences that we good girls felt in the late ‘70s when we started reading historical romances.

**ES:** *When Sarah Frantz Lyons talked with Bertrice Small at the IASPR convention in New York City, Small told us that when she was writing The Kadin, she had no idea that she was writing romance. She thought she was writing historical fiction—that the historical romance genre as we now think of it didn’t exist at the time she wrote it. It sounds like you started out right from the get-go with the sense that you were writing romance.*

**SEP:** *Historical* romance. Bertrice was a real history buff, and while Claire and I liked history, I wouldn’t say our interest was centered on the actual history of the period. We just wanted that male/female conflict that gave us such a rush.

Bertrice was one of the original superstars when I was just starting to write, and I remember an RT convention when Bertrice took a few of us who were newbies up to her hotel room, which had this throne-like arm chair. We sat at her feet, and Bertrice told us, all the things to be careful of with our publishers, and all the things we needed to do. I still remember sitting at Bertrice’s feet like, “Feed me. Feed me.” Yeah, it was good.

**ES:** *You mention the heroine dressed as a boy...*

**SEP:** The marriage of convenience, secret baby, all of those conventions! You can find them in my books, and I love them. I love them to this day, because there’s such strong built-in conflict to them. That’s the other reason I write the alpha hero. I don’t tend to enjoy romances with beta heroes, because there’s just not enough conflict for me. Usually if you’ve got a beta hero, you have to have a pretty neurotic heroine, and I like books that show the growth of the heroine. With a beta hero, I wouldn’t know how I would pull that off. Although Robyn Carr, a dear friend of mine, has a new book out—women’s fiction—called *Four Friends*. At the beginning, one of the women’s husband is having an affair. Robyn has this guy groveling for the entire book. What I love about him—a true beta

hero—is that he’s basically a chick in a man’s body. I devoured this book, and glowered at my husband the whole time.

I can’t pull that off, but oh my god, did Robyn ever do it beautifully.

**ES:** *Your books began to come out right at the same time as the first big wave of academic scholarship about romance begins: Tania Modleski’s *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982), Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984), Kay Mussell’s *Fantasy and Reconciliation* (1984). Did any of those ideas from the academic discussion of the genre make their way into what you and other writers, authors were talking about? Did you know about them? Were you responding to them in any way?*

**SEP:** Yes, we did know about them, and the truth is we grit our teeth. Now remember: we were extremely defensive. What we were hearing in some of the early scholarship was that women were reading romance because it helped them get through the dreariness of being wives and mothers at home with kids. We were also hearing that we were using clichés in romance and the language was so trite, because our readers were too stupid to understand great language. It became increasingly frustrating for us. So what happened?

One of the best intellects when it comes to romance, especially through the 1980s and the 1990s, is Jayne Ann Krentz. Jayne is very analytical, and after she plowed into the scholarship she gathered a number of us together said, “We are letting academics define us and what we do. We have to define ourselves.”

Jayne understood that if we went on record, writing our viewpoint about what we saw happening with the romance genre, and if this work was published by an academic press, then in all future work, the academics would have to take what we were saying into account. It was extremely calculated. When Jayne got us together, she gave us a simple charge. “Write an essay about the appeal of the romance.” That was it. She was not giving us specific assignments, she was not telling us what to write.

Now, of course, we have a lot of academics writing romance: Mary Bly/Eloisa James, Jennifer Crusie, just to name a few. But during the early ‘90s those women weren’t around. We had to look at what we were doing and figure out for ourselves what was going on both from the writers’ and readers’ point-of-view. Since we had so much face-to-face contact with our readers through letters and book signings, we understand why they were reading romance, and we could see that there was a lot more going on than a bunch of housewives who were picking up our books because they were frustrated with their kids.

When the essays arrived, Jayne has said she was thunderstruck because we all took different approaches. My approach was, as a feminist, to examine why *I* was responding to the books. For me, it was the idea that the heroine always won. I had to create that strong alpha hero, because that made her victory all the sweeter. So I wrote an essay about the empowerment of the heroine. Since then, honest to Pete, the word “empowerment” has been used for every stripper, every hooker, every... Well, at that time it was fresh.

So that’s how that book came about. It was very deliberate, and it wouldn’t have happened without Jayne. She was the one who saw the big picture while the rest of us were going: “Ahhh, we need to get some respect.” Jayne had a much, much broader viewpoint than the rest of us did.

We're so appreciative of the academic work that's being done now, because it's so much more thorough and thoughtful than the early work, but that's to be expected since I'm guessing many of the academics studying romance have grown up reading it. I do hope that current academics recognize *Dangerous Men* for the groundbreaking work it was.

**Sarah Frantz Lyons:** *I'd like to ask a question about the period right after Dangerous Men, Adventurous Women, in the mid-1990s.*

*In 1994 and 1995, within about eighteen months of each other, we get a bunch of novels published: your first Chicago Stars novel, It Had to Be You, Nora Roberts / J. D. Robb's Naked in Death, Dream Man by Linda Howard, Dreaming of You by Lisa Kleypas, To Have and to Hold, by Patricia Gaffney. If you look at lists of "perfect romances" and the "best romance books of all time," those books show up, year after year, and they all come together in 1994 and 1995. So you must have been writing them around the time that Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women came out. And your novel It Had to Be You (1994) was an obvious switch in your career. It's a very different book from any of your other books. You started out with historical romance; you then moved to the kind of glitz and glamour epic sagas following generations like the ones Judith Krantz would write: Glitter Baby and Hot Shot and Honey Moon, the big, epic sagas.*

*Could you talk a bit about It Had to Be You as a turn in your career? How did you go about constructing that book in relation to the context when it came out?*

**SEP:** My background was in theatre, and I am an actress looking for parts to play. So a lot of things that have happened in my career have happened accidentally. Nothing has been logically constructed.

After I did the three big books—*Glitter Baby*, *Honey Moon*, and *Hot Shot*—I wanted to write a shorter book; and for years and years I had this idea: What would happen if woman who knew nothing about sports inherited a professional football team? Remember: I had never written series romance; I had not been indoctrinated by Harlequin; I didn't know that you were not allowed to write about sports. (You're not allowed to write about sports, actors, or rock stars, apparently. I only found that out later on.)

By the time I finished *It Had to Be You*, my career had crashed. I had three books at Dell, then I had three books at Pocket. Pocket published *Fancy Pants*, *Hot Shot*, and *Honey Moon*. They had no idea how to package these books, because they were, fundamentally, *big* romances, and there was no precedent for covers or marketing. Claire Zion was editing me—just a brilliant editor—and she let me know that my numbers weren't strong enough for *It Had to Be You* to get decent support from the publisher. Even though the book was under contract, she was kind enough to plant the seed that I needed to move houses.

So I had the manuscript of *It Had to Be You*, my agent sent it all over town, and we waited for the auction to start. I'd gone into New York and I remember being taken into a publisher's big conference room where I was asked about my career plan. I was a schoolteacher at heart! I'd never sat around a conference table in my life! Oh my God, I was so traumatized, but I winged it. I'd already started *Heaven, Texas*, so I said, "Well, I'm going to write smaller books now and I'm going to be writing more humorous books and I'm going to write another Chicago Stars book." I just made it up.

So we had an auction. Nobody came. The first bids that came in—right now these numbers sound good—I remember \$35,000 per book—but I had been making quite a bit more with the big books at Pocket, and oh my gosh, I still remember that sick feeling in my stomach. And I remember my agent calling me and saying, “We’re still waiting to hear from Bantam, we’re still waiting to hear from this publisher, we’re still waiting to hear from that publisher.” But they felt the book was too quirky. They didn’t know what it was—the book didn’t fit into their preconceived idea of romance. And then at the last minute, Avon, which was a train wreck at that point, came in and bid \$100,000 for that book. “Okay, I’ll take it!” I said. All Avon had at the time was historical romance, and they wanted a book to anchor their contemporary line.

*It Had to Be You* ended up with a very small print run, but it changed my career forever because of my brilliant agent. He talked to my publisher and said, “Why don’t we give out a thousand free copies of this book at RWA?” Everybody does this now, but it was the first book that was the freebie in such a big quantity. And that’s when I was truly discovered and my career changed.

**SFL:** *What we don’t realize as scholars, I’m now coming to understand, is how much of the history of the genre is about publishing decisions, how much of it is luck, how many books there were that broke out of genre conventions in similar ways and did similar things but just disappeared because they didn’t have the combination of luck and marketing smarts and all of this other stuff behind it.*

**SEP:** There were a lot of authors, yes, who had a very strong vision and experienced more frustration than you can imagine as they strained against the boundaries of series romance.

**ES:** *Moving away from the chronology now to thinking about bunches of books together, many of your books are set in what I think of as iconic American settings. You’ve got Chicago, you’ve got Hollywood, and you’ve got small towns in Texas and rural Michigan and Tennessee. And they feature iconic American characters: a shady TV Evangelist (or at least his widow), star quarterbacks, star golfers, a fifty-year-old rock star who has the perfect symbolic name—*

**SEP:** Jack Patriot.

**ES:** *Jack Patriot! And in The Great Escape, the heroine, Lucy, is the adopted daughter of a former president and the novel’s hero is a combat vet who served tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan. So I’m wondering, do you think of your books as being particularly American romances?*

**SEP:** Absolutely. If I had to describe myself in one word, it wouldn’t be writer or wife, mother, grandmother, it would be a Midwesterner. Despite eleven years in New Jersey where I was a fish out of water, I am a Midwesterner through and through. My family roots go way, way, way back. And I love the small town Midwest. The Hollywood settings I hate doing. I’m not comfortable with them. I want to write the Midwest. I want to write Michigan, although I’m pretty happy writing about Texas and the south, too.

But what I find really fascinating is that 50% of my income is coming from foreign sales. The books are published in thirty languages now, and I get a lot of email from all over the world, and they love the Chicago Stars books. They love the Wynette, Texas, books. The more American the book is, the more the international audiences respond to them.

I've now toured in Germany, I've toured in Slovenia, in Croatia—and I'm telling you, romance readers are the same everywhere. I can't tell you how easy it is talking to readers everywhere. They are the same. They're responding to the same kinds of emotions, and it's the same demographic. You've got students, you have academics, you have doctors, and you have moms at home with small kids. It's exactly the same in Europe as it is here.

**ES:** *So are the American settings for them are like, say, Regency England or Scotland for American audiences: settings we tend to think of as being somehow intrinsically "romantic." Is Chicago like that, elsewhere?*

**SEP:** I don't think so. I think what appeals is American popular culture, more than the fantasy of a particular place.

**ES:** *I want to talk about one of the Chicago Stars novels: Natural Born Charmer. I've taught that book six or seven times at DePaul, including one ten-week seminar on it—*

**SEP:** What the hell do you talk about for *ten weeks*? [laughing]

**ES:** *We read the book really slowly. We read it a couple of chapters per class day and we would come in and talk about them. And the fun thing was—here, I have a bunch of nicely trained seniors, senior English majors, and I said to them, "All right, you're smart, you're English majors, you know what to do with a book. Here's a book! Do it!" Most of them had no idea where to begin: they didn't realize that they could do the same things they do with any other book. They could read it closely, they could pay attention to the characters and symbolism and ideas and looking at, you know, pacing and looking at how different scenes play off against each other—all the stuff that they do with any other book. I also sent them over to your website. I said, "Hey, romance authors have websites. Romance authors have Facebook pages. You can communicate with them. You can find out more." This is a whole other way of being an author than the kind of literary figure that they are used to.*

**SEP:** Especially in romance. I mean, no other genre connects with readers quite the way we do. We love it.

**ES:** *One of the things that I always talk about when teaching Natural Born Charmer is the fact that Blue Bailey, the heroine, is an artist. She's a painter. She does murals. She does portraits. And it's always seemed to me that there was some connection between what you say about her paintings and career as a painter and what it is that you're doing as a romance novelist. Is that connection something you were thinking of as you wrote the book?*

**SEP:** Some of it is just technical. I need occupations for heroines where the hero and heroine can spend a lot of time together. That's really tough when she's got an eight-to-five

job, so I do have a lot of artists and people like that. Also, I am an art lover, and I'd much rather write a heroine who's doing something that I'm passionate about, interested in, than a heroine who's not, like tracing the history of the personal computer industry as I did in *Hot Shot*.

I was also influenced by a bunch of things I've seen Jennifer Crusie do. And—what was Jenny's series romance—oh my gosh—it's one of her early books and I've forgotten the name—she described the art work of the heroine so beautifully and that was—

**ES:** The Cinderella Deal.

**SEP:** It was always in my head. And I love the idea that Blue's drawings were domestic, they were almost fairytale—and she was such a tough little critter.

**ES:** *There's an early scene with Blue and Dean where she presents him with two sketches of him. The first sketch that she gives distorts his features just a little bit—*

**SEP:** —[in sync with **ES**] just a little bit.

**ES:** *—in a way that gets him thinking. And the second one presents him as he actually looked, and that also gets him thinking, because he looks at it and thinks, "Boy, I look kind of sleazy and slimy in here."*

**SEP:** He wants the drawing where she's distorted his features, doesn't he?

**ES:** *Oh, he's fascinated by it. But one of the things that came up in the class discussions—you asked what we did with this—was that my students said, "Well, there should really be a third picture, because there's one that's worse than reality and there's one that is the reality—there should be one that's better than reality, to round out the set." And that then turned into a really interesting discussion of the way that Blue's later paintings are a vision of the way things ought to be.*

**SEP:** And she could not have done that at that point in the story. She could not have created that ideal—or envisioned what the future looked like—yes. That was definitely planned.

**ES:** *Nailed it! Which leads to a second question, this time spanning of a variety of books, also focused on romance and the way things "ought to be." I know that you are not an inspirational romance novelist as such—that is, someone marketed as writing Christian books—and your books don't go into Christian theology or terminology in an elaborate way. Still, you set one novel, *Dream a Little Dream*, in a town called *Salvation*, North Carolina, and you don't have to be an English professor to get that one. And in *The Great Escape* a lot of the novel takes place on "Charity Island." There's a lot of discussion particularly in the secondary romance in that novel about forgiveness, about redemption, about what it means to live with faith. I'm just curious if you see a connection between the thematic material that interests you in your novels and Christian themes or Christian ideals.*

**SEP:** You think? I'm attracted to popular fiction because I want people to follow the rules. I want justice. I want fairness. All those ideals that popular fiction delivers. I was the little girl who in fifth grade went up to the new teacher and told her she wasn't teaching reading right, because she didn't have reading groups as we'd always had. I like rules and I like order. I was raised in a liberal Presbyterian church, and although I'm not conventionally religious now, I very much believe in redemption. I believe that love is the most powerful force. All that sappy stuff, I believe with all of my heart.

My husband is your white male country club golfer. Got it? We had gone to the accountant to do our taxes. And the accountant pointedly told us how many thousands of dollars we were paying specifically for Obamacare. Pointedly. "So you know this." And we walked out of there and Bill looked at me—my white, golfing, country club husband—and said, "If that helps somebody, I don't mind paying it one bit." That's why I'm married to him.

So those themes, which are common not just to Christianity, but to all the world's great religions, are definitely part of my worldview. I don't like religion that hems us in; I want religion that reaches out, that broadens out. Religion that is love and respect for all people. So those themes will always be in my books—it's the reason I have trouble writing villains. It would be so much easier to have villains in my books, but I'm not that interested in characters I can't redeem. That's why, in *Dream a Little Dream*—you know, the creepy televangelist, he's been done a million times. I was more interested in Rachel, his widow, who is basically a healer, yet who totally denies it! Completely denies it, even at the end of the book.

**ES:** *In the Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women anthology there's an essay by Laura Kinsale which famously says, "The hero carries the book." This was a huge shot across the bow of academic criticism, which had up until then, largely assumed the idea that female readers were reading to identify with the heroine and that the hero needed to be an enigma and so on and so forth. So I wanted to ask you about heroes. Your latest book is called Heroes Are My Weakness. What kinds of heroes do you most like to write? Are there certain kinds of heroes that you've never tried writing but like to read? Do you have a favorite romance hero either from your own books or from the wide world of romance?*

**SEP:** I'm not sure I completely agree Laura on that. I don't think you can say, "The hero has to carry the book." Sometimes the heroine has to carry the book. It really depends, sometimes even on the scene you're writing. In *Call Me Irresistible*—this is the book with Teddy Beaudine where Lucy has run away from the wedding at the beginning of chapter two and it's Meg and Ted's book. I got a lot of flak from readers because I don't go into Ted's viewpoint until about three hundred pages into the book. And I wanted to say, "Duh!" The minute you go into his head, the book is over. The book is over. Do you remember in the early days of romance you didn't go in at all? What was that? In the 70s, 80s? It was all in the heroine's viewpoint. You *never* went into the hero's viewpoint. And making those decisions about point of view on heroes is really tough. If you go into his head at the wrong time, you suck all the tension out of the book. But the readers have gotten so used to having that hero's point of view presented early some of them had a hard time with the fact that I didn't do it.

In terms of hero types, I'm always going to write an alpha hero just because that's the only thing I know how to do. In my books the internal conflict between the hero and

heroine is driving the story. It's not going to be the serial killer. It's not going to be so many of the other elements that you have in romantic suspense, so I pretty much have to use the alpha hero unless I want to make my heroine crazy, which I don't want to do

**ES:** *Although in Natural Born Charmer, to me at least, the great love story there is Dean and his mother April finally reconciling. That turn is crucial to his character development, but also to hers, and to the love story between her and Jack Patriot.*

**SEP:** When you can do a secondary plot with older characters—readers love that. And they'll frequently say, "Why didn't you use the older characters for your main story?" Well, the courtship story and the discovery of love is kind of my core story—it would be hard for me to do that. And I never get the feeling that my secondary love story is quite strong enough to carry the whole book. But I have two grown sons, so Dean and April's story was just catnip to me. I love that story so much. And Jack Patriot, who's modeled after Bruce Springsteen...though I get email all the time with all these different rockers saying—

**ES:** *Throw a little Keith Richards in there and a little Bob Dylan in there too.*

**SEP:** Yeah, well, maybe. It was Bruce.

**ES:** *But it's a Telecaster Custom Jack plays—*

**SEP:** My son picks out my instruments. You know, he was probably reading *Life* [by Keith Richards] at the time. I was reading it too. Uh, did I answer the question? I forget what it was. Heroes.

**ES:** *Heroes. Any favorite hero by someone else?*

**SEP:** I love the hero in Laura Kinsale's *Flowers from the Storm*. He does drive the book. But, you know, these alpha heroes are just kind of one big blur in my head—I love them all.

**ES:** *One of the things I do when I teach your book, when I teach any romance novel, really, is send my students over to the author's website, and to look at Twitter feeds and Tumblrs and anything that might give the students a sense of how the author's presenting herself. Could you say something about how being on the web, how the social media side of being an author changes things? Also, on your website you have a few things that are right there on the splash page—when readers land—you know, one of them is right under your name, it says, "Life's too short to read depressing books."*

**SEP:** [in sync with ES] "Life's too short to read depressing books."

**ES:** *And then you have a little letter to the reader that says, you know, "I know some things about you—you look for a sense of recognition and you want a tear." So say a little if you will about what happened as you made your way into having to have a web presence, having to*

*interact with readers there. How has it changed things for you? How has it changed things for other writers?*

**SEP:** It's changed everything.

Over the course of my career, I've lived through the time when the publishers controlled everything in terms of publicity and promotion. Now we're pretty much expected to do that. Truly, half of my work time is business, social media, and half is actually writing. Guess which is more fun?

Authors have to think about how to use social media well. When I first started to use Facebook, I noticed that writers were using it as a promotion device 100%, and I wanted to make it much more personal. So we've discussed my difficulties wearing a bra long-term, and Mr. Bill is now a familiar character to everybody. (He's not on Facebook so he doesn't know half the stuff I put on there!) I feel a personal connection with the readers, and Facebook nurtures that connection.

At the same time, I need those email addresses, because the publisher is not going to be doing all that. So I'm running contests, I've started this "member's lounge": It's all a huge, huge, huge time sink. We know our readers better now, one-to-one, and we have made personal friends with them through these long-term contacts, like my old website message board and now the Facebook page. Avon is amazing with their social media technology now, but when they first started, this might have been ten years ago, they had a meeting at the RWA conference for all of their authors. They started the meeting by telling us how to use the Internet. We laughed them out of the room! They were very good-natured about it, but we laughed them out the room. It's like, *seriously dude?* We have been doing this a lot longer than you have. They have now made leaps and bounds over us in terms of the way they collect data and deal with it, and they've helped us with all of that. But yes, it's just a whole new ballgame.

Keep in mind, within the course of one year all of my fan mail stopped. It all went to email. It happened so quickly that I complained to my editor. I said, "Something's going on in your mailroom. I'm not getting any of my fan mail." I didn't understand. It happened that fast. And I'm just so grateful for every reader I have. I've had a career collapse on me, and I know how precious every reader is, so I want them to know that. I talk about the sense of recognition in my splash-page letter, and that is the emotional recognition they get with the books.

Academics are not seeing our reader email—so I'm going to try to fill that hole without just drowning you in it and let you see this emotional connection the readers have with the books. And that is what I'm referring to when I talk about the sense of recognition.

**ES:** *"Life's too short to read depressing books." Say more.*

**SEP:** You know, that's certainly an overstatement—and oh my gosh, some people love Nicholas Sparks. They love, you know, that good cry. But in some literary novels, every drop of juice has been sucked right out so, God forbid, the writer doesn't use the dreaded "purple prose." Well, there's a reason for that purple prose. It's a coded language. It produces an emotional response on the part of the reader. If you haven't read the essay in *Dangerous Men* that Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz did—they take a back-cover copy,

rewrite it plainly, and then present it in purple prose, and you just see right there where the emotion is coming from. In so much of literary fiction, you have to enter the book intellectually, as opposed to the romance novel where you're entering the book emotionally.

**ES:** *Speaking of which, time for a little emotional or intellectual interaction! Questions from the PCA house?*

**Audience Question:** *I'm from Mississippi, and I've read many, many books set in the south that are very cringe-worthy, but your Ain't She Sweet isn't, at all.*

**SEP:** *Ain't She Sweet* is an interesting book, because you don't think you can redeem this heroine. I mean, she's accused the hero of rape—she's done all these horrible things. That's my very favorite kind of book, because you can really do the redemption arc.

**Audience Question:** *I had a question about the changing relationship with readers. My instinct is just to embrace this as a completely positive thing, but I was wondering: are there ways in which being responsive to the readers might make it feel harder to branch out and do something new or something you suspect they might not like?*

**SEP:** Yes. It messes with your head like crazy. So do Amazon reviews. Jayne tells me to stay off Amazon. And, you know, every once in a while I disobey and almost get sick. Writers never remember positive reviews, and any book you write is going to hit somebody's hot button. So I have to consciously get that out of my head.

My favorite reader story was this: I'd written *Heaven, Texas*, and I loved it. Bobby Tom Denton was one of the easiest heroes I've ever had to write. I felt like he was channeled. After that I went on to write *Kiss an Angel*, and I decided, you know, "My career's over. This book's going to kill my career," which would become a repeating theme in my head. So *Kiss an Angel* comes out and all I can think about is, you know, "It's not as good as *Heaven, Texas*—it's not as good as *Heaven, Texas*." I go to my first signing and this reader comes up to me and she says, "Oh, I just loved *Kiss an Angel*." She says, "I didn't love that *Heaven, Texas* book, but this one I love." And I went, "Ohhh. Thank you." And that's where I learned the most important lesson of my career. No matter what book I write it's going to be someone's favorite and someone's least favorite. I always have to remember this, stay off Amazon, and write the book I'm going to write.

Those reviews can wear you down after a while. It's not coming into my reader email. I get hardly any negative email. But some of the romance websites are nasty—they're just nasty. And I'm not talking about myself—some of them aren't even reviewing me. I know the blood, sweat, and tears that have gone into a book, and to watch these lame-ass critics dismiss a book and dismiss a human being's work... I would be a terrible reviewer because that kind of negativity makes me nuts. I want to send out into the world words that make people better, that make them grow, that nourish people. Ugly reviews don't do it.

**Audience Question:** *I have a question about volume. How much fan email do you get? Can you quantify it all? Like in an average day, there would be—*

**SEP:** It depends on how close I am to having a book come out, if a newsletter is going out, etc. Ordinarily there's going to be one or two every day. But when a book comes out or a newsletter goes out, there could be ten or twelve, something like that, every day. It's a lot of volume. I try to type a personal message in addition to a form response, but it does take away from the writing.

**Audience Question:** *Do you do that personally?*

**SEP:** I have an assistant who helps.

**Audience Question:** *I have a question about the publishing side. Has there been any particular issue or character arc that an editor or publisher has been cautious about your doing, or about what it's going to do in term of your career or your readers?*

**SEP:** I have never sold a book on proposal. I've never written a proposal, so for example, when I was going to write the golf book, I didn't have to say, "I'm going to write a book about golf." Instead, they got the beginning of the book, a hundred some pages, so they could see what I was going to do. After that, they pretty much let me have free rein. I've heard horror stories from some of my friends who write series romance. Some of them have had great relationships with editors, but with others, it's been: "You can't do this, you can't do that." If I had said ahead of time that I was going to write about football, golf, a rock star, an actor, I would have been discouraged from doing it. I've been fortunate not to have to deal with that.

**Audience Question:** *Your new book has a combat vet in it, and I know that since the Iraq war there have been a lot of combat vet heroes in popular reading. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little about writing a combat vet.*

**SEP:** There's not a lot of reference to it in the book. There are a couple of sentences here and there, and you've got the scene with the shrink at the end who's also a combat vet. I've done PTSD in my novels—I did that in *Glitter Baby* early on, and everybody's doing it now. But I needed the wounded hero. I tried every other way I could think of to approach his character, but the traumatized vet really did *work*. And I like the idea of the psychiatrist who could specifically identify with wounded vets because I have read about the difficulty of these guys coming back with PTSD and working with a shrink who has never been in combat. That was interesting to me.

**Audience Question:** *Every time I read—I can't remember the title—but Molly and Kevin—*

**SEP:** Yes, *This Heart of Mine*.

**Audience Question:** *Every time I read about Molly's stories about the bunnies—I keep thinking, "You should turn these into children's stories."*

**SEP:** I've gotten so many requests! Molly is a children's book author with the Daphne the Bunny series. Molly is really Daphne, and Kevin, the hero, is Benny the Badger. I thought about writing an accompanying children's book, but my editor wasn't enthusiastic because that's a whole different publishing animal. Children's books are tough! Everybody says, "Oh, I always wanted to write a children's book." But it's a lot harder than people think. Still, *This Heart of Mine* should have had a companion children's book, for sure.

**SFL:** *From the publishing point of view, now, we would look at that and say, "Absolutely. Go right ahead. It would be perfect."*

**SEP:** A children's book division is completely separate from a publishing company's adult division. I don't know if you know much about children's book publishing, but it is a bunny-eat-bunny world. It takes forever to get things through, and coordination would have been very difficult. Plus, I'd have had to write the darned thing, and I'm not sure I could have.

**Audience Question:** *Have any of your books been auctioned for a film or a television show?*

**SEP:** There have been numerous requests. Early on I would get so excited about that. But as I've watched what's happened to authors who've had their book turned into film—in most cases it's brought them nothing but grief. Readers want a film of the book that's in their head, but they're such different media. So now I just say, "No, no, no, no." The only one I've agreed to sell is when Bollywood bought *This Heart of Mine*. When Bollywood called and said, "We'd like to buy *This Heart of Mine*," it was a reputable studio, they were going to pay decent money, and I thought, "This is perfect, because it's Bollywood. Nobody is going to expect the exact book." I don't know exactly what the timing is, but they did give me production money.

**Audience Question:** *I taught First Lady this year—*

**SEP:** Did you?

**Audience Question:** *They adored it. They really adored it. They were surprised to get sucked into what struck them as too much of a "family" romance. The thing they're falling in love with in the book is the family that's going to be created. That's the happy ending they're hoping for—that beautiful family.*

**SEP:** The end—you noticed how I tried to straddle political parties in there—

**Audience Question:** *That did come up in discussion.*

**SEP:** That was deliberate. We're so fragmented politically—no matter what side I chose, it was going to be a mess, so I took the coward's way out and I'm happy I did.

**SFL:** *Suzanne Brockman sometimes has an unhappy love story in her books, or an arc that goes through six or seven books so that the characters have a series of unhappy encounters and finally get their HEA six books later, and she says that the tragedy helps to highlight the beauty of the other story. All of your secondary romances end happily, and they mirror and foil the primary relationship—*

**SEP:** I always say, “If one love story is good, two’s better.” Why not? Plus, I get to write about a non-traditional couple. An older couple. In *Dream a Little Dream*, I’ve got Ethan, the minister and his little clerk, his assistant. There wasn’t enough conflict to carry that through their own book, but I loved writing that story.

**SFL:** *Have you thought of doing a different type of non-traditional couple? Same-sex couple?*

**SEP:** Um, same-sex couple? Well, yeah. *The Great Escape*. But that’s kind of a spoiler alert. Spoiler alert!

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[1] See, for example, the All About Romance reader poll from 2013, in which she has eight novels listed (<http://www.likesbooks.com/top1002013results.html>), or the 2015 National Public Radio list, drawn from readers’ nominations and curated by romance bloggers and authors, which includes her seven Chicago Stars football romances—each a standalone volume—among its “swoon-worthy” romance recommendations (<http://www.npr.org/2015/07/29/426731847/happy-ever-after-100-swoon-worthy-romances>).

[2] See Tania Modleski, “My Life as a Romance Writer,” originally published in *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 4, no. 9 (1998); reprinted in *Old Wives’ Tales and Other Women’s Stories* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 71.

[3] On investigation, the sentence turns out to be adapted from Seton’s *Avalon* (1965): “And then he raped her brutally.” Anya Seton, *Avalon* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1965; 1993), 128.

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