



# Books are Mirrors: Romance Novels & Human Connection in Quarantine



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**What has your leisure reading looked like during quarantine? Have books helped you through the pandemic?**

I used to read books as a recharge from the onslaught of daily interactions—or rather, I read them when I was alone, when I had space and time to sink wholly into a new world. And one of the immediate “perks” of suddenly living alone with “two weeks” off of work and school last March was that I could actually tackle some of my TBR list. Of course, we snapped quickly into digital workspaces, but the lack of commutes and facetime with other people did actually make it easier for me to transition from work time to reading time. That is, until the semester ended.

Suddenly, I had no human connection outside of a weekly check-in with my bosses, no interaction to counteract with reading. It was just me and my cat crashing in my sister’s empty apartment in an unfamiliar neighborhood. You can see the exact moment the isolation shock hit me on Goodreads, because I then read 14 romance novels in a row, read two non-romances (of which I was not a fan), and then immediately went back to romance novels. Between May 18th and July 9th, I read *36 romance novels* (and 5 non-romances). There was a day in early June, a couple days after my cat passed away, where I read four in one day.

It felt like I needed romance novels like I needed air. At the time, I couldn’t figure out why I was reading them, especially since I’d only ever read a handful of contemporary rom coms before. I couldn’t figure out why I turned to them when I lost my cat, or why I ducked out early from a virtual birthday party *on my own birthday* just to read them deep into the night. They were just fun and funny and pulled me out of my own head, and that was a good enough reason for me.

Now that I’ve had some distance from last May (but still incorporate romances into my reading time quite frequently), it feels surprisingly obvious.

**Romance novels are a vehicle for remembering connections, for creating verisimilitudes of human interaction for your heart—and when you are forced to isolate, when your social life is gone,**

**romance novels are a playground for your *brain*. Through romance novels, of any kind, you are experiencing and remembering what it means to connect with people on a deeper level, what it's like to have people physically around you who support you and know you, who can comfort you in person. Romance novels kept me sane, and kept me company when there was none to be (safely) had. I was reading not to relax after constant connection—I was reading *for* the connection.**

I came out of my romance binge because I moved and school started and I began reconnecting with familiar and friendly faces, but I stayed out of it because they had helped me realize what I was at risk of losing. Texting with my friends about “doing okay all things considered” in endless circles made keeping up connections feel like a chore, and while I didn't draw direct inspiration from events in these novels, they were a useful reminder that I could control this new kind of human connection.

Plots where characters feel reluctant to talk about why they feel a certain way, but learn what can be gained by having deeper conversations? I stopped telling my friends that I missed them, and started telling them what about them, and seeing them, I missed. Plots where the characters get up to shenanigans and the writing is ab-achingly funny? I remembered how much I loved giving friends little things that reminded me of them, and I started sending them white elephant gag gifts at random. Plots where everything hinges on a secret from the past? I impose a

gag rule on daily life talk during virtual hang-outs and then we reminisce about how uncool we were when we all first met.

It was such a delight to be reminded of the fun that comes with human connection and interaction, beyond cursory virtual check-ins that too often feel lumped in with the virtual meetings of a work day, even though I personally didn't immediately recognize romance novels' influence or parallels as I worked on what having relationships during a pandemic meant to me. Romance novels are built on tropes, but the good ones know how to bend them so that they are still exciting and new! That is also what real human connection is built on, and romance novels can provide a pseudo-interaction experience that reminds us, among so many things, that connection is what we make of it.

## **I can't end a piece about romance novels without a reading list! Here are some of my personal favorites that I've read in quarantine:**

*A Rogue By Any Other Name* by Sarah MacLean (Sarah MacLean is my historical romance maven! All her historical romances are incredible and I've read them all—yep, all 13—during quarantine.)

*Get A Life, Chloe Brown* by Talia Hibbert (Talia Hibbert is easily one of the funniest—and most compassionate—contemporary rom com writers around and I have inhaled her books!)

*You Deserve Each Other* by Sarah Hogle

*You Had Me at Hola* by Alexis Daria

*The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* by Olivia Waite

*Beach Read* by Emily Henry

*Breaking Character* by Lee Winter

*A Princess in Theory* by Alyssa Cole

For more recommendations (especially since the above reflect personal tastes and are definitely not a genre scope!), check out [these amazing lists](#) on Goodreads.

Brooklyn, NY · Updated Mon, March 8



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