

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Love Beyond Conventions: Contemporary Romance and the Representation of Non- Normative Bodies

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza cómo los cánones tradicionales de belleza están siendo redefinidos gracias a las novelas de romance contemporáneo y su representación de protagonistas con cuerpos no normativos. Estas historias exploran temas como la positividad corporal, la autoaceptación y el crecimiento personal, a la vez que apuestan por una representación más variada e inclusiva. No fue hasta la pandemia del COVID-19 que este tipo de novelas comenzó a ganar una mayor visibilidad, en gran parte debido al auge de redes sociales como TikTok. La publicación de contenido literario en estas plataformas ha permitido que los lectores descubran obras más variadas, con personajes y tramas que se ajustan mejor a sus intereses y necesidades. En este contexto, se van a analizar dos novelas que presentan protagonistas con cuerpos de talla grande: *Set on You*, de Amy Lea, y *The Fastest Way to Fall*, de Denise Williams. Estas novelas fomentan la empatía y cuestionan las ideas sociales que existen acerca del deseo y el valor personal, mientras que también les dan visibilidad a identidades tradicionalmente excluidas. Por medio de este análisis se muestra cómo está cambiando el género romántico, un género que ahora abarca un mayor número de voces y refleja la realidad de muchos lectores.

Palabras clave: Romance contemporáneo, *Set on You*, *The Fastest Way to Fall*, positividad corporal, inclusión, representación, TikTok, COVID-19, cuerpos no normativos, autoaceptación

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how traditional beauty standards are being redefined through contemporary romance novels and their representation of protagonists with non-normative bodies. These stories explore themes such as body positivity, self-acceptance, and personal worth, while also advocating for a more varied and inclusive representation. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that this type of novel began to gain greater visibility, largely due to the rise of social media platforms like TikTok. The publication of literary content on these platforms has allowed readers to discover more diverse works, featuring characters and plots that better align with their interests and needs. In this context, two novels that feature plus-size protagonists will be analysed: *Set on You* by Amy Lea and *The Fastest Way to Fall* by Denise Williams. These novels foster empathy and question social ideas surrounding desire and self-worth, while also giving visibility to traditionally excluded identities. Through this analysis, the study shows how the romance genre is evolving to include a greater number of voices and better reflect the reality of many readers.

Keywords: Contemporary romance, *Set on You*, *The Fastest Way to Fall*, body positivity, inclusion, representation, TikTok, COVID-19, non-normative bodies, self-acceptance

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, romance literature has moved away from traditional narratives that often reinforce narrow representations of beauty and identity. In the current literary landscape, these narratives are characterized by more inclusive and diverse portrayals. The broader representation of protagonists aligns with the rise of the Contemporary Romance subgenre, which is being used to challenge a culture that seems to favour perfect bodies and to celebrate a wide range of bodies and experiences. This evolution reflects a societal shift towards diversity and inclusion while at the same time addresses an audience that is increasingly demanding more authentic and varied representations, particularly in media consumed by younger audiences.

These new alternative narratives became especially popular due to the COVID-19 pandemic since social media platforms, especially TikTok and its literary community BookTok, were used to popularize all kind of romantic novels. However, it was Contemporary Romance, with the portrayal of protagonists with non-normative bodies and disabilities, the one which had the greatest impact. Through these digital spaces, readers can discover and share books in which they feel represented, helping to promote greater diversity within the genre.

This dissertation aims to analyse how Contemporary Romance novels challenge societal assumptions about love by focusing on characters with curvy bodies, who are depicted as individuals worthy of loving and being loved. To explore this, I have selected two novels that have gained significant attention on social media: *Set on You* (2022) by Amy Lea and *The Fastest Way to Fall* (2021) by Denise Williams. Both works depict curvy characters at different stages of body acceptance and highlight the emotional and social challenges plus-size people face to find love due to a culture that often marginalizes them. Additionally, in neither of the novels is it suggested that the protagonists need to

change their bodies to find love. Instead, they encourage readers to embrace their bodies as they are, while introducing topics such as self-acceptance and body positivity.

These two novels fall under what is known as #OwnVoices narratives, a hashtag coined in 2015 by Corinne Duyvis which refers to stories where authors share, either directly or closely, the experiences they depict in their stories (Steffens 1). Therefore, there is a more authentic representation of marginalized identities, allowing for more nuanced, respectful, and empowering portrayals of non-normative characters. Through the analysis of these works, I seek to demonstrate how the romance genre is redefining beauty standards and creating space for diverse, inclusive romantic narratives. This kind of literature not only raises awareness among readers of the challenges faced by those who do not conform to stereotypes but also serves to represent those who have traditionally been left out of mainstream narratives.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE ROMANCE GENRE

Romance has long played an important role in literature, as it reflects one of humanity's most universal and cherished desires: love. Its origins can be tracked back to ancient times, since there is evidence that suggests it began "at least as early as the Greeks" (Regis 20). With a history spanning centuries, romance has evolved while captivating readers across different eras. As Jean Radford notes, the broader concept of romance encompasses a wide range of literary traditions, including "Greek 'romances', medieval romance, Gothic bourgeois romances of the 1840s, late nineteenth century women's romances, and mass-produced romance fiction now" (8).

This genre is so widely known that almost everyone could identify key details that align with its basic conventions. Romance is primarily defined by its focus on romantic relationships, centring the narrative on the development of a romantic bond between the protagonists, who often have to face various obstacles that they must overcome before reaching an emotionally satisfying resolution. According to Ramsdell, a novel must meet several criteria to be considered a proper romance: the central plot must revolve around the love story between the main characters; the narrative should engage the reader's emotions; and it must include a "satisfactory ending" (4).

Romance is the most popular literary genre globally, surpassing others like fantasy, classics, poetry, and adventure in sales and readership ("What People Read"). According to Curcic, romance novels generated over \$1.44 billion in revenue as of May 2023 and its sales reached over 39 million printed units in the U.S., reflecting a 52% growth compared to the previous year. However, despite its commercial success and cultural impact, the romance genre has traditionally been dismissed by literary critics. This disregard originates from long-standing gender biases that have deeply shaped the literary canon. Throughout history, women have struggled to gain recognition in the

literary world. With limited educational and professional opportunities and societal pressure to remain in the domestic sphere, many were forced to write under pseudonyms to make sure their work was taken seriously by both readers and fellow writers. As a result, and as Romeril explains, literary canons have come to be overwhelmingly dominated by white men, whose works have historically been regarded as more prestigious (13). It is not unexpected, then, that the perception of romance fiction has been influenced by patriarchal values and, hence, dismissed simply because it is primarily written by and for women. Although the genre has been considered a lesser one due to critics' "pervasive scorn for all things feminine" (Modlesky 13), the widespread popularity of romance fiction among women "suggests that [these narratives] speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives" (Modlesky 14).

In recent decades, romance novels have expanded the boundaries of the genre by openly exploring themes such as sexuality and female desire—topics that have historically been marginalised or censored. However, this evolution, has also fuelled further criticism and societal disdain for the genre. The frequent engagement of contemporary romance novels with themes of sexuality has led many to mistakenly classify the genre as pornographic. This perception is deeply rooted in the patriarchal structures still present in society, where female sexual desire continues to be stigmatized. As Romeril notes, literary critics such as Radway believe that "romance has been bashed and ignored because of the assumption that all women's literature is pornographic" (16). While it is true that there is a subgenre within romance—erotic romance—in which sexual content plays a central role, the depiction of female desire should neither be treated as taboo nor dismissed as lacking literary value. Sexual desire is a natural and inherent aspect of the human experience, and its portrayal in fiction contributes to more honest and empowering narratives for women. As Choyke points out, "[r]omance novels are

dangerous [...] to the patriarchy because they show women [that] they can be active participants in their emotional and sexual well-being, and that female sexuality is not simply a passive response to men's sexual advancements and desires" (121). By centring women's desires and granting them narrative power, romance novels challenge traditional gender norms and disrupt dominant cultural scripts that portray female sexuality as passive or secondary. In this context, as McCann and Roach argue, labelling all romance novels as pornographic is a strategy aimed to shame women (412) since such classification makes many women feel embarrassed about their reading preferences and fearful of external judgment.

Romance novels have also embraced a variety of cultural elements that underscore the genre's great capacity for adaptation and evolution. In particular, Contemporary Romance—a subgenre of romantic fiction set in present day, typically reflecting modern social norms, values and issues (Taylor)—has begun to include more diverse characters in a more visible and deliberate way. While traditional romance narratives are largely centred around white, heterosexual, able-bodied protagonists, contemporary works portray characters with a much wider range of identities and experiences—not only in terms of race, sexual orientation, and gender identity, but also in relation to non-normative bodies. This thematic and representational expansion reflects a shift in readers' interests and a growing demand for more inclusive and realistic stories that better capture the complexity of human experiences today, while also reclaiming space for marginalized voices in literature. Contemporary Romance novels, serve as crucial platforms for exploring and challenging cultural notions of identity, agency, and love. By focusing on characters who defy societal norms, the genre provides validation and representation. As Amy Lea states, "[w]hen you don't regularly see yourself represented in the media you consume, you begin to think you're not worthy of being a main character in your own

life” (in Inah). Therefore, these narratives empower readers who have long been excluded from mainstream romantic fantasises by allowing them to finally see themselves reflected.

3. THE BOOKTOK PHENOMENON

In recent years, social media has become a major force in shaping reading habits and literary trends, in particular through the rise of *BookTok*, a space that has played a key role in the popularity of Contemporary Romance.

BookTok refers to a subcommunity within TikTok where users share book recommendations, reviews, emotional reactions, and aesthetic videos that reflect their reading experiences. This digital space has become a powerful cultural hub, especially among young readers, where literature is discussed in a dynamic, informal, and visual way. Its rise is closely tied to shifts in digital habits during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the global spread of the virus, governments were forced to implement drastic measures, such as extended quarantines, to slow down contagion and prevent a healthcare collapse. This enforced isolation led to heightened feelings of boredom and loneliness, which encouraged greater social interaction through digital platforms. As Feldkamp notes, “people started communicating and interacting online in order to stay in touch with their social connections” (74). In this context, social media became essential tools for maintaining emotional bonds, and TikTok stood out, becoming “the second most downloaded Android app behind WhatsApp and the most downloaded iOS app in March 2020” (74). Even though TikTok had been growing steadily before the pandemic, the arrival of COVID-19 greatly boosted its popularity, helping the app reach a wider range of audiences and regions (74).

This increase in digital activity also facilitated a shift in reading practices. In times of uncertainty and isolation, many readers turned to fiction—and particularly to romance—for comfort and escapism since fiction offers readers the opportunity to experience worlds and perspectives different than their own (Balling 45), something

which became especially appealing during the pandemic. As Merga points out, COVID-19 led to a rise in both reading frequency and volume (5), a phenomenon clearly reflected on the TikTok platform, where “on the 21st august 2020 the hashtag #booktok had achieved 743.9 million views” (2). In this sense, real-time interactions with recommendations, opinions, and other users’ reactions have turned reading into a communal activity, where emotions and connections are publicly shared. According to user Phoebe 2, BookTok is “a way of sharing about yourself via books” (in Balling and Martens 8). Through short videos, passionate reviews, and discussions about characters and plots, BookTok has created a new way of consuming literature that goes beyond mere reading, fostering a dynamic space for expression and social interaction.

While digital media are often seen as detrimental to reading, Merga notes that “social networking around book sites are being used for readers’ advisory purposes to secure recommendations” (2), showing that platforms like TikTok can, in fact, support and promote reading. Rather than replacing traditional forms of literary interaction, BookTok reinvents them for the digital age. It functions much like a virtual book club; however, rather than dedicating time to just one book at a time, it “may focus on a select corpus of books to strengthen bonds of commonality between members” (Merga 5). In this way, BookTok becomes a space where reading is not only preserved but reimagined as participatory, social practice that encourages interaction, emotional investment, and a collective sense of belonging.

A central feature of TikTok’s success in promoting literature is its highly personalized algorithm. As Hutchinson explains, the app uses artificial intelligence to recommend content based on a user’s watch history, repeated views, likes, comments, shares, and how they interact with posts, minimizing the effort required to discover new

content, and therefore, allowing users to effortlessly come across recommendations that align with their interests (Feldkamp 79).

In this environment, the rise of the so-called *bookfluencers*—influencers dedicated to sharing book-related content—has become essential to the platform’s impact. These creators are perceived as authentic and trustworthy, forming affective relationships with their audiences (Balling and Martens 2). Consequently, it is not a surprise to find out that a significant proportion of young adults—72% of those aged 18 to 29—often rely on suggestions from influencers and content creators when making purchases, with 41% admitting to having bought something after encountering it on social media (Faverio and Anderson).

This recommendation culture has effectively transformed the book market. Previously, books’ visibility depended heavily on traditional marketing strategies in brick-and-mortar bookstores, but the digital revolution has enabled “entirely new channels of communication between creators and consumers” (Thompson 15), profoundly changing the way in which books are promoted. Today, authors are no longer solely dependent on publishing houses to publicize their work; instead, they are increasingly expected to promote their books online (Balling and Martens 5). At the same time, readers themselves have assumed an active role in the marketing process, functioning as peer-to-peer promoters (Balling and Martens 5) whose reviews, reactions, and recommendations often have greater influence than official campaigns.

The impact of BookTok has been so significant that physical bookstores have even started placing “BookTok Recommends” labels to attract young audiences searching for the viral books they have seen on the platform. As Balling and Martens affirm, “TikTok is a powerful tool for promoting, marketing, and selling books, but also for engaging

young readers, many of whom have become readers because of the BookTok community” (8). As a result, a book’s success no longer depends solely on the backing of a publishing house, but also on its ability to generate conversation and interest within virtual reading communities like BookTok.

Additionally, BookTok has helped reduce the stigma surrounding romance by fostering a safe and welcoming environment—particularly for women and queer readers—where the genre can be celebrated openly and passionately. This positive atmosphere is largely due to the platform’s ability to connect individuals with shared interests since BookTok provides a social environment for like-minded readers to connect, discuss, and share their experiences with books (Boffone and Jerasa 10). Surrounded by others who engage with and appreciate the same kinds of stories, readers feel encouraged to express their love for romance without fear of judgment.

Moreover, the BookTok phenomenon has been crucial in democratizing and diversifying access to romance books that explore non-normative themes, such as protagonists with curvy bodies, physical disabilities, neurodivergence, or identities within the LGBTQ+ collective. Hence, it has allowed romance literature to evolve, offering a more inclusive portrayal of human experiences that aligns with contemporary values of acceptance, diversity and inclusivity. As Jerasa and Boffone note, BookTok “makes space for identities that are underrepresented in the traditional canon and allows for community with books not considered ‘appropriate’ for academic spaces or those spaces where curriculum is created according to rigid testing ‘standards’” (222). In this way, TikTok has not only amplified the reach of romance genre and the way people discover its books but has also contributed to its transformation into a more inclusive and socially engaged genre that speaks directly to the concerns and desires of today’s readers.

4. ANALYSING *SET ON YOU* AND *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL*

In contemporary society, beauty standards are deeply ingrained cultural constructs that shape how individuals perceive themselves and others. These ideals are primarily dictated by the media—“television, catalogues, clothes advertisements, and even toys” (Brownell 2)—and increasingly, by social media platforms that continuously expose users to idealized images. According to Raman, women have long been the primary targets of these demands of attractiveness (52); however, in recent years, men have also faced growing pressure, further highlighting how modern society prioritizes physical appearance over other aspects of personal identity. As Gabe et al. note, “media’s consistent depiction of a thin ideal leads women to see this ideal as normative, expected, and central to attractiveness” (460). Nevertheless, as obesity rates continue to increase, it becomes even more harmful to society when influential media suggest that certain physical traits are indicative of a person’s moral inferiority (Norton 9).

In fact, nowadays, physical appearance plays a central role in determining both personal and social worth, since it functions as “a primary source of information that others use to guide social interactions” (Sarwer and Crerand 103). As a result, individuals who deviate from the norm often face stereotypes and prejudices (Raman 52). Curvy women, in particular, encounter heightened discrimination; for instance, in the United States, they are perceived as less competent in professional environments (Raman 59). This widespread pressure to embody a specific physical appearance contributes to what is commonly referred to as the “culture of the perfect body”, in which the ideal physique is associated with “success, self-control, and acceptance” (Brownell & Kelly 1).

Within this context, Amy Lea’s *Set on You* (2022) and Denise Williams’ *The Fastest Way to Fall* (2021) emerge as significant interventions in the subgenre of the Contemporary Romance. These novels stand out not only for their engaging love stories

but for the way they centre curvy, non-normative female protagonists who challenge mainstream beauty standards. As Williams questions in her author's note, "When we are inundated with messages about an obesity epidemic alongside those about body positivity, when bullying and fat-shaming exist in tandem with celebrity role models embracing their bodies, why write about a fat character doing anything but living their best life with no mind to their size?". This sentiment captures the essence of both novels, which refuses to portray plus-size women as anything less than confident, worthy of love, and living fulfilling lives, independent of society's conventional beauty ideals.

However, these kinds of narratives and their focus on fat characters are often met with controversy, with many people arguing that portraying plus-size protagonists in a positive light "can potentially undermine the recognition of being overweight and its health consequences" (Muttarak 1125). Content creators like @mara__jimenez, @teresalopezcerdan, @andreacomptonn, and @aliciamccarvell—who advocate for body acceptance and challenge traditional beauty standards in their discourses—frequently face criticism and accusations of promoting an unhealthy lifestyle.

Nonetheless, *Set on You* and *The Fastest Way to Fall* challenge these assumptions by portraying curvy characters leading clearly healthy lifestyles. Fat people are often referred to as "lazy", "indulgent" or "lacking control" (Brownell 4), yet these novels dismantle such stereotypes while presenting a narrative where self-acceptance and an active, balanced life coexist. In both works, the protagonists actively engage in physical activity, which they enjoy (or end up enjoying), further highlighting that people can be healthy and still have a non-normative body.

4.1. The Importance of Curvy Representation in the Fitness Industry

In Amy Lea's *Set on You*, Crystal is a personal trainer and fitness influencer who actively uses her social media platform to promote body positivity and self-love. In the Author's note that opens the novel, Lea explains that "Crystal is an advocate of working out and lifting weights as one of *many* means to living a healthy and balanced lifestyle and does not count calories or keep track of her weight" (VIII). Within the fitness world and on social media, the norm has long been the worship of a "toned and muscular look" (Norton 7). Most fitness influencers conform to this stereotype, presenting themselves as the ultimate goal and suggesting that their routines will help followers to achieve similarly sculpted physiques. However, "many of these women will never look like the programs creator and may feel discouraged" (Norton 6). This is because, as Norton further observes, social media often "portrays 'idealized' images of users' peers" (11), reinforcing unrealistic expectations and contributing to body dissatisfaction.

Crystal breaks this mould. She is the antithesis of the stereotypical fitness influencer: a curvy, confident trainer who defies conventional standards of what a "fit" body looks like. Her presence challenges the toxic norms of fitness culture and expands the scope of representation in the exercise industry. Instead of selling an unattainable ideal, Crystal models a version of health that is inclusive, empowering, and relatable. Her followers are not pressured to shrink their bodies into a predefined ideal; rather, they are encouraged to embrace their bodies as they are, to move in ways that feel good, and to build self-esteem from within since Crystal is an avid defender of "prioritiz[ing] the goal of confidence. Not calorie deficits, and definitely *not* the numbers on the scale" (Lea 17). Lea's depiction of Crystal as a curvy trainer and influencer offers a much-needed counter narrative: fitness is not about having a certain appearance but about feeling good in your own body. As Crystal explains, her mission is to "focus on exclusively de-stigmatizing

and demystifying the gym for people who may not have felt they belonged” (Lea 17), aiming to make fitness more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

On the other hand, in *The Fastest Way to Fall*, Britta offers a different yet equally valuable representation within the discourse of wellness and self-acceptance. As an editorial assistant at a lifestyle website, Britta dreams of becoming a writer. When she is given the chance to write a blog about a new fitness app called *FitMi*, she decides to try the app herself to share her experience and hopefully get a permanent writing job at the company. Until then, Britta has not been particularly enthusiastic about exercising or eating healthily, but in order to do her job, she must fully engage with the program and follow the guidance of her personal trainer. Unlike Crystal, who is already involved in the world of fitness when the novel starts, Britta is the representation of those who are just beginning their fitness journey. Throughout her narrative, the reader witnesses the realistic challenges of starting a fitness routine, as Britta’s experience is filled with moments of vulnerability, self-doubt, and small triumphs. These ups and downs make her journey highly relatable and realistic, showing that the path to self-improvement is not always smooth but full of both struggles and achievements.

Britta’s story further emphasizes the vital role of representation in fitness spaces. At one point in the narrative, Britta shares a reflection with her blog readers, in which she explains: “I never [loved yoga] until I found the YouTube channel of a woman who looks like me leading yoga instruction. I saw this beautiful, fat Black woman and thought, ‘Maybe me, too’” (Williams 166). This moment illustrated how powerful it can be to see someone with a similar body type confidently leading a workout. For Britta, it was not simply about yoga—it was about finally seeing herself reflected in a space where she had previously felt excluded. As she herself puts it: “Representation is so important in all aspects, but three cheers for fat representation in fitness” (Williams 166). While Crystal

embodies the figure of the curvy trainer paving the way for body-inclusive fitness, Britta represents those who are inspired to enter that world because someone like them is already there.

4.2. The Two Sides of Fitness: Healthy and Toxic Fitness Culture

In today's society, gym culture has become increasingly normalized, driven not only by health awareness but also by the beauty standards promoted through social media, advertising, and popular culture. Fitness is often equated with achieving an idealized physique, overshadowing its original purpose of enhancing overall well-being. As a result, fitness can manifest in two contrasting forms: healthy fitness and toxic fitness. According to *Equip*, a healthcare organization focused on eating disorder recovery, “[h]ealthy or joyful movement is about focusing on how your body *feels* as you move it...It’s about moving in ways you enjoy and that enhance your well-being.” Contrarily, toxic fitness focuses on “how [the body] looks, how many calories you’re burning, or how it will affect your body size and shape” (“Healthy Movement”). *Set on You* clearly aligns with the healthy side of fitness culture. Throughout the novel, exercise is presented as a way to feel good in one’s own body, rather than focusing on the number of the scale. As a personal trainer, Crystal embodies an inclusive and empowering approach to fitness, one that values physical and emotional health over thinness as a measure of worth.

On the other hand, *The Fastest Way to Fall* explores both sides of fitness culture through two contrasting workout apps. FitMi Fitness app represents the positive side of fitness, emphasizing well-being over weight loss. This app pairs users with certified coaches, like Wes, who has “a degree in exercise science and ten years’ experience coaching and teaching fitness and nutrition” (Williams 23). Rather than focusing on numbers, FitMi encourages users to enjoy movement and build confidence. As Wes notes, weight loss “can happen when people exercise more and eat well, but [his] focus will not be the numbers on the scale, but on [Britta] moving more and feeling good” (Williams 27). In contrast, HottrYou app embodies the toxic side of fitness culture, where the primary goal is physical transformation and appearance. Its campaign promotes a

superficial focus on “hotness”, with slogans like “*There’s a hot body in all of us. We’ll help you unlock it*” (Williams 40), reinforcing the notion that self-worth is tied to looks. Unlike FitMi, which “hire[s] people with training, experience, or degrees. In a perfect world, all three” (Williams 40), HottrYou recruits coaches, stating that “no experience [is] necessary” (Williams 40), therefore putting users’ health at risk. These unqualified coaches often suggest unsafe practices such as extreme fasting or crash diets which are treated as “good way[s] to drop a few pounds in a pinch” (Williams 184), and some even push users to “buy some weight loss protein powder he was selling” (Williams 234). This app prioritizes quick, visible results over long-term well-being, reflecting a wider societal problem where the pursuit of thinness is normalized, even at the expense of physical and mental health.

By addressing the issue with fitness culture, both novels highlight the conflict between healthy exercise practices and society’s pressure to meet beauty ideals. However, the central message in both narratives is clear: fitness should be about self-care and connection with one’s body, not about conforming to aesthetic standards.

4.3. The Impact of Body Shaming on Self-Image

Set on You and *The Fastest Way to Fall* emphasize the profound effect that other's comments—whether from strangers or close connections—can have on an individual's self-image and mental health. Both Crystal and Britta are subjected to body shaming—unsolicited and often harmful opinions about their physical appearance—which, “significantly [affect] self-worth and mental health” (Novotný, Jan Sebastian, et al 2). In this sense, from the very first page of *Set on You*, Crystal is portrayed as a strong and confident woman who has come to love and accept her curvy body. As a fitness influencer, she is no stranger to criticism online, but has always managed to brush off the negativity, relying on the overwhelming support from her followers, which makes “all the negative comments worth it” (Lea 128). Nevertheless, when she posts a photo with Scott, her firefighter boyfriend, she becomes the target of a new wave of cruel comments, questioning how someone like him could genuinely be interested in someone like her. Comments such as “He deserves so much better!!! He’s sooooo hot” or “She could eat him for breakfast” (Lea 283) deeply unsettle Crystal, forcing her to reevaluate her worth and damaging the confidence she had worked so hard to build.

With the rise of social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, the way people communicate and share their lives has been transformed. Nevertheless, alongside the potential for positive connection and community-building, these platforms have also created spaces where toxic behaviour, especially cyberbullying, can easily emerge and spread. Cyberbullying is commonly defined as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga 278). Unlike traditional bullying, which typically occurs in specific settings and at specific times, cyberbullying is much more invasive as it can reach victims

at any time and place through phones, emails, and instant messaging (Tokunaga 279). Its digital nature also allows harmful content to spread globally, making it nearly impossible for victims to escape. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by many online platforms, as Kowalski et al. explain, allows individuals to engage in hostile behaviour they might otherwise suppress in face-to-face interactions. This lack of direct contact with their victims prevents perpetrators from witnessing the emotional consequences of their actions, thereby reducing the likelihood of empathy and remorse (1107).

In *Set on You*, Crystal's experience demonstrates how digital spaces can amplify insecurities and destabilize even the most resilient self-image. Although she has built a confident public persona, the relentless scrutiny and cruel remarks from strangers begin to tear down her self-esteem. As she admits to have "reread those words at least fifty times", which have become "a permanent screenshot in [her] head (Lea 283). This illustrates how deeply the comments affected her and how harassment can stay in someone's mind, damaging their confidence and mental health over time. In this sense, one of the most dangerous aspects of online harassment is the speed and scale at which harmful content can spread. What begins as a few negative comments can quickly escalate into widespread public scrutiny. A single post can go viral and subject its target to ridicule in front of millions of people, intensifying the feelings of shame, vulnerability and isolation. In Crystal's case, cyberbullying intensifies to such an extent that a news outlet publishes an article about the situation. However, as the heroine points out, "broadcasting the issue draws even more unwanted attention to the negativity" (Lea 292). For public figures like Crystal, whose careers depend on their digital presence, this exposure adds another layer of pressure. The need to maintain a positive, confident image for an audience can feel overwhelming. After the backlash, Crystal begins to question the very foundation of her identity and work: "Is my self-doubt hypocritical? My brand's very

foundation is rooted in body positivity. So why have I allowed the comments of total strangers to make me doubt myself when I've come so far in loving my body?" (Lea 286). Her internal conflict highlights how public shaming can create a disconnect between one's outwards image and internal emotional reality.

In *The Fastest Way to Fall*, Britta's journey towards body acceptance is marked by the complexities of internalized *fatphobia* and the profound impact that external comments, especially from romantic interests, have on her sense of self-worth and emotional stability. While she initially appears self-assured and committed to the idea that her value goes beyond her look, her growing attraction to Ben, a co-worker, begins to erode that confidence. One key moment in her emotional journey comes when Britta reflects on how her body image has been shaped by her past romantic experiences, who have often dismissed her because of her body type. In her blog, where she posts her advancements with the FitMi app, she admits that "so much of [her] relationships with [her] body is tied up in [her] history with men and feeling desirable (or undesirable)" (Williams 99). This confession underscores a powerful and often overlooked reality for many women: body image and self-worth are continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions with others, particularly in romantic relationships.

Ben's sudden interest in Britta, as her body begins to change due to her fitness routine reveals a deeper issue: the idea that desire based on physical appearance. Comments like "You really do look good, Britt... imagine how hot you'll be as you keep going" (Williams 102), though framed as compliments, imply the superficiality of people like Ben who believe that attraction is earned through conformity to beauty ideals. His later rejection—"You're not the kind of girl I'm expected to be with" (Williams 102)—only reinforces this toxic notion, shattering Britta's confidence, and ultimately making her believe that she needs to change to be loved. When certain messages are repeated

again and again, especially by those we care about, they start to feel true, no matter how harmful or unfounded they are.

After the rejection, Britta begins to engage in harmful behaviours to cope with her emotional pain. Feeling unworthy, she channels her distress into an obsessive need to control her body. Her relationship with exercise, once a source of empowerment, takes a darker turn as she becomes fixated on spending hours at the gym, becoming a form of self-punishment and a desperate attempt to shrink herself in the hope of gaining approval. This shift reflects a commonly overlooked reality: the dangers of compulsive exercise, which, according to Ruiz-Torrero et al., is closely “linked to one’s self-esteem, body image, and body satisfaction” (7). Britta begins to overexercise and undereat, convinced that losing weight will somehow make her feel better. Despite acknowledging how unhealthy her habits are, she justifies them by saying, “I wouldn’t do it forever, just enough to get a boost” (Williams 111). Ben’s remarks on her body have impacted Britta so deeply that her self-confidence becomes tied to the number on the scale, a number she uses to measure her worth. It is not until she collapses and ends up in hospital that she realizes the extent of the damage. Britta’s experience exemplifies the idea that “it is not the frequency or quantity of exercise, but the underlying motivations, the emotional attributions, and the psychological meaning that is attached to (not) exercising that distinguishes compulsive exercising from healthy exercise” (Ruiz-Torrero et al. 7). In the case of Britta, her overexercising is clearly driven by emotional distress and internalised social expectations rather than a genuine commitment to well-being.

Britta’s self-doubt, shaped by others’ opinions, is also evident in a scene where she works out with Wes in the park. It is the first time they leave the gym to exercise outdoors, and the change in environment exposes Britta’s insecurities. While the gym represents a safe space where she feels supported, the openness of the park triggers her

anxiety about being seen and judged. External comments have affected Britta to the point that she constantly questions, “What would people think? *Are they laughing at my slow pace or wondering what this hot guy is doing with me?*” (Williams 168). This hyper-awareness of how her body might be perceived mirrors her internalized fear of judgment and reveals how intensely beauty standards have ingrained in her self-image, undermining her confidence despite her efforts to improve her health.

These situations in both novels reveal how deeply fatphobia has permeated our society, largely due to the media’s persistent portrayal of idealized and unattainable bodies. The heroines must navigate a world where judgment and unsolicited comments are constant reminders of narrow societal expectations. Unfortunately, the worlds of the narratives are not fictional constructs, they mirror the real-life experiences of millions of people who face similar pressures and stigmatization every day. Just like Crystal and Britta, many individuals are forced to fight with external voices that shape and often distort their self-image. By depicting these struggles, *Set on You* and *The Fastest Way to Fall* not only shed light on the emotional and mental cost of living in a body-obsessed culture but also underscore the resilience it takes to reclaim and affirm one’s worth beyond appearance. As Crystal herself reminds her followers, “Your self-worth isn’t just about your weight, or your fitness level. It’s also about the health of your mind, soul, and heart [...] don’t allow people to put you into positions that make you feel less than” (Lea 85).

4.4. Traditional Beauty in the Depiction of Male Characters

Finally, it is worth commenting on the decision of both authors to pair their fat female protagonists with male characters who embody traditional ideals of attractiveness. Although McDavis-Conway argues that “by consistently pairing fat heroines with thin partners, fat romance has demonstrated an unwillingness to diverge from the expectation of an idealized ‘purity of maleness’” (236), I believe this is a broad assumption that does not fully reflect the truth behind these kinds of narratives. The matching of fat characters with thin, fit male love interests is an intentional decision that serves to challenge the traditional romantic tropes that often portray plus-size women as either invisible, tied to unrequited love, or in need of changing themselves before being considered worthy of a romantic relationship.

In *Set on You*, Crystal is romantically involved with Scott, who is “well over six feet”, has “enormous biceps” (Lea 3-4) and happens to be a firefighter—a profession often associated with masculinity, strength, and sexual appeal. Similarly, in *The Fastest Way to Fall*, Britta’s love interest is Wes, the CEO of the FitMi app and her personal trainer, whose physic, professional success, and emotional maturity construct him as the prototypical romantic hero.

By positioning these highly idealized male characters as the romantic counterparts to fat women, both novels challenge the idea that romantic desirability depends on having a “perfect” body or following beauty standards. Instead, they emphasize that fat women are, and should be, seen as desirable without needing to conform or shrink themselves.

Contrary to McDavis-Conway’s belief, none of the novels “tie the heroine’s self-acceptance to the hero’s appreciation of her body” (235). In fact, Crystal is fully aware of her body type and embraces it with confidence even before Scott enters her life. On the

other hand, although Britta recognizes that her past experiences with men have shaped how she feels about her body, this is not true in her relationship with Wes. By the time she becomes involved with him, Britta has already worked through her insecurities and fully realizes that Wes is drawn to her because of who she is as a person.

Both Amy Lea and Denise Williams use their character's relationships to reinforce the idea that love is not conditional on body size and that physical attraction can, and does, exist beyond the narrow confines of mainstream beauty norms. As Lea declares in the book's dedication, we all are "worthy of an epic love story", independently of our body type.

5. CONCLUSION

Although it is a genre largely undervalued by critics, romance has become the genre par excellence among readers, especially women, because of its ability to convey emotion, but most importantly, because of its ability to portray realistic and diverse experiences. With the rise of social media like TikTok, readers have been able to discover new stories that align better with their interests and needs, further showcasing how society is evolving and becoming preoccupied with longstanding societal conventions of beauty. In particular, Contemporary Romance is giving voice to narratives, and realities, that have been long ignored or despised. Through narratives that focus on traditionally marginalized characters, Contemporary Romance reaffirms essential values such as empathy, dignity, and acceptance.

The portrayal of curvy characters like Crystal and Britta is especially powerful since they are depicted as protagonists in their own story, rather than being relegated to secondary roles or just used for comic relief. They are presented just as they are: worthy of love, desire, and happiness—without having to change their bodies for acceptance. These characters offer visibility and hope to many readers who have long been left out of conventional representations, further inspiring them to accept their bodies and reclaim their right to love and be loved.

More importantly, these kinds of narratives also serve as powerful tools for awareness and education. For readers whose bodies align with socially accepted standards, these stories provide insight into the everyday struggles faced by those who do not. By highlighting how certain comments or behaviours can cause harm, they foster empathy and challenge readers to reflect on their own assumptions, ultimately encouraging more inclusive and compassionate attitudes. This is one of the reasons why so many people love to read: because when we lose ourselves in the pages of a book, we

can imagine different lives and briefly make them our own and because only literature gives us the chance to choose who we want to be. In this sense, contemporary romance has become a safe and accessible cultural space for presenting non-normative bodies and exploring more inclusive and positive ways of understanding desire and affection.

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