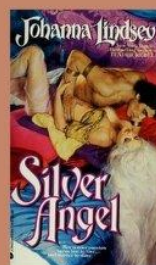
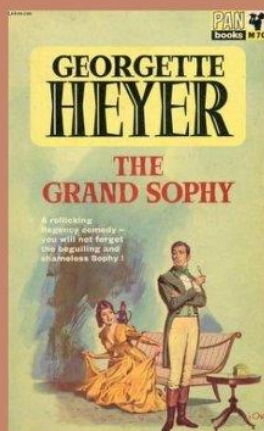
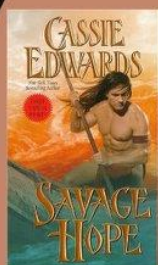


History's Been Hijacked

*The Perpetuation of White
Supremacist Ideology in
History-based Fiction*

*Historical
Romance*

We're going to be looking at the historical romance genre in the aggregate. This is about the forest, and not any individual trees. There are a lot of great exceptions to the rule that we all love and celebrate, but I'm here today to talk about the rule and not the exceptions – so please keep that in mind.



Romanticizing White
Supremacy

Relevance

*In
Romance*

*Changing
the
Landscape*

Relevance

You're probably wondering what the KKK and neo-nazis have to do with historical romance novels, which is perfectly fair. Romance readers are *everywhere*, as we well know, but it's extremely unlikely that anyone who already identifies as a white supremacist is going to be persuaded to think any differently because of a romance novel.

So to explain the intersection of these two worlds, I'd like to tell you about Derek Black.

Derek Black was once considered the bright future of the white nationalist movement in America. His godfather was David Duke, his own father Donald Black built and runs Stormfront, the oldest and largest hate site on the internet. But Derek Black has publicly renounced white nationalism, and now he speaks out against the movement and their tactics.



"My dad often gave me the advice that white nationalists are **not** looking to recruit people on the **fringes** of American culture, but rather the people who start a sentence by saying, **"I'm not racist, but..."**"

- Derek Black

Source: "What White Nationalism Gets Right About American History." New York Times, Aug 19, 2017

Derek explains that white nationalists don't target people on the fringe, "but rather the people who start a sentence by saying, "I'm not racist, but..."

It is in that space – "I'm not a racist but" – *that's* where white supremacist ideology thrives. It gains traction wherever people have **unconscious** and **unquestioned** biases that can be manipulated by extremists. For example, Derek Black was 10 or 11 when he built the children's section of Stormfront by creating a forum to talk about, of all things, The Lord of the Rings.



"I had founded that section because when the movies came out I got super into it, and I figured you could get people who liked with such a **white mythos**, a few turned on by white nationalism, and more mundanely **just wanted to talk about movies.**"

- Derek Black

He found that he could appeal to people's taste in fiction – fiction with a white mythos – to recruit new members.

So while I don't think any of us believes that historical romance is a fertile recruiting ground for white nationalists, it is undeniable that the version of history taught by romance novels has made it far easier for white supremacist arguments to be accepted by otherwise intelligent, well-read people. To put it simply, the well is poisoned, and if you read historical romance, you are drinking from that well.

The most glaringly obvious influence of white supremacy is how the vast majority historicals are set in England. This holds true even though Americans (a huge proportion of the readership) have an extremely varied heritage. We could have romances predominantly set in Russia, Greece, Morocco, Mexico, Japan, Poland, Ethiopia - any number of places that reflect our respective histories - but instead, it's overwhelmingly England.

But before we get into why that is, let's talk first about the specific beliefs that are prevalent in the genre.

White Nationalist Belief System

elements found in the genre

Misogyny

- Fear of racialized rape
- Fetishizing Asian women
- Degeneracy of "other" cultures

Positive depiction of colonialism

Non-WASP = "exotic"

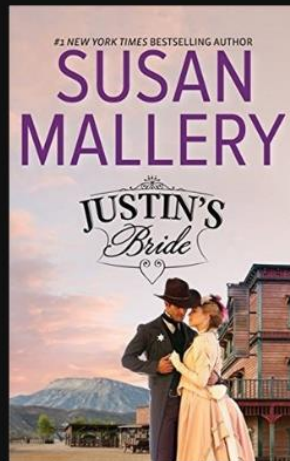
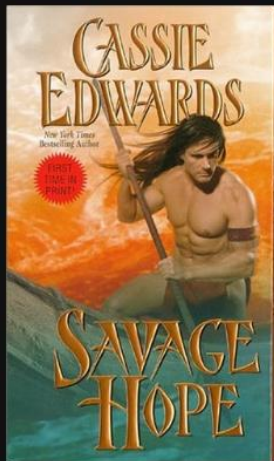
Only white, Christian stories are told

First, there is a strong component of misogyny in white nationalism. Anyone who studies this issue knows that the fear of black men raping white women has been used to keep both African Americans *and* women oppressed for centuries. Also, sexually fetishizing Asian women in particular is a real theme with white supremacists, as well as the belief that "other" cultures sexually objectify and "dishonor" white Christian women and are therefore evil. The era of European Imperial Power is held up as a golden age of history, and "white and Christian" is the norm while anything non-white and especially non-Christian is considered "exotic" and treated with great suspicion. This last point ties heavily into the anti-immigrant sentiment, which is a high priority item on the white nationalist political agenda. And finally, white nationalists only talk about the history of other cultures in the context of highlighting how backwards they've always been. They consistently erase the contributions of non-white, non-Christian people.

In Romance

So now that we know what we're looking for, let's see where we can find it in Historical Romance.

*Where white supremacist ideas **were** found in Historical Romance*



The first that come to mind, because they are the most obvious, are the old **Native American** Romances. These depict the noble savage, present manifest destiny as a good thing, and nearly always feature a white woman being abducted by a Native American man. (He very often turns out to be a white man who was kidnapped as a child and raised by a Native American tribe - and that's why he's allowed to be the hero, because he's really white.)

Historical Western Romances also tend to feature racist depictions of Native Americans, just less noble and more savage in this iteration. There is also a lot of erasure - for example, historically it's estimated about 20% of cowboys were black and 40% were Mexican, but in historical westerns cowboys tended to be overwhelmingly white.

And of course **Sheikh** Romances, which almost always depict a white woman forced into a harem as a form of sexual slavery. (Note also that sometimes the sheikh turned out - of course - to actually be Christian and/or European which, once again, allows him to be an acceptable hero to the white lady heroine.) The sheikh romances reinforce the perceived sexual depravity of Islamic cultures, as well as the trope of the white woman in sexual danger from a non-white man.

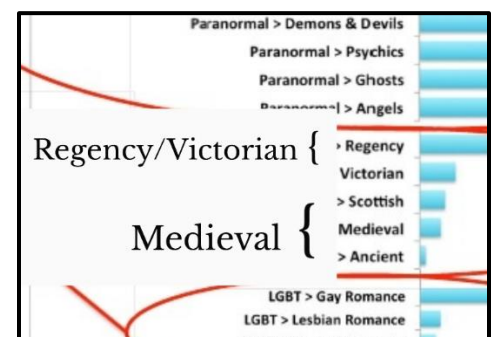
While there are some historical authors of color like Beverly Jenkins and others currently writing in the Historical Western space and doing so with success, as I said: we're not looking at exceptions to the rule, but the rule itself. And as a general rule, these sub-genres have largely died out and are no longer wildly popular with romance readers. The historical genres that are still popular are listed here:



Source: Author Earnings, [2016 Romance Writers of America PAN Presentation](#), July 15, 2016

This information focuses on profits and not units sold, so it's not perfect. But we romance writers know what's popular with readers, and this data reflects what we know.

There are five historical sub-genres that make significant earnings for authors, but since it's a time-honored tradition in Romance to fudge the years in any historical era, we're going to consolidate them into two categories. Regency and Victorian will go together to represent the 19th century, and Medieval will include Ancient and Scottish. (That's because if it's a Scottish romance, it's usually either set in medieval times or it's *Outlander*.)



These two periods – the medieval and the 19th century - are extremely important in the white nationalist movement. It's no coincidence that they are the eras that continue to thrive in Romance.

There's a reason for the relationship between these eras. The connection was deliberately created in the early 19th century with an expressly white supremacist intent.

The Dark Ages of Enlightenment

“Many of those 19th-century texts were bound up with modern British and other European forms of **colonialism and imperialism**. They're very much bound up with naturalizing the idea that Europe is an **ancestral homeland** for Europeans, that it was **homogeneously European** in heritage, and that it **should have power over** the rest of the world.”

- Cord J. Whitaker, Ph.D.
Wellesley College

Source: "How Hate Groups are Hijacking Medieval Symbols While Ignoring the Facts Behind Them." History.com, Dec. 18, 2017

This quote comes from an article about how hate groups use medieval iconography. It's hard to overstate how important medievalism is to the white nationalist identity, and there was no missing it in Charlottesville last year.

As you can see, white nationalists use medieval imagery and have done so for more than a hundred years. They have claimed medieval history as their own in a very visual way.



Credit: Charles Butler



Credit: Charles Butler



Credit: Newsweek



Credit: Lidia Jean Kott

In the wake of Charlottesville, many historians - especially medievalists - began to call for more effort in confronting the white nationalists and their sympathizers who frequently appear in their classrooms, at historically themed events (like re-enactments and renaissance faires), and as their peers in academia. They emphasize the need to be as public as possible about how the history as told by white supremacists is wrong, and how important it is to educate the public wherever the falsehoods are encountered and spread. They talk about how it crops up in video games, fantasy novels, and shows like *Game of Thrones*. But I knew - we all know - that the one place they won't even bother looking much less trying to combat this influence is in the Romance genre. And we all know why they won't bother. Academics and scholars rarely consider the fact that because it is such an enormously popular genre, a huge number of people learn history from Romance. Knowing that we can't count on them to do outreach to our field, we have to address the problem ourselves.

I write medieval romance, and seeing these particular images last year had a profound effect on me. It led me to examine a lot of things, but especially how we depict the era in the genre.

So let's start by taking a look at the modern medieval.

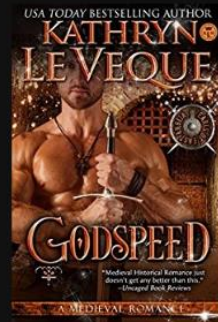
Medieval (pre-1500) *includes Scottish and Ancient World*

Changes:

- less rapey
- more Scottish

White nationalist ideology:

- British-centric
- Civilization = Christianity
- Entirely white
- Fixation on Vikings, Highlanders (Celts)



My first question is: how much has it evolved from the old-school era? And the answer is that it really hasn't changed much at all except that there's less rape and more kilts these days.

As for ideology, the medieval genre is a white nationalist dream.

- It depicts England as the center of world instead of the backwater it actually was.
- Civilization is always synonymous with Christianity.
- It depicts a thoroughly white population in the British Isles and Europe.
- White nationalists have a very deep fixation on Vikings (which correlates here to the Ancient World Romances), and they also have a real thing for Celtic ancestry (which is where the Scottish come in, and I'm sure that just thrills the Scots.)

But having said all that, let's face it: Medievals aren't the most popular historical romances. Regency and Victorian lead the pack.

Regency (roughly 1780-1890)

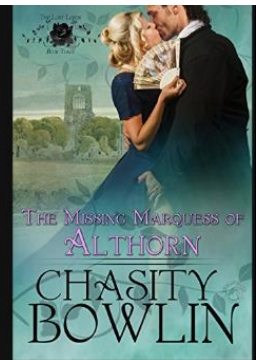
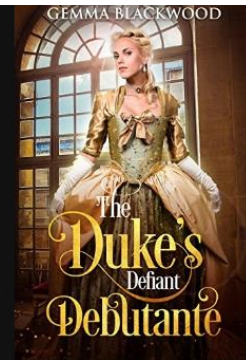
includes Georgian and Victorian

Changes:

- less blatantly racist/antisemitic
- growing acceptance of m/m romance

White nationalist ideology:

- Extremely white & Christian
- Pro-imperialist historical lens
 - India
 - Opium Wars
 - British anti-slavery movement
- Choice of heroes



Now, a word here about Regency romances: Jane Austen is often seen as the foremother of Regency romance, but the truth is that we all live in the house that Georgette Heyer built. And it is a very British, very imperialist house.

Some changes since Heyer's time include more recognition & rejection of overt bigotry, and a growing acceptance of m/m romance. A note: Homophobia isn't really part of the white nationalist agenda, but I've included this shift here to show that the romance readership is at least a little bit open to change.

As for how Regency/Victorian Romance conforms to white nationalist ideology:

- Again, it's predominantly white & Christian.
- A glaring feature is that aside from the Napoleonic wars, it's a very *incomplete* version of history. It's a failure of world-building in fiction that leaves out, for instance:
 - *India*. If you learn history from romance novels, as many of us (including myself) did, all you probably know about India is that it's where tea and spices come from. And sometimes British men were stationed there, and learned sex from the exotic women.
 - *The Opium Wars* are also notably absent in the romance version of history, as is
 - *The anti-slavery movement* in Britain, which was quite robust. This absence is a stark contrast with how Romance incorporates the suffragette movement, for instance.
- The most obvious element of white supremacy is seen in **who Regency romance chooses to valorize**. It's the members of the nobility – all of whom were white, Christian, and made their fortunes through colonial exploitation and brutality. These are the men who are made into heroes by the Regency/Victorian Romances.

To demonstrate how prevalent this is, I've taken the RITA finalists from the last 3 years just as a representation of what types of books hold the broadest appeal among the readership.

Who's a hero?

RITA Award Nominees for Best Historical Short and Best Historical Long

2016

*Falling into Bed with a **Duke***
***Earls** Just Want to Have Fun*
*If the **Viscount** Falls*
*The Secrets of **Sir** Richard Kenworthy*
*Say Yes to the **Marquess***
*It Started with a Scandal**
Secrets of a Scandalous Heiress +
Sweetest Scoundrel+
*Bella and the Beast**
Tiffany Girl
Tremaine's True Love

2017

***Dukes** Prefer Blondes*
*How I Married a **Marquess***
***Duke** of Sin*
*A **Duke** to Remember*
*No Mistress of Mine**
*Do You Want to Start a Scandal**
*The Study of Seduction**
*Taming the Highlander**
Left at the Altar
Susana and the Scot

2018

*Between the Devil and the **Duke***
*Blame It on the **Duke***
*The Demon **Duke***
*The Day of the **Duchess***
*Mad for the **Marquess***
*A Scottish **Lord** for Christmas*
*Waltzing with the **Earl***
*The Scandalous Flirt**
The Scoundrel's Honor+
*The Scandal of It All**
The Rogue's Conquest
Within a Captain's Soul

You can see how many noble titles are here. The red asterisks and crosses are books that feature an aristocrat in the lead but don't say so in the book title. Those in bold are not about the nobility. When you do the math on this, you see that **over 80% are books about rich, titled white people falling in love.**

So this is what the landscape looks like, and any meaningful change will take a lot of time.

Change

What needs to happen to affect long-term change? These are just my own best guesses, which I offer as a suggestion to at least get started on the discussion.

Change

General

The publishing industry

- 87% identify as white*
- Industry practices routinely segregate books and authors

Diverse representation

- Voices that are not white and not Christian
- History that is not white and not Christian

* Source: PW Publishing Industry Salary Survey 2017

First and most obviously, the publishing industry is overwhelmingly white. The real-life landscape has to change before we can have any hope of changing the fictional landscape. Industry practices also have to change. African-American Romance can't be separated out into its own section, and publishing houses cannot continue to relegate African-American authors to separate publishing lines. That kind of segregation is precisely what white nationalists want. It's what they hope for, fight for, and march for. We don't have to give it to them.

But that's not enough to change things. Non-white, non-Christian authors must be allowed to tell stories. This is not just about representation as a means of allowing readers of diverse backgrounds to find themselves reflected on the pages. It's also about changing what history looks like to *all* of our readers, and welcoming a greater variety of voices is the only way to populate the shelves with new perspectives on history that not only reflect society now but are more accurate to *actual history*.

More specifically, authors have the power of shaping history itself. We tell the stories. And I don't want to give the wrong message today: if you love stories with ballgowns and kilts, that does not make you a white supremacist. It doesn't even make you a racist. There is nothing wrong AT ALL with reading and writing white characters in England. Just *don't* write stories that make it hard for non-white perspectives to even exist in the same space.

Change

Authors

- Maybe dial back on the Dukes a little?
- Actively fight against the idea that HEAs are for whites-only
- Use real history to inform your writing
- Question everything
 - what you "already know" about history
 - your historical sources
 - many were written by white supremacists
 - white nationalists are very active in the same spaces
- Reframe the "historical accuracy" argument

And I'm not trying to take anyone's Dukes away! But having said that, just try to remember where the British aristocracy's money came from, and realize that historically, it's not exactly hero material.

In our writing and with our readers, we have to fight against this idea that only straight, white, Christian people lived Happily Ever After. When you deny happiness to people of color in history, you are being **historically inaccurate**. You're also implicitly telling your readers that only white Christians deserve loving relationships.

I'll also offer some practical writing advice: Look to history for your plot and characterizations. Like, just as a suggestion - instead of making the villain fat or bisexual, consider making him a racist imperialist to signal to your reader that he's the bad guy. My point is that real history is filled with examples of true villains and gripping conflict – use it to inspire and inform your stories.

The most useful advice I can give to anyone writing any kind of history is to question absolutely everything. So much of what romance writers know about history comes from reading *other* romance writers, and so much of what is treated as indisputable fact has its origin in fiction, not history. Furthermore, you have to keep in mind that so many of our research resources are polluted by white supremacists. Eighteenth and 19th century imperialists **purposely buried the stories of marginalized people**. It's not that those stories can't have happened; it's just that you won't find those people or their accomplishments unless you *actively search* for them.

You also have to investigate every source of information. Please remember that white nationalists don't always announce themselves by wearing white sheets and carrying tiki torches. They are otherwise normal people who are very active in online forums, facebook groups, historical reenactment clubs, and some "experts" who are sympathetic to their worldview are often tolerated in academic settings. Information that you think is accurate could easily be coming from them, so you have to fact-check everything you hear or read.

And finally: probably the most common argument against a more accurate version of history is, ironically, "historical accuracy".

"historical accuracy"

Historical Accuracy is used as a weapon to criticize, dismiss, belittle, and silence authors who dare to write anything different from what's expected. All authors have to push against this argument whenever it's employed. No one complains that the London of a million dukes is historically inaccurate, but many *do* complain that happy interracial relationships could not possibly have existed, when we know that they did.

We have to work consistently and deliberately to re-frame the concept of "historical accuracy" so that it's not about the nitpicky details of when the salad fork came into common use - but about reflecting a more complete historical world. **Never forget that as authors, we are teachers of history**, whether you like it or not. Ask yourself which is more damaging put out into the world: a reader who thinks there were potatoes in 12th century Europe, or someone who genuinely believes there were no black people in England before the 20th century? The former just looks like a little ignorant. The latter hears the white supremacist argument that Europe is the ancestral home of white people only and thinks, "I'm not racist but that's actually right."

Conclusion

So all of that is what I see when I look at historical romance. I don't just see gorgeous dresses and exciting swordfights and swashbuckling pirates and rich Dukes who are very welcome to come Netflix and chill with me whenever they like. I see all that, but I also see a very calculated, gaping hole in the history we tell, and I see the damage that that absence does in the real world.

I don't have any academic credentials, and I'm very far from being an expert on romance or an expert on anything at all. The only reason I've even bothered to come here today is to implore those of you who study and analyze romance – and any other kind of popular fiction based in history – please, include this in your analysis. Ask yourself: what is missing from the history we allow to live on in popular culture? Who is ignored? Who is celebrated? And to what end?

And to my fellow romance authors I want to say that we can reclaim history from hate. Historical Romance is a fantasy world that I've loved from childhood. We've spent generations building this lovely communal fantasy together – but it's a fantasy that's still openly hostile to authors of color, hostile to any characters who are not white or Christian, and hostile to actual history itself.

It's exactly the kind of world that white supremacists want, and it can only change if we acknowledge where hate has shaped our genre. It is a huge and daunting challenge. It may take a generation or two or more to make a lasting change. But I'm a romance novelist so you know I have deep convictions about the power of love.

Hate truly can only be driven out by love. And if there's one thing Romance knows how to do and do well, it's love.

