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Introduction

I'M A SUCKER FOR a happy ending. Especially when my own prospects have felt a bit precarious. As a teen, when my parents divorced, I escaped to the orderly world of Jane Austen. Later, when I worked in New York as a young magazine editor, Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed* taught me you don't have to be a size two to find love. After a heartbreak in my twenties, Terry McMillan's romance-adjacent *Waiting to Exhale* reminded me that lovers come and go, but girlfriends are forever.

Then came a time when I couldn't read romance at all. In graduate school, with my twin boys in second grade, my marriage suddenly, unexpectedly evaporated. A newly single mom, the *last* thing I wanted to read was romance: I was too busy sobbing in the produce aisle. I regrouped, moved onto campus with my boys, and settled them in a new school.

On the sunny morning when I finally sat down to resume my research, I couldn't write. I stared at my blank screen, anxious, overwhelmed, and terrified by uncertainty.

This time, it was romance writers themselves, rather than their books, who gave me hope.

After a decade as a freelance journalist, I'd entered graduate school to study how digital technologies changed life for journalists and other media workers. In the early 2000s, I'd noticed friends outside media starting to work like freelancers, moving to the project-based self-employment glorified by books like Daniel Pink's *Free Agent Nation* and Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class*. Magazine editor Tina Brown dubbed this ostensibly liberating New Economy workstyle "the gig economy." The term conjured images of carefree musicians sleeping by day and partying by night.

But I knew better. My own freelance career had its glamorous moments—like writing for the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*—but to fund

those high points, I had to write corporate reports and press releases and teach as an adjunct. I constantly hustled for work and hounded clients for payment. Most years, I earned more than my then-spouse, but it was his steady paycheck and benefits that made my career possible. Now, with no marriage and no steady job, even with all the privilege that comes with being white, well educated, healthy, and middle-class, I felt more than ever the high anxiety of working in the gig economy.

Although my research had focused on journalists, other media workers were also feeling insecure as new technologies disrupted old patterns. A writer friend had mentioned in passing that, of all the authors he knew, *only* the romance writers were thriving in the digital economy. Idly, I'd wondered why that was. Maybe an interesting side project? Then I'd forgotten about it.

But that morning in California in 2014, feeling lost and terrified, I remembered the romance writers. Unable to focus on the “real” research in front of me, I emailed some authors. To my surprise, several responded almost immediately. I set up interviews. I asked them how publishing was changing. What were they earning? How was technology affecting their work?

After each call, I felt miraculously better. Recharged, hopeful, focused. The rise of e-books and digital publishing, just a few years old at the time, offered these writers new ways to make money and set their own terms in an industry where they'd had little power before. Many, especially authors of color and writers of LGBTQ+ love stories, had started self-publishing, reaching audiences long slighted by major publishing houses. Meanwhile, traditionally published authors were finding new ways to connect with readers.

My early interviews were all with women (defined in this book as anyone who self-identifies as a woman), who make up more than 90 percent of romance novelists. Every one of them deeply understood precarity, both personal and professional. They'd faced every flavor of personal hardship—divorce, infidelity, sick children, natural disasters, racism, sexism, homophobia. They handled all this while pursuing a notoriously unstable and solitary career. Most started out writing at night or early in the morning, held multiple jobs and did most of the family caregiving. Their sales were unpredictable, their incomes rose and fell, and contracts were hard to come by, especially for marginalized authors. And yet not a single romance author said they felt isolated or unsupported in their work.

Without exception, every author I spoke with talked about how the romance community of writers, readers, and other fans—which many affectionately dubbed “Romancelandia”—offered the emotional and professional support

needed to thrive in an uncertain, digitally disrupted cultural industry. At the same time, this was no hearts-and-rainbows story. The network never served all authors equally or fairly. For far too long, authors of color, LGBTQ+ authors, and other marginalized writers reaped less advantage from the network than white, heterosexual authors—I would come to call this persistent pattern *inclusive access/unequal benefits*. Tensions would come to a head in the near implosion of Romance Writers of America in 2019, offering valuable lessons in network repair and social justice. This inclusive access/unequal benefits tension seemed to reflect other networks I’d seen, in journalism and academia. As one Black author told me, in this way, Romancelandia “is a microcosm of America.”

All this would unfurl as I continued to research the community. The more people I spoke with, the more I came to see that this much-mocked, largely dismissed group of creators was grappling with some of the most compelling issues of our time: How can isolated workers create community and solidarity? How can racism, homophobia and forms of discrimination be redressed? How do digital platforms change power dynamics? In pursuit of answers, my explorations of Romancelandia expanded to include eighty in-depth interviews with writers, editors, agents, and industry observers along with a survey of 4,270 romance authors and a network analysis of their advice patterns. Over the years, I also engaged in countless informal interviews with readers, writers, and other Romancelandians at conferences and online. Here’s what I found:

- For forty years, American romance writers have developed an unusual type of professional network, based on practices historically associated with women, where they shared critical business information about contracts, payments, publishers, and the craft. This gave them a massive advantage when e-books came along.
- Romance authors pioneered electronic publishing, nearly a decade before the Kindle launched. Marginalized authors in particular were first to experiment with e-books and new forms of self-promotion.
- After the e-book boom, between 2009 and 2014, romance writers’ median income rose 73 percent, while the median income of all other authors dropped 42 percent. Among romance writers, authors of color saw more income growth than white authors, with their median income rising 150 percent compared to 63 percent for white authors.
- Through their solidarity, romance writers improved their power vis-à-vis publishers and even—sometimes—held their ground against Amazon, as the company came to monopolize digital publishing.

For romance writers, none of this happened overnight. Rather, over four decades, romance writers created a powerful model of female solidarity, which, while flawed, drastically improved their working conditions.

All this matters because work today feels unstable, uncertain, and isolating for a huge number of people—not just writers. More than half of Americans today, and more women than men, do not work a “traditional job” with a steady wage, predictable earnings, and a regular schedule.¹ In 2022, 36 percent of respondents in a nationally representative survey identified themselves as independent contractors, up from 27 percent in 2016.² Another survey in 2018 found that a third of Americans freelanced either full time or as a side hustle.³ It’s no wonder that some 60 percent of Americans feel increasingly insecure and isolated in their jobs.⁴ Meanwhile, the most coveted careers of the future like video streaming, gaming, and social media influencing involve highly individualized working conditions, calling for new kinds of organization.

All this characterizes what sociologist Ulrich Beck dubbed “the risk regime . . . a political economy of insecurity, uncertainty and loss of boundaries.”⁵ Many scholars link this risk regime to “precarity,” defined as work with unpredictable pay, little access to health benefits, individualized working conditions, and no guarantee of continued employment.⁶ These risks and insecurities are not equally distributed: people of color and other marginalized groups suffer more.

More and more workers are responding to increasing insecurity. In the summer of 2023, screenwriters and actors went on strike together for the first time in sixty years, protesting the impact of streaming and, potentially, artificial intelligence on their incomes. A few months later, twenty-five thousand members of the Auto Workers Union walked off the job in three states, demanding wage increases, better retirement benefits, and shorter hours.⁷ Meanwhile, employees at Starbucks and Amazon warehouses have been forming unions. Public support for unions is higher than it has been in five decades.

Labor arrangements and networks don’t have to be the way they are. As a thought experiment, for instance, media scholar Angela McRobbie asks how creative work might be organized differently had production structures not originally been designed by and for men. “What would it mean to bring a feminist perspective to bear on social and cultural entrepreneurship?” she asks. What might “new forms of community and cultural economy” look like?⁸

I believe it might look a lot like *Romancelandia*.

This is a book about how informal labor networks, self-organization, and mutual aid can improve the nature of work. It's about forging communities where no community existed before, based on a philosophy, however imperfectly realized, of attending to the needs of every member. The story of Romancelandia shows that alternative forms of organization, based on historically feminized practices, can improve "platformized," isolated, and precarious working conditions. At the same time, this is a cautionary tale, warning how informal networks can, however unwittingly, absorb and reproduce broader social patterns of exclusion and marginalization—which, in turn, can spur new forms of self-organizing. In the end, it holds a two-part lesson for independent workers, especially platform creators, seeking more equitable treatment from corporations: If you want to be treated fairly, you need a united community. And if you want a united community, you have to treat everyone fairly.

This book adds to expanding conversations around platformized cultural labor, where old careers like writing, music, filmmaking, and journalism, and new ones like social media influencing and streaming, all depend on digital platforms dominated by vast, impenetrable corporations. Media and communication scholars including Brooke Duffy, Nicole Cohen, Stuart Cunningham, David Craig, David Hesmondhalgh, Emily Hund, Nancy Baym, and many, many others are examining how social media and the digital economy change the way we think about work and community. This book adds to these conversations by analyzing how emerging forms of self-organization, communication, and technology affect the flow of cultural power and inequality.

More broadly, though, this book offers a few ideas, and a little hope, for people pursuing insecure work that they love, and for the communities that support them. Anyone who works alone or who feels isolated and unprotected in their job can learn from Romancelandia. So can organizations looking to redress exclusions and create unity in an age of increasing division and declining trust. Right now, creators—who symbolize the way more and more people work—are turning their attention to long-neglected conversations around labor conditions, both in grassroots efforts like Instagram influencers working together to game algorithms, and in broader professional organizations, from the brand new American Influencer Council to the Future of Music Coalition to the plethora of digital journalism unions.⁹ Many of these groups are just starting to form their own version of Romancelandia: I hope the history and trajectory of this community will inform their conversations.

6 INTRODUCTION

My own story ended up happily, at least for now, which is plenty good enough for me. My boys and I resettled in Colorado; I love my job as a professor; and yes, I found a life-changing new romance. I hope this book can be part of a much larger positive change, by helping isolated and precarious workers build communities in ways that advance fairer, more satisfying, humane, and dignified work.

That would be a very happy ending indeed.

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