



Romance

By Ruth A. Rouff

[Home](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

Recently I was walking through “Bargain Book Warehouse,” a store filled with discounted books located in a nearby strip mall. The books were publisher’s overstocks: the unwanted step-children of the publishing industry. When I passed by the tables heavily laden with discounted paperback romances, I recalled how I used to heave armfuls of these books into stinking trash compactors in Kmart’s throughout southern New Jersey.

This was back when I was working for the Reader’s Market, a division of the now-defunct Waldenbooks, which was in turn a subsidiary of Kmart. In addition to managing an expanded book department at the Clementon Kmart, I would go around to other Kmart’s and service their smaller paperback book sections. Servicing their book departments invariably meant tearing the covers off of all the paperbacks that hadn’t sold after a period of a month or so and throwing the books out to make room for the new titles that were shipped every week. Since very few of the titles sold all that well, this amounted to heaps of books. I had to sort the torn covers and return them to the publishers, so the store could get credit for all the books that didn’t sell. During the two years I worked for Reader’s Market, I must have thrown out thousands of paperbacks.

A large percentage of the books I put on shelves and later trashed were romances. Working with this merchandise was very alienating for me as a lesbian. I had absolutely no interest in Harlequin romances or those titles known as bodice rippers featuring scantily clad men and women in period costume. In truth, I rather despised the women who bought them. I knew it was wrong for me to despise them. But did their desire have to take such cheesy form? All pinks and purples, the book covers throbbed like engorged genitalia. And the prose was so hackneyed, so devoid of literary value, it made Stephen King sound like Proust. I guess the woman who bought these books weren’t satisfied with their mates, if they had any. Then again, when is anyone ever completely satisfied with one’s mate? I mean sexually. The wives read romance novels while the husbands whacked off to Playboy (this was before streaming Internet porn). Freud had it right: civilization is discontent.

Not that lesbians are much better. But at least with lesbians, you know that both parties tend to be romantic. Are there lesbian romances? Yes, there are. In fact, they’re a growing market segment, although you’ll probably never find them on Kmart shelves. From what I’ve seen, they’re escapist nonsense too. They have titles like *Passion’s Bright Fury* and *Wasted Heart*. I don’t read them. Through bitter experience, I’ve come to believe that desire is the opiate of the people.

Let me tell you – in one of the Kmart’s I serviced, I became attracted to a woman who worked in receiving. She was a big-boned, lusty-looking brunette with a Southern drawl and an air of vulnerability that belied her Junoesque stature. Her name was Jeannie. After repeated trips to this store, I got to know Jeannie a little. She used to scrawl “Book Lady” with a flourish on all the incoming cartons of books meant for me. She was originally from Raleigh, North Carolina. Her sad tale was that she had been married twice, both times to disappointing men. She had kids—two nice-looking teenagers who worked part-time for Kmart while attending high school-- but was now divorced.

One day as I pushed a shopping cart full of paperbacks through receiving to the

trash compactor, I heard Jeannie singing along with the song that was playing over the store intercom, “Hungry Eyes.”

“I’ve got hungry eyes,” Jeannie was looking at me as she sang this, slightly off key. I could feel that she was mildly attracted to me. Or maybe she was just whiling away the monotony of her job with a fleeting sexual fantasy. As things turned out, not long after I first set eyes on her, Jeannie and I both transferred to the newly opened Plum Hill Kmart—she in receiving and I as a sporting goods/automotive manager. Ever hopeful, I took this as a sign that we were meant to be together.

Dave Tilden—a district manager for Kmart at the time-- had unintentionally aided and abetted our relationship by recruiting me to be a departmental manager at the new store.

“You’re doing a very good job as Reader’s Market manager,” he told me as we sat at an orange plastic table in the Kmart grill. “So which department at Plum Hill would you like to manage?”

“Sports/auto,” I said, even though I knew this position meant working a 48-hour week instead of a 40- hour one. Selling fishing rods and spark plugs paid better than selling paperbacks.

The new job did prove to be a lot of hard work. I wasn’t naturally an organized person, and it took me a while to get the hang of managing two stockrooms full of everything from automotive batteries to deer urine. But I was happy that Jeannie was back there in receiving. Although she for the most part was indifferent to my efforts to get to know her better, we did go out to dinner a few times at Mikey’s – a restaurant and bar across the street from the store. This was when we both had to work until 10 pm – closing time. With the Phillies game on in the background at Mikey’s, Jeannie told me about her mom.

“She used to feed us beans while she ate steak,” Jeannie said with disgust. Hers sounded like a very rough childhood. “I guess that’s why I like food and kitchen stuff so much,” she added. Jeannie knew good pots and pans when she saw them. Not cheap Kmart stuff.

“What’s the difference?” I asked her. She looked at me as if I had two heads.

“Good pots and pans cook better,” she said. “And they last longer.”

Since we were on the topic of cooking, I told Jeannie about the time Martha Stewart autographed one of her cookbooks for me and about fifty other Reader’s Market managers. The book signing occurred at a Reader’s Market managers’ meeting in Westchester, New York. This was back when Martha was just making a name for herself as a doyenne of domesticity. I told Jeannie what Martha had written in my copy of Martha Stewart’s Quick Cook book: “To Ruth, Be entertaining, always. Martha Stewart.” This was before Martha got convicted of insider trading and sent to prison.

Jeannie was mildly impressed by my name-dropping Martha, but not enough to be interested in me. She did tell me an interesting thing, though. She said that Paul, one of the assistant managers at our store, had propositioned her.

“Paul? He’s engaged!” I replied. Not only that, I thought to myself, but he’s

twenty years younger than you.

Again Jeannie looked at me as if I had two heads.

“That don’t mean much these days,” she opined.

I had actually met Paul’s fiancée. He had introduced her to me one day while I was putting up a new fishing display. Her name was Karla. It was clear that she had stars in her eyes when she looked at Paul. She seemed like a very nice young woman. Now that I knew what a dog Paul was, I felt sorry for her. She didn’t know what she was getting into.

Secretly, I was rather pleased that Paul considered Jeannie attractive. It proved to me that I didn’t have poor taste in being attracted to her. However, she had no romantic use for either Paul or me. She had her heart set on a butch woman who worked as a computer systems trainer for Kmart. As things turned out, a few months later she and this woman went off to Phoenix together when Kmart transferred the woman out there. A year after that, they broke up, and Jeannie moved back to South Jersey and once again started working at the Plum Hill Kmart. This time she settled in Bordentown, New Jersey, about 45 minutes north of Plum Hill, off of Rt. 295. A few nights, when we both had to work until 10 pm and then come in at 8 the next morning, Jeannie stayed over my apartment rather than commute back home. Nothing happened. She slept on my sofa bed in the living room, while I slept in my bed in the bedroom. I was disappointed, but at least it was nice having someone with whom to watch the crimes, fires, and accidents on the 11 o’clock news.

So Jeannie and I never did get together. She just didn’t like me that much, physically. Although she was a tall, Amazonian woman who could probably knock you into next week if she tried, she took the sheets in bed. A few months later, the Plum Hill Kmart went out of business. I remember the day that Dave Tilden called the management team into his office.

“This store has never made a nickel in profit,” Dave told us. I admired the fact that he was forthright. It seemed that the Plum Hill Kmart was somewhat off the beaten track. Rather than being located on a major thoroughfare such as Rt. 70 or Rt. 38, it sat at the end of a road that not everyone was familiar with. In fact, many Plum Hill residents hadn’t realized there was a Plum Hill Kmart until they noticed our going-out-of-business ad in the local papers. By now Dave held a jaundiced view of Kmart Corporation.

“I’d rather stick pins in my eyes than call headquarters,” he said.

After the hubbub of the store closing, Jeannie relocated back to North Carolina and began working for a Kmart down there. I felt it was high time to put my BA in English to use, so I turned down Dave’s offer to manage at another Kmart. Instead I went to work for a book distribution company and then got a job as an apprentice teacher with the School District of Philadelphia. I went to Saint Joseph’s University after the school day to earn my certification and master’s in education.

I don’t know what was more grueling – working for Kmart or teaching in inner-city schools. I used to joke that retail would be fun were it not for the customers. I sometimes thought education would be fun, without the kids. I now teach part-time at a GED program and write part-time for an educational publishing company. I have written two nonfiction books geared to young adults, which the

company has published. I haven't seen Jeannie in 17 years.

Recently, however, the sight of all those paperback romances laid out upon tables at Bargain Book Warehouse led me to Google her. I found her on Facebook. In her photo, she's standing in a nicely appointed kitchen, a smile on her face. There is a pretty granite kitchen island in front of her and handsome-looking pots and pans behind her. She's put on a little weight. Her hair is dyed a rusty red. She's clearly in her element. I can imagine she eats steak anytime she wants. I didn't bother to "friend" her. I had wasted too much time enamored of her.

Still, knowing Jeannie was one of the better parts of my tenure with Kmart. Our relationship wasn't a romance. But it wasn't bad.

Ruth Rouff is an educational freelance writer and part-time GED instructor who lives in Collingswood, NJ. Her work has appeared in such journals as *Exquisite Corpse*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, *Philadelphia Poets*, and the *Coal City Review*. In 2012, Townsend Press published her young adult book, *Great Moments in Sports*.

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