



KATHERINE CENTER author's note THE ROM-COMMERS

Exciting news: I've chosen the hill I'm going to die on. And it's the hill of standing up for love stories.

If you read the author's note at the end of my book *Hello Stranger*, where I mounted a defense of love stories that accidentally turned into a manifesto, you might be wondering, "Is she still thinking about this?"

To which I reply: Yep.

Still thinking about it. Still talking about it. Still trying to insist that hopeful stories about human connection have cultural value.

I mean, *of course I am*.

If you're a writer, and if you've spent your life reading and loving and studying and obsessing over stories, and if the stories that you genuinely, authentically love the most—by a mile—just happen to be the stories that are the most disdained, the most dismissed, the most ridiculed, and the most eye-rolled at . . . you're gonna have some work to do.

What does it say about you if the stories you would save in a fire are generally regarded as ridiculous?

Does that make *you* ridiculous?

I've asked myself this question. Seriously. Literally. I'm no stranger to self-criticism. If loving love stories makes me foolish, I'd rather know it than not.

I've contemplated it.

And my answer? Objectively? To that question?

No. Of course not. No.

I'm not *perfect*, but I'm not ridiculous.

But the minute I say that, I flip around and think, "Well, but *nobody* thinks they're ridiculous. Even ridiculous people."

So I look up "ridiculous" in the dictionary. Just to be sure. And the definition is "very foolish."

Am I *very foolish*?

I mean—and I say this as a person who is not always on my own side—the answer's just: *no*.

I have my moments. I forget what day it is. I double-book appointments. I've made some very questionable fashion choices.

But I don't *lack human dignity*. I'm not shallow. Or uninformed. Or *contemptible*.

I'll go further and say that I am, in fact, a bit deep. I read poetry. I wonder about the meaning of it all. I overthink things. I look up the word "ridiculous." And when the definition of that word is "foolish" . . . I look that up, too. And then I dispassionately consider if I would describe myself as "unwise," "stupid," "silly," "idiotic," "halfwitted," "brainless," or "mindless."

And again—except for "silly," which, in my opinion, gets a bad rap—all those are a no.

I'm saying there's a disconnect. A disconnect between what I know is true and what the world keeps insisting.

I don't need to tell you that as a culture we regard romance novels as the lowest category in fiction, do I? You already know it, the way we all do.

And yet, I just keep thinking we're wrong.

For a long time, I maintained that romance novels were no worse than any other kind of novel: no more ridiculous than wars in the stars, no more unrealistic than superheroes in bodysuits, no more nerdy than wizards in the forest, no more impossible than a zombie apocalypse.

But now I'm changing my mind. Maybe it's not just that love stories *aren't any worse* than other kinds of stories:

Maybe they're *better*.

Maybe love is more valuable than we think.

Maybe stories that help us see our best possibilities are exactly what this bedraggled world needs.

Because love stories let us witness infinite ways that characters master pro-social behaviors.

And now I'm headed back to the dictionary again: *Pro-social behaviors* are ones that benefit "another person, group, or society as a whole."

Love stories can be built out of infinite plots involving almost anything—ghosts, murder, pirates, movie stars, firefighters, whatever—but one inevitable truth about them is that, no matter what, the behaviors that drive the story toward its Happily Ever After are pro-social ones.

Our lovers might not be good at love when they start. But if they want that happy ending, they damn well better figure it out.

And so, over the course of the story, they master the many arts of listening, and connecting, and nurturing, and care-taking, and trusting, and appreciating, and savoring, and sharing, and empathizing. They have to overcome their prejudices, learn to apologize, forgive each other, and sacrifice.

When we read love stories, we get to see kindness in action. And human compassion. And connection made visible. And people choosing to be the best versions of themselves in the face of it all.

Love stories show us people getting better at love—in real time.

The same cannot be said of, say, serial killer stories.

It's not nothing to witness acts of goodness. In fact, it creates an expansive, uplifted, physical feeling in our bodies that psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls "moral elevation." It impacts us—and changes us. This is documented.

Witnessing other people doing good makes us want to do better, ourselves.

And don't forget: We learn by watching.

Researcher Helen Fisher has studied love scientifically—most notably by doing brain scans of people in love as they look at photographs of the people they're in love with—and she concluded that romantic love is not an emotion. It is a human drive, like hunger or thirst.

It's not just something Hallmark made up to sell Valentine's cards. It's not a construct of the patriarchy. It's a deeply embedded, essential component of the human experience.

And so I just keep coming back to this question. If we didn't insist that romantic love was *more ridiculous than zombies* . . . would we be better at it?

I'm not saying everyone has to read love stories. I'm not going to march into the living room and rip that fighter pilot novel out of my husband's hands to replace it with a Julia Quinn. The stories we need call to us from deep places in our psyches, and we find them with our hearts more than our heads. Your inner compass will guide you to the particular stories that you need to hear.

What I want to say is just this: If you've been shamed away from reading love stories? *Hello, friend. Come over to the fun side.*

The ridicule? It's wrong. In that way the world has of being so very wrong about so many things.

Come hang out with me on my hill of love stories. I said it was the hill I was going to die on, like some great battle was destined to rage there—but, you know what? Let's not do that, after all. Let's give ourselves a happy ending, instead.

Let's spread out a picnic blanket, and eat cupcakes, and drink something fizzy. Let's let the sun warm our skin, and the wind ruffle our hair. Let's immerse ourselves in hope, and joy, and goodness—and just read and read and read.

Author's Note for The Rom-Comers: A Novel
by Katherine Center
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