

A Distant Heart by Sonali Dev
Wednesday, April 25, 2018
Naperville Public Library
3:15 p.m.
24 people
Notetaker: Karen Toonen

Discussion was led by Becky Spratford

Becky Spratford lead the Leadership Topic following the book discussion. We focused on incorporating romance novels into any book club. [Sonali Dev](#) joined us with insights, comments, and words of wisdom. Much of the conversation was interview style with Becky and other asking Sonali for her opinion.

The question came up during the discussion if Sonali's books should be read in a certain order.

Sonali said they are really only loosely a series. So you can read them as stand-alones, especially if you like certain tropes. If you want more of a romantic comedy, start with **A Bollywood Affair**, as the other are darker.

However, if the reader is one who needs to read everything "in order", read **The Bollywood Bride**, **A Change of Heart**, and **A Distant Heart** as they are linked through the story of Jen Joshi. You can then read **A Bollywood Affair** at any time.

During our discussing, we wondered why Sonali had chosen to have two timelines in **A Distant Heart**. Was it to build suspense?

For Sonali, the story really starts when his father is dying on Rahul's lap. She actually wrote it linearly as the boy's life changes for the first draft. Then she went back with a storyteller's eye. She knew something was missing to make it more readable. It's always how you put the pieces together so it makes sense to the reader. Half of the story is viewed (by readers) as backstory.

She thought about using the literary device (often found in thrillers) where you write one chapter where something goes wrong, and then start back at the point that builds to the wrongness (linearly). But it wasn't until she wrote it as a dual line that the storytelling fell into place. You can see where the stories cross over and run in parallel. Remember, the "backstory" is 12 years, while the "modern day" is only 4 days.

But that dual storyline actually makes some romance readers feel it is not a romance novel. She has other readers who love the childhood years part of the story best. And it can be polarizing. (However, polarizing is great for a discussion group!) She knows that it can be difficult to figure out what is happening and cited her own experience with [The Time Traveler's Wife](#).

Sonali described a similar experience with **A Bollywood Affair**. The book was all the way to the copy edit stage before she wrote the prologue, which she feels ties the book completely together. However, some romance fans dislike the prologue because it is backstory.

One question that may help gauge if a person will be ok with dual time lines is "Are you a patient reader?" or "Will you give a book time to unravel?" Some people want a book that grabs them immediately and never let's go. That's not what happens in **A Distant Heart**, it takes a while for the story to unfold. Another book like this is [A Constellation of Vital Phenomena](#).

Becky asked Sonali, "Why does romance make for a good discussion book?"

Sonali admitted to not really understanding why anyone would think a romance novel wouldn't make a good discussion book.

Get a room full of romance readers, and you will have no doubt romance is discussible because you will have a hard time making them quit discussing a book.

For example, the primary elements for a "discussible book" would be

- Growth
- Conflict
- Addressing women's Issues – which are societal issues
 - Discussing the world we live in
 - The hot topic female sexual agency, which all romances handle differently
- Any overall discussion of romance can follow the history of
 - Feminism as its definition changes and it impacts society
 - Tracing the path of women within society as the understanding of their roles change

Part of why some discussion leaders question if romance is discussible is because one of the requirements for "discussible" has been assumed to be ambiguity in how the novel ends. With romance's guarantee of a Happily Ever After (HEA) ending, why are romance still discussible?

The ambiguity is there! Life is a slippery slope, and you don't know where you are going until you get there. However, knowing the ending (the HEA) is very different than knowing the path. The question is really where you end up, but how you get there.

Do romance plot lines have ambiguity?

Romance, Crime, Action, and Adventure novels all suffer from this criticism. In all, you know there is going to be a "happy" ending. The couple is going to get together, the criminals will be caught, and the good guys are going to win. You know the end of the plot. That doesn't make watching (and discussing) the journey any less entertaining.

In any of those books, you can discuss the character development, socio-economic issues, and all the elements authors.

Any book actually, even very literary books, have a typical story arc that the plot line follows. It's all the extra elements that the author includes – everything except the plot – that leads to discussion.

Romance writers know they need to follow genre structure. But that structure doesn't determine the story. What makes the story enjoyable is what is going to happen. When Sonali sits down to write, she doesn't know what's going to happen. She knows the genre structure, but not the path to get to the end.

Becky reminded us all that a golden tip of leading a book club (or discussing any book) is not to focus on the plot. You discuss everything around the plot.

Sonali related it back to her degree in architecture. Some people read voraciously in all genres. Some writers like to push the boundaries of genre structure. When you push those boundaries, it's like using architecture to create something that is awe inspiring. However, when you enter an "awe inspiring" house, can you find the bathroom? Finding the bathroom is the equivalent of "genre rules". If you break too many genre conventions, you can confuse the reader. Your building may be "awe inspiring", but it becomes less functional.

Genre conventions are not "knowing the plot". The plot is not determined by the genre structure. The plot is created by tracing character arcs and tracing underlying themes addressed. The only thing the genre convention means is the writer knows the end. That frees them in some sense to focus on the details and everything else in the book.

Again, when you know the end, it lets you focus more on enjoying the story – as a reader or a writer. Having the structure sets you free to dig deeper into themes and characters, because you know where the story is going to land. All those flavors the writer can add since they aren't focusing on the ending make the story more discussable, not less.

Part of why some people think romance isn't discussible is actually snobbery. Horror and romance are both genres that appeal to emotions. Becky related a plane flight where she and her seatmate were enjoying discussing books – in a lot of different genres. The person then asked Becky where she was headed. When Becky explained Stoker Con, the lady instantly shut down talking about books with Becky.

We all agreed we see this a lot. Some readers don't see emotionally driven books as worth their "serious talk time".

There is also an element of sexual identity involved. Discussing romance can shut down an man's interest. Discussing horror can shut down a woman's interest.

Sonali related a conversation she was having with a good friend. They were talking on the phone, and the friend doesn't understand why Sonali writes romance instead of something more serious. But then she interrupted the conversation because [Scandal](#) was about to come on and she couldn't miss it.

People make that assumption that "If I'm going to spend my time to read a book, it has to be something that will grow my mind." But no one says, "If I'm going to spend my time watching TV, it needs to be a show that grows my mind." There is good writing on TV, but people don't judge their own (and other's) time spent on television with the same snobbery they bring to reading.

Because Sonali is from India, people have certain expectations of Indian writers. But not every writer is [Arundhati Roy](#) or [Jhumpa Lahiri](#). There is inherent snobbery in assuming all Indian storytellers only have one type of story to tell. It's saying, "Isn't that nice that you are trying to be a writer." They aren't "trying to be a writer", they are just writing a different type of story.

Human beings want escape. It's ok if they find escape in TV or in reading. Either should be acceptable. However, humans also want to feel intellectually superior to other humans. It makes the battle against snobbery harder.

Non-romance readers are often shocked to discover romance writers left "intellectually superior" type fields to become writers. Lawyers, doctors, architects, and many other "dream careers" have turned out to not be as satisfying as writing romance.

Sonali sees romances as intimately tied to feminism. It is frowned upon in part because it is women writing for women. Women writing for JUST women.

However, in India, Bollywood movies are enjoyed and accepted by all. It's a very machismo culture, but men love Bollywood films too.

Bollywood movies have the same structure, same emotional appeals, and the same reasons for enjoying that romance novels have. So it's not really an issue that "emotional stories are not for me", because men can express a love of Bollywood. It's really isolated to the romance genre.

Hopefully, this will change as we are raising boys differently causing men to change. Again, this is romance connected to feminism in the real world.

Also, all it takes is one positive association – one good (to that reader) romance novel can change their mind and perception forever. Unfortunately, one bad (to that reader) novel equally reinforces their stereotype.

People may be thinking “I’m fine. I’m not missing anything.”, until they finally find something outside their normal zone that connects with them.

Becky brought up how everyone thinks Horror is suddenly “being written again” because of [Get Out](#). But horror and romance have always been there. It’s just more socially acceptable to say you like horror since *Get Out* won the Oscar for Best Screenplay.

Becky thinks romance may be the perfect solution if you are hearing from your book group “Not another sad book!”

Being romance guarantees you a happy ending. So romance is not going to be “too depressing”. There is a lot of angst and drama in some romance, so they aren’t “light and fluffy”. The appeal of romance is emotional based. All those emotions give you places to launch discussion.

Romance is about how the book makes you feel. And the best discussions are created when the group is split in their opinion of agree or disagree about the book. Having a book that is emotionally driven almost guarantees that split, that discussion. For a book to be discussible, you need to care about the characters. For any emotionally driven book to connect, the writer has to make you care about the characters.

The writing style is less important for discussion than that connection to the characters. You may need a hook that connects the reader to the characters to help you sell the book. (That may be how to find that “one good romance” than can change a person’s view of the genre.)

But the characters, themes, topics, and issues that create the emotional situation can all be addressed in discussion.

A book doesn’t need to be “tragedy porn” to be discussable.

We agreed that how you handsell a specific romance is different than how to sell genre to the book club. Again, it may work best to bring it back to TV. Ask your book group, “What kind of TV shows do you enjoy?” If you like that in your TV, this book has the same elements. Let’s discuss those elements.

- Do they like a specific historical setting? There will be a romance novel set then.
- Do they like more international books? Particularly easy to find romance set in England but can find romance from other international cultures if you look. The discussion leader just has to be willing to search.

Give them one know – the element they like – and one unknown. The know because an alternate hook.

We discussed whether our libraries had stickered **A Distant Heart** as romance or put it in the fiction section. Sometimes, the lack of classification makes them easier to handsell. As with many genres, when a book because “a classic”, such as **Pride and Prejudice**, no library puts genre labels on it. So while the genre labels help fans, they can also make it harder for some people to give a book a try.

Sonali asked us if book groups accepted Women’s Fiction titles. She admitted she is sold as Women’s Fiction but doesn’t understand what that means entirely.

Women’s fiction that works for book clubs is often issue driven. Also, women’s fiction is everything that takes place to women outside of obtaining a HEA.

Sonali pointed out that any complex romance is also going to be issue driven and include all the characters lives outside of the HEA. She pointed to one definition for women’s fiction she was given, “If you remove the

romance thread from the book, would the story still stand?" The book she is currently writing is a **Pride and Prejudice** flip (female is Mr. Darcy) around an Indian "Kennedy" type family and including 12 major characters. Even if you remove the love arc, there is still a story that stands.

In particular, the definition given by the [Women's Fiction Writers of Association](#) is very nebulous

Women's Fiction Writers Association is an inclusive organization of writers creating layered stories in which the plot is driven by the main character's emotional journey.

We found it hard to think of any currently popular story that isn't "driven by the main character's emotional journey". It's almost like Women's Fiction is used as a catch all for books that don't exactly fit anywhere. However, as Becky and the group pointed out, genres are crossing each other so much lately, it's almost impossible for one book to only fit in one genre. Genre borders are merging. Domestic Suspense is one of the most popular genres right now, and it was created by crossing traditional Psychological Suspense with Women's Fiction.

One librarian mentioned that part of the distinction seems to be on the publisher's end. If it is issued in trade paperback, it is "Women's Fiction", versus romance which is issued in mass market paperback.

Becky asked if not calling these stories romance, are we enforcing the stereotype and doing a disservice to readers by being snobs ourselves?

Sonali says her readers, especially in the current political climate, want predictability and comfort. Using the romance label implies a level of predictability in the plot that comforts many people.

Her books sales may suffer because her books are "too serious for fun" (escapist or romance) readers, but too fun for "serious readers".

People are going to consume the genre they want to consume. You can't really fight that to a great degree but need to let people have the enjoyment they want. She asked why we would want to push people outside their normal reading habits.

We agreed this was part of the dual nature of readers advisory. Why we would be more hesitant to try to convince a die-hard non-romance reader to give romance a try, part of the purpose of a book club is to get its members to go outside their comfort zone. We aren't trying to "trick them" so much as show connections they may not make on their own. Debbie related that her book club read [You Can't Go Home Again](#) by Thomas Wolfe, she quipped that they would later read a book that showed you could go home again – [Ain't She Sweet](#) by Susan Elizabeth Phillips. (Debbie had a tradition that her group would read one romance novel a year; similar to the plan Karen mentioned where her crime book club reads one nonfiction a year.)

Becky shared the idea, if you think your group won't discuss a romance novel, remember Sonali's comment that it's almost impossible to get romance fans to quit talking about their books. If you have a customer who is a hardcore romance fan, extend a special invitation for them to join the book group when you are discussing a romance novel. It will help expand the minds of those who don't understand the appeal to listen to some real fans discuss the appeal. Likewise, you create that agree/disagree divide that enlivens any book discussion.

Becky discussed that when a library picks a book for discussion, we mark the book with the subliminal message "This book is worth our time. This book will be worth your time." (A more accurate phrase than "We gave this book a stamp of approval." Especially since we often pick books specifically because they are controversial will create divisiveness about their story.) This is why we all have patrons who read the books our discussion groups are reading, but never come to the discussions. Also, all the marketing and mentions of a book we do for our book club stick that title in our user's minds. People see it on the website. They see it in the building. Eventually, it triggers their mind to give it a try – even if they don't realize that is why. Becky shared a story of a family member "discovering" [Lincoln in the Bardo](#) – not realizing they had been seeing it multiple places, but deciding to give it a try.

Sonali told us about the first writing class she ever took. The professor ask them to write down their genre. She wanted to but “commercial fiction” or “my genre is books”. It’s a naïve answer, but it is still reflected in her writing. She loves romance, she reads romance, but she is not sure she writes romance. Her books live in a place where shelf space doesn’t always exist in bookstores. She lives in the genre overlaps. That can be a mountainous road block to marketing and reaching new readers.

We discuss the “Storyteller Genre”, which were a lot of the authors Sonali grew up reading:

- [Sidney Sheldon](#) (Sonali views as her closest read-alike)
- [Harold Robbins](#)
- [Ken Follett](#)
- [Jeffrey Archer](#)
- [Jackie Collins](#)
 - o If Hollywood stories appealed to someone, Bollywood stories are a natural read-alike!

These authors commonly defined genre boundaries, and Sonali thought of them as “commercial fiction”. They write very discussable books precisely because they are hard to limit to one genre. [Stephen King](#) is another of these writers, where the public is often shocked to learn he writes non-horror but they then love those stories.

All these authors appeal to emotions. (Perhaps that appeal to emotions is what makes a “Storyteller”.) They also create memorable characters who stick with you for your whole life. Sonali still remembers a Jackie Collins novel and the characters that she read in 12th grade!

We asked Sonali for books she thought we should all know about:

- [My Beautiful Enemy](#), by Sherry Thomas

Sonali loves it because the heroine makes “real mistakes”. For example, she poisons the hero, runs away, and leaves him to die. But it is a romance with a happy ending. How do you get from that initial meeting to a HEA is a lot of fun!

Sherry Thomas also writes teen fantasy novels with the boarding school feel, [The Elementals Trilogy](#). And now she is writing mysteries, with a female Sherlock Holmes, [Lady Sherlock](#) series. All make great reading!

- [Love and Other Words](#), by Christina Lauren

Sonali thinks it would definitely work for a book club, and it bridges women’s fiction and romance. It has dual time lines, much like **A Distant Heart**.

- [Forbidden Hearts trilogy](#), by Alisha Rai

It’s a great soap opera of family interactions, with a Hatfield versus McCoys thread.

- **Take the Lead**, by Alexis Daria

Sonali loves the setup of a reality TV dance competition with the Latina dancer Gina Morales and the star of a Alaskan wilderness reality show Stone Nielson (who hates reality TV).

- Sonali also recommends any book by Alyssa Cole, and she loves Priscilla Oliveras.
- Beverly Jenkins feels like the stories your grandmother or aunt would tell. They are very well researched, historically accurate – but feel like the type of stories that only survive via oral tradition.

Don’t forget to check out [Lit with Love](#) on YouTube. They are great 30 minute interviews. Becky pointed out how great it was to hear how two authors talk about their works – which is different than fans, librarians, or reviewers discussing the same work.

Sonali will also be the [keynote speaker for RWA's Library Luncheon](#)

She's going to talk about how buying power can be used to influence the voices we see in publishing. It's never an immediate financial profit to reach out to new markets, but we need to realize it's not about what is convenient. Yes, it can be hard to change the structure built for 200 years about what is sellable and how to sell it, but we need to think and evolve. For an example, look at the Children's best seller's list.

Becky also brought up, if you don't open up new markets, the publishers also can't sell their backlist – where they make the most money.

The [next two Book Club Studies](#) will be:

- [My Favorite Thing is Monsters, Vol. 1](#), by Emil Ferris
(The sequel has been delayed, but might be done by Fall.)
On August 9th, from 2-4p, at Northbrook Public Library
- [The Leavers](#), by Lisa Ko
On November 7th, from 2-4p, at Stickney-Forest View Public Library

We are still looking for Leadership Topics for both discussions if you have a topic you'd like addressed, email Elizabeth Hopkins (hopkinse@lislelibrary.org)