Pushing the Limits
Alaska by foot, paddle and Viking grit

Pieces of History
Stories of heirlooms
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On the cover: Patrick Farrell ('04) scrambles over an icy boulder on his 4,000-mile trek – by foot, ski, packraft and determination – from Bellingham to northwest Alaska.
Sociologists Jen Lois and Joanna Gregson ('93) ask why romance writers don't get the literary credit they deserve

Jen Lois wasn't looking for love.

Then, through a neighbor, she discovered the "Twilight" series and fell hard. Lois read all four books, then read them again. The WWU sociology professor fell in love with romance novels, where endings are always happily ever after.

But "Twilight" was just the beginning. Lois and Joanna Gregson ('93, Sociology), a sociology professor at Pacific Lutheran University, have teamed up to study the authors of the most popular and least respected of literary genres: romantic fiction.

Romance novels — dismissed by many as mindless, formulaic, popculture pulp — are a commercial gold mine, accounting for about half of all commercial paperback book revenue. Romance novels were responsible for $1.44 billion in sales last year, according to a trade association.

To Lois and Gregson, this raises a fascinating question: Who is writing these books about love, all these stories with the power to shape our ideas about relationships and sexuality?

But in academic circles, the pair found romance a tough sell — at least at first. Lois has studied such subcultures as mountain search-and-rescue volunteers and home-schooling mothers. But when she applied for a grant to study romance writers, she was initially denied because the topic was determined to have "dubious scientific merit."

Last year, Lois and Gregson first presented their findings at a conference. When they introduced their topic, "Sneers and Leers: Romance Writers and the Stigma of Sexual Shamelessness," the room of sociologists started laughing.

"We weren't surprised by this," Lois says. "We said, 'That's what we're going to talk about. So thank you for that response.'"

By the time they finished, they sensed a change in the room.

"When we get to talk in-depth about our findings and how it has sociological significance, other sociologists are pretty supportive," Lois says.

Romance, largely written by, for and about women (an estimated 95 percent of writers are female), carries a stigma with a basis in sexism, Lois and Gregson argue. Even romance superstars like Nora Roberts, Debbie Macomber and Judith McNaught, who have sold millions of books, get asked: When are you going to write a real book? Romance writers tell of insulting or leer questions, such as how they "researched" the sexual content in their books.

Lois and Gregson want to dispel the notion that "professionalism equals masculine," writes Lois.
(People) don’t ask Stephen King how many fires he started with his telekinetic powers,” Lois says. "Men don’t get asked the same questions."

Studying romance is gathering steam and legitimacy in academia. The National Endowment for the Humanities recently contributed a $900,000 grant toward the Popular Romance Project, which includes a web site and documentary. The Chronicle of Higher Education wrote a story about increasing scholarly interest.

And it doesn’t hurt that “Fifty Shades of Grey,” the explosive best-seller labeled "mommy porn" by some, has flung romance fiction into the pop culture spotlight.

“They hit it at just the right point in terms of romance crossing over some kind of barrier into (the) more popular … area that people now know about and acknowledge more than they might have 10 years ago,” said Mick Cunningham, chair of Western’s Sociology Department.

Best friends since graduate school at the University of Colorado, where they bonded over jogging and “Beverly Hills 90210,” Lois and Gregson started researching romance writers about three years ago.

They attended a local chapter of the 10,000-member Romance Writers of America, at first intending to write a romance novel. Both published authors in their field, they figured it would be easy.

But – plot twist! – they were wrong. Writing compelling fiction was hard, they found, but it was easy to like the women who wrote it. In their research, Lois and Gregson have met doctors, lawyers, stay-at-home moms, college professors, ranchers, Ph.D.s and Microsoft employees.

“It surprised and humbled us,” Gregson says.

Marissa Berry (’08, English - Creative Writing) is an up-and-coming author with two books and two novellas published. Writing under the pen name Kinley Baker, she writes on weekends and during her lunch break from work at a Seattle bank. She can relate to the duo’s research. Berry has a workaround to combat negative perceptions.

“Sometimes, if people are hesitant to read romance,” she says, “give them a romance novel and don’t tell them it’s romance. They’ll enjoy it.”

Romance writers tell of insulting or leering questions, such as how they “researched” the sexual content in their books.

Meri Jo Barzilleri is a Bellingham freelance journalist whose work has appeared in USA Today, The Miami Herald, Seattle Metropolitan Magazine, The Peninsula Stater magazine, and others.