

## ♥ **Love Notes** / Romance / By Jaime Green

### The latest crop of romance novels features marquesses, dukes, journalists and federal agents.

**THE HAPPY ENDING** — happily ever after, or at least happily for now — is the defining trait of romance. No love story, no happy ending? Not a romance. But nobody says they have to start happy — and they often don't. The opening of Kerrigan Byrne's **HOW TO LOVE A DUKE IN TEN DAYS (St. Martin's, paper, \$7.99)** tests how darkly a romance can begin.

In the prologue to Byrne's latest historical romance, set 10 years before the rest of the book, Lady Alexandra Lane is raped by her school headmaster — and kills him in the act. This is a defining night in her life, cementing her to the two friends who help dispose of the body, and feeding the blackmailer who will torment her for the next decade.

In Chapter 1, Dr. Lane — she's become one of the few female archaeologists of the late Victorian era — meets the imposing Duke of Redmayne, to whom she feels a surprising and intense attraction and with whom she'll have her happy ending by book's end. Dr. Lane's family is newly destitute, and the duke needs a wife to produce an heir so that his conniving cousin's line won't take the title. There's a ball and a marriage of convenience and smoldering glances and searing kisses, not to mention assassination attempts. It's a level of action and intrigue perhaps more familiar to romantic suspense than historical romance, but regardless of the time period, all romance is a response to the time in which it's written. Byrne makes this explicit in the book's dedication: "To every survivor. #MeToo."

That dedication emphasizes a tension inherent in the novel. Many male/female romances, especially historicals, trace the arc of the hero's redemption — he starts out some kind of ass, scoundrel or rogue and must make himself worthy of the heroine's love. Some heroes are criminals, some are coldhearted, some are wounded, some are snobs. Redmayne is physically and emotionally scarred, but he's also a misogynist. Dancing with Alexandra at a ball early in the book, he muses: "Did he hold in his arms the rarest of creatures? A woman of substance. Of integrity?" It's her "artless" grace and "innocent" kisses that tell him so. Don't think for a second Redmayne's a virgin himself. But Alexandra isn't a virgin, either, and when Redmayne discovers this on their wedding night — practical realities of hymens aside — he flies into a cruel rage that's harder to read than the opening rape scene.

Over the rest of the novel, Redmayne and Alexandra do come to understand and love each other, but he remains the kind of domineering man whose heroism is questionable in the hashtagged era Byrne name-checks. Redmayne shows his love through possessiveness and jealousy, struggling until nearly the last page to believe Alexandra over his own suspicions. (His mistrustfulness is grounded in back story, but it's still unnerving and in real life would be a red flag.) He is tremendously mindful of Alexandra's history when they're in the bedroom, but not nearly as careful to avoid abusive tendencies outside of it. If powerful heroes didn't hold so much appeal, there'd be

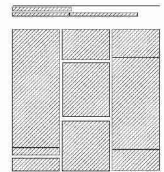
far fewer dukes and billionaires on the romance shelves, but the interplay of power and gender is complex. Redmayne's brand of dominion shares too much vocabulary with the realm of abuse that he's meant to counteract.

ling men." He answers, "Of course you don't . . . but you do like men who are in control." It's a crucial distinction and a mission statement for the modern alpha-male fantasy, of which Raider, a burly federal agent with a rigid morality, is a prime specimen. He's Brigid's handler in a scrappy deep-ops division of the Homeland Defense Department, where she's a hacker. She's not trained for the field as he is, but when her estranged father is implicated in the division's case against a Boston mobster, Brigid is pulled from her computer screens and into action.

The complex, but never convoluted, plot begins with Brigid bringing Raider to meet her father as her fiancé. The fake engagement gives the pair ample excuse to indulge their attraction under the guise of method acting, but the pretense quickly falls away. There's thankfully little hemming and hawing about real feelings or propriety, and much more thoughtful grappling with thornier issues. Raider holds himself and his loved ones to a strict moral code, especially when it comes to honesty, and Brigid is keeping secrets. The couple must also negotiate the power dynamics in their relationship — sexually, professionally and physically. Maybe most impressive, though, is the comedy Zanetti weaves through the suspense. Brigid and Raider's kooky co-workers are somehow still rich, fleshed-out characters. In particular, their fellow agent Clarence Wolfe is so weird he just shouldn't feel like a real person, yet he does; I can't wait for his book, which is next in this series. And for Brigid and Raider as a couple, humor surfaces in even their tensest moments, giving the high-stakes drama humanity and warmth.

**ZANETTI'S ACTION SEQUENCES** are sharp and dynamic. Her hacking sequences are far vaguer, but that's easy to forgive as long as the reader isn't versed in cybersecurity herself. I don't know how familiar most readers are with the mores and mechanics of journalism, but it's a testament to the copious charm of Rachel Spangler's **FIRE & ICE**

(Bywater Books, paper, \$16.95) that I was only minimally troubled by the fact that the sports journalist Max Laurens is kind of awful at her job. Max isn't a bad writer or broadcaster, but when she's assigned to cover a women's curling team as a last chance to save herself after a scandal, she does everything wrong. Not only is her first story a misguided and flatly insulting "humor" piece about how silly curling is, she doesn't do any research about her subject and doesn't even think it's a real sport. While romance characters need foibles and failures to recover from, I wish Max's had been a little more reasonable, and that she would have, at the very least, researched what curling was before writing about it.



Luckily, Max finds an excellent teacher in the team's skipper (that's curling for "captain"), Callie Mulligan. Callie is a devoted and gifted curler, and her athletic precision sliding stones is what first clues Max in to the fact that this is a deceptively sophisticated sport. That lithe prowess on the ice also sparks an attraction, but it develops more from the deep understanding between the two women. Spangler obviously loves curling almost as much as Callie does, and it's described with care and fascination. But just when it seems the romance might be playing second fiddle to the sport, Max and Callie emerge as a complicated, messy, believable match. The professional drive, stubbornness and pride that connect them also create the challenges to their happy ending. Spangler writes fights and misunderstandings with heartbreaking precision, but she puts her characters' hearts — and the readers' — back together by the end.

ROGER BERWICK, the Marquess of Chatton, and Fenella Fairclough grew up on neighboring estates in a town near the Scottish border. Five years ago their fathers conspired to arrange their marriage, but they both refused, Fenella even fleeing to her grandmother's home in Scotland. She returned a stronger, more confident woman, and eventually befriended Roger's wife. It was a brief and unhappy marriage, though; **HOW TO CROSS A MARQUESS** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, paper, \$7.99) opens with Roger a widower, grappling with guilt and grief. (This is Book 3 in Jane Ashford's The Way to a Lord's Heart series, in which each book's hero finds love in the aftermath of great loss.) The romantic arc roughly follows the enemies-to-lovers model, as Roger and Fenella discover a connection wrought not just by their pasts, but by the ways they've grown and changed over the years. While Fenella struggles to care for her ailing father, run their estate and stand up to her domineering brothers-in-law, the town is swept up in rehearsing an elaborate historical pageant. It's a lovely mix of high-stakes drama and homely atmosphere, with a strong sense of community wrapped around the couple.

The fantasies of romance are often robust — powerful men with thighs like tree trunks, bottomless fortunes and tongues like magic (for repartee and darker deeds). This

one is built on subtler dreams, save a single superhuman feat of swimming. There's a solitary mention of Roger's broad shoulders, but many more of his short temper, tendency to put his foot in his mouth and general social ineptness. Fenella is brave and smart and sensitive, but none of that can help her when the sexist standards of her time rob her of any independent economic power. And yet this story is still an escape, shot through with sweetness and tenderness. I was so sorry to have to return to reality when it was done. □

EARLY ON IN Rebecca Zanetti's **FALLEN** (Zebra, paper, \$7.99), Brigid Banaghan tells Raider Tanaka, "I don't like control-

**JAIME GREEN** is the Book Review's romance columnist. Her first book, about the science and science fiction of life beyond Earth, is forthcoming.



LISA TEGTMEIER