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# “Prince Charming with an Erection”: The Sensational Pleasures of the Bonkbuster

AMY BURGE<sup>o</sup>, JODI MCALISTER, AND CHARLOTTE IRELAND

## Abstract

*The bonkbuster—an explosively popular genre of women’s writing in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s—had an interesting resurgence in 2023. UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak claims to be a fan of bonkbuster author Jilly Cooper, whose novel *Rivals* (1988) is being adapted for television. But what is a bonkbuster? And how is it different from the genre with which it is most associated: the romance novel? In this article, the first to analyze the bonkbuster in detail, we focus on two concerns common to both forms—sex and relationships—and explore how bonkbusters revel in their own “badness.” We argue that the pleasures of a bonkbuster are rooted in their sensationalism and their ironic potential.*

## Introduction

In May 2023, it was reported that UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s favorite writer was Jilly Cooper, “the English author whose raunchy tales of romance and infidelity among horse riders and show jumpers have been best-sellers” (McDonald). Asked about this on British TV program *This Morning*, Sunak claimed, somewhat embarrassedly, to be a fan of Cooper’s work, listing *Riders* (1985), *Rivals* (1988), *Polo* (1991), *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous* (1993) and *Appassionata* (1996) among some of his favorite books. One word that came up repeatedly in the coverage of Sunak’s admiration for Cooper’s books was “bonkbuster,” described in *Politico* as “a British term for a series of 1970s and 80s steamy romance novels” (McDonald). This is a neat definition, which aligns with both the works of Jilly Cooper and the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “bonkbuster”: it is “chiefly British

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Contemporary Women’s Writing

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(colloquial and humorous)” and describes “a type of popular novel characterized by frequent explicit descriptions of sexual encounters between the characters” (“Bonkbuster, n.”). However, pinning down what constitutes a bonkbuster is, as we will discuss here, actually considerably harder.

The genre label “bonkbuster” has been applied with varying degrees of frequency to the works of many authors, but there are four to whom it is applied repeatedly: Sunak’s beloved Cooper, as well as Jackie Collins, Shirley Conran, and Judith Krantz (the first three authors British, the fourth American).<sup>1</sup> These authors were all writing—and selling millions of copies of their books—at approximately the same time: while Collins’ first novel *The World Is Full Of Married Men* was published in 1968, she and the other three authors were at the height of their powers and popularity in the late 1970s and 1980s. This locates them amid major developments in other forms of women’s writing, including, but not limited to, second-wave feminist writing and criticism (see Gelder 130) and, importantly, popular romance fiction.

This is where the question of what bonkbusters are starts to become complicated. The *Politico* definition positions the bonkbuster as a form of romance fiction. The two are often equated: like romance, bonkbusters feature sex and relationships and are largely written by female authors for a presumed female reader. However, as we explore in this essay, the two genres are related but not identical. They have different internal structures, priorities and attitudes towards love, sex, intimacy and marriage.

This article aims to shed light on two simple questions: what is a bonkbuster and how is it different from a romance novel? After contextualizing the bonkbuster in the extant scholarship on itself and romance fiction, we explore this question through a thematic reading of four novels by key authors: Krantz’s *Scruples* (1978), Conran’s *Lace* (1982), Collins’ *Hollywood Wives* (1983), and Cooper’s *Riders* (1985), before turning to our own theorization of this slippery genre category.

A key thing that differentiates bonkbusters from romance is that while romance remains perennially popular, bonkbusters have all but disappeared from the contemporary publishing marketplace. We are now about thirty years after the bonkbuster’s heyday—so why undertake this theorization now? There are several answers to this question. The first is simply that no one has done this work before. There is not much scholarship on bonkbuster texts and/or authors, and even less which considers it holistically as a genre. The second is that these books were immensely popular, which means they mattered deeply to many people. Their readers were predominantly women, and so understanding what these books are, what they did and why they mattered offers us a new way to look at a turbulent and fast-changing period in Western women’s history and to contextualize women’s reading. Finally, as the example of Sunak shows, just because these books are no longer being published in large quantities does not mean they are no longer relevant. Bonkbusters are still being read (and adapted—a new adaptation of Cooper’s *Rivals* is filming at the time of writing in 2023). These books and authors still loom large in

1 Other notable bonkbuster authors include Judith Gould, Celia Brayfield, Sally Beauman and Penny Vincenzi.

literary and publishing history and readers' memories. In this article, by unpacking what a bonkbuster is and its relationship (or lack thereof) to that other famous women's genre, the romance novel, we explore what it did—and, in some cases, still does—for its readers.

## The Bonkbuster, Romance and Genre

The term *bonkbuster* was coined by British author Sue Limb in 1989, writing as Dulcie Domum for the column *Bad Housekeeping* in *The Guardian*:

Publisher . . . [enquires] about progress of blockbuster. Or as spouse now refers to it, bonk-buster. . . . Grab pen, and whisk Charlotte Beaminster from jacuzzi to bathroom window, from which she glimpses new gardener: stocky, balding Slav, with magnetic eyes and masterful manner with turnips. Feel at last bonkbuster is on the road. (Limb)

The etymology of the word is clear: the *buster* of *blockbuster*, combined with the sexual slang word *bonk*. Its constituent parts are, then, sex and popularity—and perhaps also melodrama, if we include the linguistic overlay of *bonkers*. These are, broadly, things we could also ascribe to the romance novel. Romance is a very popular genre that frequently features sex scenes and sometimes also veers into wild spectacle. However, the two forms are ultimately quite different in terms of plot structure and priorities.

The romance novel is reasonably easy to define: it “center[s] around a love plot that holds the promise of a future with a unified emotional life for two or more protagonists” (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo 2). A bonkbuster shares neither these priorities nor this narrative trajectory. Its tendency towards soap operatic expansiveness means identifying a central plot can be difficult, and while they generally end with some form of closure, there is no guarantee it will be happy. Bonkbusters are generically much more amorphous than romances. Narrow definitions of the romance novel, such as Pamela Regis' eight structural elements, all of which “must be present for a work to be recognizable as a romance novel” (30), are too limiting to fully encapsulate the bonkbuster. These are: “the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal” (Regis 30). Bonkbusters share with romance a focus on female protagonists and romantic and sexual relationships, and the use of dramatic barriers couples must overcome to be together. However, these aspects are not the focus of bonkbusters in the way they are for romance. Catherine M. Roach provides a broader definition of romance, identifying nine essential elements which “identify the core claims about romantic love made by the broad romance narrative

[which are] exemplified in cultural products such as romance novels (as well as romantic comedy movies, pop lyrics, advertising, etc.)” (20). Roach articulates:“(1) IT IS HARD TO BE ALONE, especially (2) as a WOMAN IN A MAN’S WORLD, but (3) romance helps as a RELIGION OF LOVE, even though it involves (4) HARD WORK and (5) RISK, because it leads to (6) HEALING, (7) GREAT SEX, and (8) HAPPINESS, and it (9) LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD for women” (21). While useful, this similarly does not describe the bonkbuster. Taking one of Roach’s elements as an example—*Romance leads to great sex, especially for women*—it is clear this is not true of bonkbuster books, in which examples of terrible sex abound.

The bonkbuster is thus simultaneously aligned with and distanced from the romance novel. For Catherine E. Riley and Lynne Pearce, the bonkbuster and Harlequin Mills & Boon romance act similarly as “a panacea to women’s real-life struggles” (115–16). Scott McCracken argues that Cooper’s *Polo* “is structured around a traditional romance narrative,” where the heroine’s “search for herself . . . is conducted, in the tradition of popular romance, through several love affairs” (42). Lisbeth Larsson, in a study of *Lace*, acknowledges the importance of romance for a text that “sets great score by the romantic ideal” (286) but also recognizes the text’s “breakdown of the romantic dream” (278). The bonkbuster thus “counts the losses and moves into new positions” (286). We could perhaps consider this a kind of innovation; this is key to Rita Felski’s consideration of the bonkbuster, where she posits that “[r]ather than either repeating the age-old story of feminine romance . . . it offers a new script,” providing “a marked contrast to conventional feminine forms such as romance and soap opera” (99, 109). For Imelda Whelehan, the distinction is one of conservatism (romance) versus liberation (bonkbusters) (11). She argues that bonkbusters “steer a bizarre course between the traditional pulp romance, the fairy story, and the gossip column” (Whelehan 151). Ken Gelder goes the furthest, labeling Collins’ fiction as “utterly anti-romantic,” reading her novels as “radically different, in particular, to the kind of lusciously evoked, lingering sex scenes one finds in women’s erotic romance fiction” (129).

The bonkbuster, then, is a curiously nebulous genre. Like romance, it falls under the broad literary category of “women’s fiction,” as the two share a target readership. However, at an industry as well as textual level, the two forms operate differently—the bonkbuster, with its celebrity authors like Collins and its focus on the scandalous, was positioned to court gossip and visibility far more than the romance, into which contemporaneous 1980s marketing encouraged women to “disappear” (Modleski 36). Neither is the bonkbuster analogous to chick lit, a genre emergent in the 1990s, defined by its confessional, first-person narrative style (Montoro 135), humor (Ponzanesi 158) and emphasis on a young female protagonist seeking personal fulfillment (Gormley). While a shared preoccupation with sex and shopping in the two forms might suggest a close connection, there are significant textual differences, such as in focalization (chick lit usually has a single protagonist, while bonkbusters have many), typical thematic concerns (bonkbusters are far more

willing to tackle heavy issues like rape, adultery, etc.) and extremity (chick lit loves the awkward, while the bonkbuster loves the abject).

Many bonkbuster titles contain elements of other popular genres. Mystery is one: many bonkbusters feature a major mystery plot (the iconic question which drives *Lace*—“which one of you bitches is my mother?”—is one notable example). Thriller is another, as the texts build sensational moments on top of each other in the same way the thriller builds escalating thrills. However, the bonkbuster is not these things either: evident not least in its apparent disappearance from the literary marketplace, while these other genres remain. Bonkbusters are something *else*.

One of the shared characteristics of the four texts we discuss here is the extraordinary contemporaneous popularity they enjoyed. Collins’ *Hollywood Wives* reportedly sold fifteen million copies (“Jackie Collins”); Cooper’s *Riders* over a million (“Meet the Author”); Conran’s *Lace* three million (“The Blogger’s Guide”); and Krantz’s *Scruples* well over three million (Carbonara).<sup>2</sup> McCracken argues that many bestsellers do not fit neatly into genre categories and that trying to think about bestselling genres, rather than titles, is only productive to a point: “[i]n fact a better definition of the formal characteristics of the bestselling title, as opposed to the bestselling genre, is its ability to integrate several popular genres” (42). This genre hybridity is a characteristic of all four texts, and of many other works by these authors. Are Collins, Cooper, Conran and Krantz then simply four authors who wrote bestselling titles at approximately the same time, whose texts were grouped together mostly because of subject matter and the fact the authors were women—and whose books do not belong to a discrete and identifiable literary category at all?

If we limited our approach to genre simply to the texts themselves, we could make this argument. While there are some key thematic similarities between these novels—for the most part, we agree with Whelehan’s assertion that “[t]he bonkbuster, or sex and shopping novel as it came to be known, sold dreams, unthinkable riches, and the satisfaction of a good revenge plot” (144)—there are also some major differences between these four authors’ works. Indeed, discussions of bonkbusters which focus on only one author often draw conclusions about the broader generic context which are not necessarily upheld in other works. For example, Felski argues, in a chapter on Krantz, that the plot of what she calls the “money, sex, and power novel,” of which she also notes Collins is an author, “features a glamorous, ambitious heroine who fights her way to the top of a corporate empire while engaging in conspicuous consumption of men and designer labels” (100). This is certainly true of Billy Ikehorn in Krantz’s *Scruples*, but it is considerably less true of Cooper’s *Riders*, where the two central characters and plot drivers, Jake Lovell and Rupert Campbell-Black, are men. It is arguably not even entirely true of *Lace* and *Hollywood Wives*, where a key structural point is that they have multiple focal characters: heroines, rather than a heroine, some of whom share this Krantzian narrative (like Judy in *Lace*), but some of whom do not (like Angel in *Hollywood Wives*). Felski also locates the money, sex and power novel as

2 These figures may not be entirely accurate—it is notoriously difficult to get accurate sales figures for books. However, they are still useful to illustrate the broader point: these books were wildly, immensely popular.

part of a “distinctively American tradition of popular stories depicting the pursuit of happiness through social mobility and financial accumulation” (108–09). This can certainly be argued of Krantz; however, the other three authors are British, which articulates itself to varying degrees in their work.

However, if we broaden our perspective out from the texts, these four texts and these four authors undoubtedly *belong* together. Collins, Cooper, Conran and Krantz are citizens of the same “genre world,” a lens through which we can understand genre as “a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts” (Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins 997). Within the publishing industry and socially, if not always textually, these four authors are grouped together: broadly speaking, they are produced and read alongside each other. The paratexts of these books—which play a key role in understanding genre, as they tell us how a “text is both intended to be and [is] actually understood” (McAlister, *New Adult Fiction* 84)—make this clear. Peritextually, the covers have a similar visual language: author and title in large, often embossed, letters, sometimes accompanied by a somewhat scandalous image (the cover of *Riders*, for instance, features a man’s hand on a jodhpur-clad woman’s bottom). The covers are similar but not identical to the iconic “clinch” covers of the historical romance novels popular at the time (sometimes colloquially referred to as “bodice rippers”), an illustration of the uneasy relationship between the two forms. Epitextually, the links between Collins, Cooper, Conran and Krantz are even clearer. As author figures, there are interesting similarities between them: the latter three wrote for women’s magazines prior to their books being published, while Collins frequently appeared in their pages. Moreover, though, turning from the author to the reader: Collins, Cooper, Conran and Krantz are the four names repeatedly invoked in media discussions of the bonkbuster (an extremely nonexhaustive list: see Barnett; Hughes; Pelling), making it clear how frequently they were read and understood together. If, as Brian Attebery argues of fantasy fiction, we can understand the bonkbuster as a “fuzzy set” which is “defined not by boundaries but by a center,” then these four authors are recognized as the center socially and in the industry—even though “there may be no single quality that links an entire set” (12–13).

Furthermore, turning back to the texts, we contend there *are* qualities that link this set, shared across these four authors, even though the volume may be turned up or down on these qualities in individual texts. The three aspects of a genre world reinforce each other: “[t]here are no genre-based social connections without textual patterns and expectations, and these patterns lose currency and power without the industrial machine to reproduce them” (Wilkins, Driscoll and Fletcher 3). To put this another way: these four authors might have been marketed in similar ways, and read in similar ways, but this almost certainly would not have been the case without at least *some* kind of common textual elements to justify it.

This then leads us to the key question of this article: “what is a bonkbuster?” We have chosen not to take a formalist approach to answering this question. While there are some potential answers—the presence of multiple focal characters, for



instance, seems common across the genre—the bonkbuster does not work like the romance, where there is a mandatory central arc (the love story) and set conclusion (the happy ending). Plot structure is not its defining feature. Rather, below, we unpack two common concerns of the bonkbuster and read them against common concerns of romance fiction—sex and relationships—using the four authors’ works as our corpus, before we move onto a broader theorization of the pleasures of the form.

### **(Bad) Sex in the Bonkbuster**

If anything can be considered key to the bonkbuster, it is sex—bonking is, after all, very literally in the name. It has this in common, at least to an extent, with romance: while sex scenes are not mandatory in the romance novel, they are common enough to be a recognizable textual feature (McAlister, *The Consummate Virgin* 135). Romance fiction is “sex-positive” and “women in romance novels are always sexually satisfied” (Roach 25). The bonkbuster shares some of romance’s sexual expression, particularly the idea that “sexuality is . . . an important and positive part of being human” (25). The heroines of bonkbusters often find enjoyment in their sexual experiences, and the texts describe in great detail their sensations of arousal and desire. For example, in *Lace*, when Maxine first sleeps with her husband Charles, she “felt the shock waves on her scalp, in her breasts, in her groin” and “a little moan left her lips” (Conran 205). But bonkbusters deviate from romance novels in that they also detail bad sex: forbidden, adulterous, incestuous, disappointing, shocking and unwanted.

Bonkbuster sex is often unsatisfying for women, particularly the first time. In *Lace*, when Maxine loses her virginity, she wonders, “Was that all? All they had speculated about and hoped for . . . all that had been hinted at in a hundred magazine romances? This damp patch of bloody sheet under her elbow, the unfamiliar, sweaty smell of bodies, the sour smell, this sticky stuff trickling over her thighs” (76). The reference to romance recalls the “good sex” anticipated by these young women who had regarded sex as that which was “invariably romantic and never left you sleeping on the damp patch. They never imagined Prince Charming with an erection and certainly not wearing a rubber” (48). Similarly, in *Scruples*, Valentine loses her virginity at the age of twenty-two to Alan, who exclaims “Oh, shit—no!” (Krantz 194) when she confirms to him that she is a virgin. Valentine lies “sprawled on her back in a jumble of sexual quickening, pain, and the beginnings of a huge embarrassment” as “she felt him shoving roughly into her with two of his fingers, like a battering ram” (194). Echoing Maxine, Valentine similarly wonders, “Was this how it was? Why had he not been more tender? How could he not know that she was aroused and unsatisfied?” (194). It is worth noting that some historical romance novels published contemporaneously also featured bad virginity loss scenes for their heroines; however, there is an important distinction, which is that such scenes were



usually rapes, and these heroines often experienced multi-orgasmic sexual pleasures with these same men later once they were recuperated into the romance narrative (McAlister, *Consummate Virgin* 154). This is different from the depictions of bad virginity loss in bonkbusters, where sex is consensual but (literally) anticlimactic and a man who is bad in bed rarely becomes better. If romance offers sexual fantasy, the bonkbuster relishes sexual realities.

As such, bonkbuster sex is often abject, foregrounding the messiness of intimate bodies in a way that is largely absent from the romance novel (perhaps as a function of the fact that sex in romance usually features two characters destined for a romantic happy ending). In *Riders*, Fenella's sexual partner Enrico's "chest [was] matted with black hairs. . . . When Enrico seized her head, forcing it down she nearly threw up" (Cooper 685). Bonkbuster sex can also be disappointing. In *Lace*, we follow Pagan's thoughts as she "was duly stabbed with what she privately called the marital *chippolata*, wearily wishing that [her husband] Robert would stop touching her nipples as if he were turning up the volume" (Conran 273). Pagan's efforts to improve their sex life are unsuccessful; Robert, "purple with rage" at her tentative request for him to "wait for [her]," quotes "the *Kinsey Report*", saying "the average man took two and a half minutes to climax, which meant that she was getting thirty seconds more than average, didn't it?" (271). For Helen in *Riders*, sex with her husband Rupert is always anxiety-provoking. She is often "too tense and nervous of interruption to gain any satisfaction" (Cooper 212), and Rupert coldly remarks "you're like a frozen chicken. Fucking you is like stuffing sausage meat into a broiler. I'm always frightened I'll discover the giblets" (426). Unsurprisingly, Helen, like *Lace*'s Kate, fakes her orgasms.

As the reference to the Kinsey Report indicates, bonkbusters are aware of shifting contexts in discussions of women's sexuality. By focusing on the sometimes-disappointing realities of sex, bonkbusters are in many ways forcefully advocating for a woman's right to sexual pleasure. This is explicitly outlined in *Lace*, when Kate's later-in-life sexual partner Tom tells her, "You have as much right as a man to an orgasm and the way you reach it is your business" (Conran 493–94). The couple "asked each other all the relevant questions, such as do you like it like this, harder, softer, faster, slower" (494), culminating in Kate's first orgasm through penetration. This is different from Kate's first sexual encounter, where the sexual double standard is clearly positioned as the reason for a lack of sexual pleasure for her (and, perhaps, women more broadly):

He seemed pleased with himself, but . . . [she] felt oddly disappointed, wobbly and stranded. Perhaps there was something wrong with her? Perhaps she was frigid? It did not occur to her that François was at fault. Boys, she assumed, knew how to do these things. Perhaps she just needed more practice. She supposed that she'd get the hang of it in time. (63)

Through Kate's questioning, the reader is encouraged to identify with her—this is a shared, common experience—but also to identify the gender inequality.

Bad sexual encounters—especially early ones—frequently have sweeping implications in bonkbusters: sex can be a scarring experience. In *Lace*, Kate is molested by her friend Pagan’s mother while taking a bath—the older woman “reached out with one manicured hand and squeezed Kate’s nipple” (37). Conran emphasizes the abjection of this scene, alongside Kate’s embodied reactions: “Kate was frozen with horror, unable to move. To her bewilderment and mortification she felt a sharp thrill in her groin. She could see the pores of Mrs. Trelawney’s nose, the drooping, fleshy folds above her eyes, black-beaded with mascara” (37). We are told “That unfortunate few minutes was destined to have a far-reaching effect on Kate’s future love life, when in the passionate embrace of a man, she felt almost unbearable sexual excitement—and then fear, repulsion and shame” (38). However, as seen in Kate’s encounter with Tom, good sex can be curative, offering a therapy of sorts. Similarly, in *Riders*, Helen’s frigidity is “cured” by her affair with Jake Lovell. Jake believes that “[f]rigid was a gross over-simplification, a term used by men about women who no longer loved them physically. He believed Helen had been very badly frightened but was not frigid” (Cooper 746). This is, perhaps, some common ground with the romance novel.

However, good sex in the bonkbuster does not necessarily have to take place with a female character’s ultimate long-term partner. The narrative impetus towards settled, stable monogamy is nowhere near as strong as in the romance and good sex can be part of a heroine’s longer individual sexual journey without necessarily being tied to romantic love. In *Scruples*, Billy reflects on her previous casual sexual encounters, declaring “[a]ll those cocks of all the various male nurses, Jake included, had been exactly what one of the words for them was: tools” (Krantz 567). For Billy, casual sex is key to her self-growth, allowing her to feel more like herself and establish an individual identity that had been subsumed through her marriage to the much older Ellis. The expansive scope of bonkbuster plots—often taking place over decades—allows the reader to follow an individual’s sexual journey through multiple partners and experiences. This gives a far more holistic view of sex than the more tightly focused romance novel, providing space for characters to compare, contrast and, crucially, improve their experiences of sexual pleasure.

But perhaps the most notable and memorable feature of sex in the bonkbuster is that it is often designed to be shocking, for readers and for characters. One of the most infamous bonkbuster sex acts is the so-called goldfish scene in *Lace*. This is not a major scene, and does not involve any of the four female protagonists, yet it endures in readers’ memories of *Lace* (see Faircloth; Hughes):

With silken cords [Abdullah] . . . would bind the wrists of the more adventurous ones to the bedhead and then he would dip one golden hand . . . into the bowl of golden fish that always seemed to be at his bedside. Abdullah would quickly scoop out one little fish and swiftly push the wriggling creature into the girl. At this point, she generally stiffened and shrieked with surprise, but Abdullah threw his body on top of hers and

held her hard against the mattress until she relaxed and was able to enjoy the strange erotic sensations as she felt the little fish move inside her warm body. As soon as the girl started to groan with pleasure, Abdullah would slide down her body and—with great dexterity—he would languorously suck out the goldfish. (Conran 281)

The use of adverbs—“quickly,” “swiftly,” “languorously”—and a focus on the anonymous girl’s bodily reactions—“stiffening,” “shrieking,” “sensations”—heighten the impact and the shock of this scene. It is a clear example of the “bonkers” aspect of the bonkbuster, but the shock here arguably comes both from the scandalous sex act itself (the fish) and the fact that it is ultimately a pleasurable one.

However, not all shocking sex acts in the bonkbuster are experienced this way. Quite often, when focal female characters find themselves in scandalous sexual situations, the experience is negative. *Riders* includes an extended foursome scene between Rupert, Helen, Rupert’s best friend Billy and Billy’s wife Janey, which takes place on holiday in Kenya. After a day of mounting sexual tension between the two couples, Rupert proposes they all “go to bed . . . together” (Cooper 707). Aside from the scandal of the four friends ending up in bed together, the shock factor is largely drawn from Helen’s absolute reluctance. Most of the scene is played out from her horrified perspective, contrasted with the whooping eagerness of the others. Rupert locks her in the bedroom as his “vice like grip on her arm tightened” (708). He chastises her, “Don’t be a fucking spoilsport. We might finally find out what turns you on,” asking Janey to help him undress Helen, who desperately tries to cover her body saying, “I can’t, I can’t. . . I truly can’t” (708). She lies with “her eyes glazed, her hair coming down, as responsive as a corpse . . . rigid with horror, her teeth clenched, eyes closed” (709). Later, as Billy ejaculates inside her, she starts to cry, before giving “a moan of terror, shrinking away from Janey, eyes darting frantically for a way of escape. But, like bookends, Rupert and Billy blocked her exit” (709). Reading this scene through Helen’s eyes, it is terror, rather than desire, which is foregrounded. While Rupert, Billy and Janey find satisfaction and enjoyment through this encounter, by returning repeatedly to Helen’s distress, Cooper captures for the reader the uneasy (and shocking) interplay between pleasure and suffering.

Sometimes, though, bonkbuster sex is shocking not because it is pleasurable or negative but simply because it is scandalous—inside and outside of the diegesis. In *Hollywood Wives*, Neil and his mistress Gina share a threesome with “a slightly built Eurasian female,” who was “quite naked apart from a white lace garter belt which emphasized her silky tangle of pubic hair” (Collins 279). A threesome is perhaps not in itself shocking (although rare in romance novels of the era), but Neil “knew without a doubt that this was to be the most exciting sexual experience of his life” (288). At the moment of climax, Neil has a heart attack: “pain. So sudden. So unexpected” (293). Realizing what has happened, Gina “panicked and tried to throw him off, her vagina contracting in a most peculiar way” (293). As Neil “attempted to withdraw from her clinging wetness,” he “couldn’t pull out. His penis felt as if it

were caught in a vise” (Collins 293, 294). The couple are clamped together, unable to be separated. They are taken by ambulance—still stuck together—to the hospital. So scandalous is this event that soon “Beverly Hills buzzed with the news” (322): “Did you hear he was with Gina Germaine? Did you know they were taken into the hospital joined like a couple of mating dogs?” (323). Again, the novel’s internal audiences are as scandalized as the external reader.

Sex occurs frequently in bonkbusters—it is a key element of the genre. But what makes bonkbuster sex unique is not its frequency, but its multiplicity. Whereas romance sex is largely homogeneous—it is always pleasurable, usually occurs with the love interest, and brings the couple closer together—bonkbuster sex is multifarious. It can be good or bad, desired or unwanted, quotidian or exceptional. Describing sex in all its contradictory disappointment, abjection and delight makes it more relatable than the fantasy sex of romance, but it also, crucially, insists on a woman’s right to sexual pleasure, while showing its characters (and, by extension, readers) how to get it. Bonkbuster authors gleefully and scandalously explore the fleshy and messy realities of sex, acknowledging its importance for female characters—particularly their right to an orgasm—and the significance of sex for interpersonal relationships. It is to bonkbuster relationships that we now turn.

### **(Bad) Relationships in the Bonkbuster**

At the beginning of *Lace*, two of the four central characters, Kate and Pagan, sit in their shared bedroom at boarding school and discuss “all aspects of being a woman” in their imagined future:

Always it was unanimously agreed that they would dare all for true love, which would instantly be recognizable as such. Next, they decided what sort of man they were going to marry and sketched their personal Prince Charming to each other. They discussed what their wedding dress would look like, and then the honeymoon was described. (Conran 48)

If bonkbusters were romance novels, Kate and Pagan would eventually meet their Prince Charmings. There would be trials and tribulations, of course, and they might lose faith along the way, but that romantic apotheosis would eventually be achieved. This is not, however, how things tend to turn out in bonkbusters. Just as sex is often mundane or bad, so too are romantic relationships, especially marriages. The majority of female characters begin where Kate and Pagan do in the excerpt above, with romantic dreams of a happy, loving, fulfilling marriage (the endpoint of most romances—especially romances of the period in which bonkbusters were written, where the demonstration of commitment via marriage specifically was a much stronger textual mandate than it is in romances now). However, rather than romantic relationships bringing the female characters love and fulfillment, more frequently, they bring them disappointment and disillusionment.

3 Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the time period, Toby's queerness is treated as abject in a way that is deeply troublesome for the modern reader.

*Lace* is an excellent example of this. Three of the four central characters experience enormously disappointing marriages. Pagan's first marriage to Robert (who was initially engaged to Kate) is almost instantly disappointing—"[a]lmost immediately after the wedding reception, the marriage started heading for the rocks" (Conran 271)—and eventually becomes a relationship "of polite, cold hate" (282), driving Pagan to alcoholism. Kate is "hopelessly dominated" by her eventual first husband, Toby, "who told her how to dress, look, think, feel, behave" (360). She is immensely distressed when he reveals his preference for dressing as a woman in the bedroom: "One week she had had a husband and the next week she had this horror" (379).<sup>3</sup> Kate and Pagan divorce these husbands, but Maxine remains with her husband, Charles, despite the fact he is unfaithful to her for several years: it is only after Judy warns him he might lose her—where, notably, she appeals not to his "better instincts, but to his Gallic instinct for self-preservation" (248), playing on the fears that he might lose Maxine as a hostess and business asset more than as a wife—that he desists. Even then, their marriage is colored by the fact that it will never embody the romance's happy ending. "However much he loves you, Charles has grown used to you," Maxine's aunt Hortense ominously tells her: "It's a pity that brides are never warned that they will undoubtedly fall in love again with someone else, and so will their husbands" (246). Judy herself, the most pragmatic of the four characters, never marries—"I suspect that women overrate falling in love," she claims, at the age of 22 (215)—but experiences something of a crisis over the subject when she falls in love later in life and her lover Griffin divorces his wife and proposes to her:

For years, Judy had been lucky enough to have success, fame, money and love, but until today, she lacked what most women hope for, and indeed expect—a husband and a child. And now she suddenly knew that she could have it all. Griffin was free to marry her, and he wanted to marry her—that was what mattered to Judy. To her surprise, however, a small voice at the back of her head kept insistently whispering, "What have you to gain by marrying Griffin? Griffin consistently cheated on his wife: ignore the reasons and remember the fact; for years Griffin has followed a pattern of cheating on his wife. No matter whether he felt trapped, bored or resentful, or whether he felt he was missing something. Griffin has developed the habit of cheating on his wife. So why risk turning into Griffin's wife? Why not continue your present relationship, which has been rock-steady for so long?" (398)

Judy's dilemma is a clear illustration of the tension at the heart of the bonkbuster, which both ties it to and divorces it from the romance novel: it centers the romantic ideal of love and marriage but also deals directly and frequently with its failure (Larsson 278). Dana Cloud writes of the long-running reality romance show *The Bachelor* that it "invites two kinds of investment simultaneously: the pleasure of the romantic fantasy and the pleasure of irony in recognizing the fantasy's folly,"

which encourages “an ironic viewing posture [that] enables one to enjoy both the romance and its emptiness” (414). The bonkbuster makes a similar invitation. Unlike the romance novel, which has a deep sincerity at its heart in its treatment of love, marriage, sex and relationships, the bonkbuster has an irony. We see the fantasy—but also the fantasy’s failure, especially for the female characters.

This is evident in all the books in the corpus. Collins’ *Hollywood Wives*, for instance, is littered with marriages that expose an emptiness or a dishonesty at the heart of the institution. Ross and Elaine Conti are stuck in a marriage (his third, her second) in which they repeatedly cheat and which has gone stale, the ecstatic and emotional heights of the beginning of their relationship having flatlined: “Oh, what a lover Ross Conti had been then!” Elaine reflects, after a routine sexual encounter which she describes as “like a favorite meal. Good but predictable. She had given up wishing that Ross would do something different” (Collins 159). Even though Elaine eventually realizes that she “actually loved the lazy, two-timing, thoughtless son of a bitch” (349), and they end the novel still married, it hardly constitutes a romantic happy ending. Neil and Montana Grey’s marriage is likewise terrible, as what initially seems like a happy union is swiftly undercut by the revelation of Neil’s affair with “Fluffy. Blond. Dumb” actress Gina: “Not that Montana wasn’t the best. In bed she was as stimulating as ever. But she was always his equal, and sometimes he [Neil] felt a burning desire to bed a woman who wasn’t” (37). Even the marriage of Buddy and Angel Hudson, arguably the most normative romance narrative in the novel, which ends with them apparently happily married and Angel giving birth to their twin sons, is ironically undercut. Not only does Buddy neglect Angel and completely refuse to see or acknowledge her emotional needs, leading her to spend a good chunk of the novel away from him, but the twins themselves are an ominous signifier, as Buddy himself is a twin and his brother Deke was a serial killer.

David R. Shumway distinguishes between two different discourses of romantic love: romance or passion, which “offers adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding a perfect mate,” and intimacy, which “promises deep communication, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love” (27). The former is strongly associated with falling in love, but the latter with being in love. Indeed, Shumway argues that the discourse of intimacy arose in the twentieth century to “tell the story of a marriage” (21). It would be tempting, but inaccurate, to claim that the romance novel is about getting together while the bonkbuster centers on being together: there are plenty of romance novels that focus on couples figuring out how to be productively and happily in love (see, for instance, the “marriage of convenience” trope, or its cousin “fake dating,” in which two people bound together in a relationship find their way to true love and thus have a significant focus on intimate love). However, while the romance focuses on successful intimacy, in bonkbusters we repeatedly see its failure. In the discourse of intimacy, Shumway contends, “love is something that happens between lovers. While it is partly a function of who they are as individuals, it is also a function of how they behave in the relationship” (25). In the romance, characters ultimately behave



well—but in the bonkbuster, they (especially male characters) frequently behave appallingly. Relationships become characterized by a lack of intimacy: the emptiness at the heart of the romantic fantasy.

The marriage of Helen and Rupert Campbell-Black in *Riders* illustrates this neatly. Helen falls in love with Rupert at first sight, quoting *Romeo and Juliet* to herself—“my only love sprang from my only hate!” (Cooper 92)—a phrase she (and, pointedly, another woman who falls for Rupert) will later repeat. The allusions to classic romance plots continue as their relationship progresses: Helen believes that “I could change him [Rupert] . . . I could arrest the rake’s progress and show him what real love is like” (117). This is not what happens, however, after their marriage. Whenever Rupert returns home from equestrian events, he brings “not tenderness but silver cups and suitcases of dirty washing” (309). He is openly unfaithful to her, shows no interest in their son Marcus, is disdainful of her interests in the arts, and forces her into sexual situations she is either not comfortable with or has not consented to (such as the foursome with Billy and Janey). The promise of true love proves doubly empty for Helen: when she eventually falls in love and runs away with Rupert’s rival Jake, she is convinced he is going to marry her—only for Jake to swiftly return to his wife Tory. For Helen, the promises of the romance plot go entirely unfulfilled, intimacy unachieved (a theme throughout the series: four husbands later, Helen still has not found what she is looking for).

Even nominally happy marriages in bonkbusters are characterized by failures and emptiness. Like Elaine and Ross and Buddy and Angel in *Hollywood Wives*, it could be argued that Jake and Tory achieve a happy ending in *Riders*—the novel ends with him returning to her and telling her he loves her—but it is colored by the earlier failures (not just his affair with Helen but his tendency to withhold the affection she so desperately craves). In *Scruples*, Billy and Ellis Ikehorn appear to have a blissful marriage despite their thirty-eight-year age difference, but he has protected her so much that the relationship stunts her emotional growth: “In the absolute shelter of Ellis’s love—Ellis, who had been lover, husband, brother, father, and grandfather to her, all the protective males she had lacked during her life—Billy had bloomed and yet not grown in any essential sense” (Krantz 206). When Ellis has a stroke and eventually dies—a textual event which itself undercuts the promise of the romance plot, in which the ending focuses on the temporal promise of a happy “ever after”—Billy is left feeling panicked and profoundly incapable of the responsibilities that have fallen on her shoulders as the heir of his wealth. Her second marriage to film producer Vito Orsini brings with it a different kind of hollowness. Billy is determined to make the marriage work (to the extent that she subliminally forgets to take her birth control pills for three months, resulting in her becoming pregnant) but is endlessly frustrated that Vito will always love his career more than her. Billy’s hunger is a running theme throughout the book: literal in the early sequences, where she loses weight, and metaphorical thereafter, and the book ends on her hunger for a purpose: “If she wanted to stay married to Vito, and she did, without too much resentment, without too much jealousy and without more than the normal strain



and pain of any marriage, she had to establish an abiding interest in life that did not depend on him in any way” (568). *Scruples* is in many ways the most romantic of the four texts we consider here (we could consider this Kamblé, Selinger and Teo’s “promise of a future” (2), especially considering that the other two protagonists of *Scruples*, Spider and Valentine, end the book as lovers), but Billy’s hunger is an astute textual illustration for the emptiness that exists at the heart of the vast majority of marriages in the bonkbuster.

Like romance novels, bonkbusters are interested in love and relationships. Across these four authors’ books, we are shown dozens of couples dating, falling in love and marrying. Yet, rather than providing fulfillment, especially in terms of emotional intimacy, bonkbusters leave their protagonists lacking. This fulfillment is among the key promises of romance fiction: as Roach argues, love brings with it, among other things, healing, great sex, happiness and a leveling of the playing field (21). The bonkbuster, though, depicts the fantasy and undercuts it by emphasizing the failure of intimacy and the effects of bad behavior. Bonkbuster protagonists almost always leave the books, like Billy, hungry for something more.

## Conclusion

The romance novel promises certainty. In a romance novel, no matter what trials the protagonists go through, everything will turn out all right in the end. Obstacles will be overcome. The disappointments of previous relationships will be recuperated. The sex will be good (and will be so forever). “I love you” will never turn into “I don’t love you anymore.” The relationship will be characterized by an unshakeable commitment and a deep and a continued intimacy—an intimacy of the body and, importantly, of the self (Jamieson 1). The romance novel has also endured, with its popularity continuing and amplifying into the twenty-first century—romance sales in the UK are at their highest since 2012 (“Sales of Romance Novels”) and in the US, romance novels sales increased 52% between June 2022 and May 2023 (Bauer). This is not the case, however, for the bonkbuster, a much more uncertain genre, both in terms of structure and narrative promise, that has passed its commercial peak. As the previous two sections have shown, the sex in bonkbusters is often bad. There is the vague hope it might get better, if you meet the right person—but even if you do, there is no guarantee they will stay the right person. Falling out of love is easy (if your husband was ever really telling the truth when he said “I love you” anyway). Commitment is unlikely and intimacy almost unheard of. The bonkbuster is in many ways, as Gelder notes of Collins’ books, actively antiromantic (129). The bonkbuster has not endured—we fell out of love with it, like its characters do with each other in the text. Much as many viewers of soap opera abandoned the form in the twenty-first century due to the emergence of reality television, the explosion of celebrity culture and the internet driving attention towards short-form content (Harrington 114), so too did many readers drift away from these “big, thick [books] with lots of bonking in [them]” (Hall).

So what, then, was the appeal? Why did authors like Collins, Cooper, Conran and Krantz sell so many millions of copies? Or, to follow Len Ang from her study of the soap opera *Dallas*, whose popularity was contemporaneous with the bonkbuster—what were the pleasures of these incredibly popular texts about bad sex and bad relationships (Ang 6)? How did the bonkbuster “present itself as pleasurable” (9)? It is useful here to return to the word *bonkbuster* itself. The texts are (1) full of sex, (2) designed to be popular and (3) bonkers. If there is one core promise of these texts, it is that they will be sensational, in multiple senses of the word. They are literally full of sensation, positive and negative, as demonstrated in the sex scenes; and they are sensational because they are full of scandalous moments, sexual and relational. Like its nineteenth-century forerunner the sensation novel, which offered vicarious pleasures to middle-class readers by depicting acts forbidden by their moral code (Felber 471–72; Daly 43), the transgressiveness of the representations of sex and relationships in the bonkbuster—frequently articulated through their badness—are core to the pleasures of the form. In alignment with Ang’s study of *Dallas*, the pleasures of the bonkbuster are twofold: heightened emotional engagement with the characters and plot; and ironic pleasure, which appreciates the satire inherent to the genre.

In summary, then, we argue that it is possible to offer an indication of the characteristics—textual and otherwise—that define the bonkbuster and which indicate its distinctiveness from romance. While both genres share an interest in love and relationships, the extent of that focus is far more marked for romance fiction, where the development of a single relationship is invariably the most prominent plot feature. In bonkbusters, the focus is on multiple relationships, often across generations, and over time; a romance novel typically ends with the “happy ever after” of marriage, but the bonkbuster invites the reader to linger beyond the wedding and to consider the oftentimes less happy reality of marriage. Where romance presents a fantasy of intimate success, the bonkbuster revels in the failure of that fantasy. The bonkbuster is similarly defined by its preoccupation with sex, as the term for the genre indicates—a preoccupation shared with romance. Yet it is in the nature of that sex that romance and the bonkbuster differ. Romance sex is ultimately pleasurable, mutually satisfying and a way for a couple to achieve intimacy. Bonkbuster sex, on the other hand, can be euphoric and satisfying, but it is also mechanical, comedic, abject, unsatisfying or simply unwanted. While the bonkbuster represents failure—of intimacy, of good sex—it would not be accurate to point to the genre as simply “failed romance.” Failure is the point of these books, which fail so spectacularly that it is impossible not to see this as an inherent part of their appeal. This brings us to the third and final characteristic we ascribe to the genre—its invitation to ironic pleasure. Ultimately, the romance novel offers its reader a deeply appealing fantasy of forever love and a happily ever after. The bonkbuster acknowledges this fantasy while simultaneously demonstrating its folly, as described by Cloud, allowing the reader

to engage in both idealism and irony. The bonkbuster promises romance but also the assurance that things will go spectacularly, deliciously wrong.

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