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READING

*Nora Roberts*

MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

# READING NORA ROBERTS

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READING  
NORA ROBERTS

Mary Ellen Snodgrass

The Pop Lit Book Club

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## PREFACE

No survey of current fiction is complete without a perusal of the works of fiction writer Nora Roberts, the producer of gripping stories of suspense, the paranormal, injustice, careers, seduction, mating, and happy endings. Unlike other reference guides in Greenwood's Pop Lit Book Club, this literary companion requires some compromise in its coverage of the author's canon of nearly two hundred publications, including regular reissues and omnibus editions. The text provides plot summaries of her landmark works, which advanced from category romance in paperback in the mid-1980s to trilogies, thrillers, a police procedural series, and stand-alone titles in hardback featured on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. Chapters on current issues and pop culture focus on her more recent fiction—*Angels Fall*, *Bed of Roses*, *Black Hills*, *Promises in Death*, *Tribute*, and *Vision in White*, each of which is a prime choice for discussion by book clubs and analysis by students of pop culture, feminism, genre study, criminology, and contemporary literature. Criticism reveals shifts in fictional motivation and action that attest to Roberts's maturity and her sophistication toward social and economic issues, feminist currents, and character psychology. Discussion questions at the conclusion of each chapter propose intriguing topics that link Nora Roberts's unique style to that of classic and current authors, particularly romance and crime specialist Linda Lael Miller.

A sure and steady author in multiple genres—romance, mystery, suspense, police procedural, saga, supernatural, fantasy, and sci-fi—Roberts enthralls a huge audience and pleases a fan base with multiple annual publications under her pen names, Nora Roberts and J. D. Robb. Key to her success is versatility in genre and literary elements, particularly plot, setting, theme, and dialogue. Fictional conversations inject enough vigor,

tone, and personal rhythms to establish character uniqueness and motivation for actions, a particular strength of both male and female characters in *Bed of Roses* and in Robb's *In Death* police procedurals. Through the investigations of *In Death* heroine Eve Dallas and Roarke, her supportive husband and ex officio partner, Robb appraises the human will to commit crime and the perpetrator's logic, from random strike to crafty retribution. For settings, the author masters the ambience of Irish slums, a sailing community on the Chesapeake Bay, an Arizona cattle ranch, inherited property in Connecticut, an inn adjacent to the Carolina swamps, Baltimore's Little Italy, and crime scenes in Manhattan, the Black Hills of South Dakota, Washington, D.C., and extraterrestrial satellite stations. Plots pit men and women against issues—dynasty squabbles, intergenerational unrest, gender discrimination, and depletion of nature—and against the entrapments characteristic of their milieu—career snags, blood feuds, stalking and crime, dirty cops, spousal abuse, and substance abuse. Endings ennoble the efforts of the strong to uphold community standards and protect the family. The vulnerable—abused women, rape victims, unwanted children, and targets of racism and fraud—gain insight into innate qualities and to a satisfaction of needs and desires that assures a balance of life forces. According to Roberts's assertion from *Tears of the Moon*, the solution to individual frustrations lies in the will: "If you don't go after what you want, you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the answer is no. If you don't step forward, you're always in the same place" (70).

Roberts accounts for her success in a simple reduction to people: "The most important aspect of any story, to me, is character" (Mowery 2008). The gusto of her female characters places her works among the best of pop feminist fiction. She stresses the decisions of career women in specific dilemmas:

- Gambler and croupier Serena "Rena" MacGregor opposite Justin Blade, a gutsy roué on a Caribbean cruise in *Playing the Odds*, one of the first evidences of the author's originality
- Dr. Tess Court, a criminal analyst pitted against Detective Benjamin "Ben" Parris and other doubting Washington, D.C., homicide investigators in *Sacred Sins*, Roberts's first police romance and psychological "whydunnit"
- Livestock specialist Willa Mercy and her inept sisters Tess and Lily facing a slasher in the Western romance *Montana Sky*, a first stand-alone blockbuster
- Dr. Lillian "Lil" Chance, rescuer of exotic cats at her animal refuge in *Black Hills*, a Western incorporating respect for Sioux reverence for Mother Earth.

The pattern continues in J. D. Robb's signature character, Lieutenant Eve Dallas, homicide investigator of disgusting mayhem for NYPD in the *In Death* series, the author's ongoing study of futuristic crime, sleuthing, computerized spying, and forensic analysis. The series began in 1995 with *Naked in Death*, her debut divergence from escapist category romance to romantic suspense. Of the fan appeal of her works, she explained, "I don't believe for one moment you can write well what you wouldn't read for pleasure" (Little 2003, 9)

Critical commentary on popular culture and contemporary issues incorporates analysis of recent blockbusters and up-to-the-minute topics. A best seller, *Tribute* dramatizes stardom and media harassment of licensed contractor Cilla McGowan, a flipper of houses and remodeler of historic properties who acquaints herself with her grandmother, singer-actor Janet Hardy, through dreams, interviews, and recovered letters from an anonymous lover. From this same era, *Vision in White* and *Bed of Roses*, the first two installments of Roberts's *Wedding Quartet*, project an in-depth look at the operation of a bride business called Vows run by a sisterhood composed of Mackensie "Mac" Elliot the photographer, Laurel McBane the baker, Emmaline "Emma" Grant the florist, and Parker Brown, the brains of the foursome. By depicting the intertwined quandaries of professional and personal lives, Roberts cuts to the core of feminist issues of autonomy and lifetime satisfactions. Her fully realized heroines learn from errors in judgment and grow as entrepreneurs and as lovers by pursuing new clients with verve and resolve and by settling matters of the heart with honest evaluation of their needs and opportunities.

Far from the Cinderella plots of standard romance fiction, Roberts's canon features the human courage of risk takers, the characters who pledge energy and heart toward personal advancement and sensual gratification. In place of the rescue-the-maiden and happily-ever-after pap of more predictable writers, Roberts injects compromise, a salute to realism and to the everyday trade-offs that people make to accommodate thorny circumstances. For Eve Dallas, the trade-off that ends her loneliness while enhancing her agency as a crime solver is alliance with Roarke, a mystery mogul with a shady past who serves as lover, mate, and sounding board on nights when Eve disburdens her psyche of molestation in her childhood. Similarly, future investor Serena MacGregor embraces a life with lover Justin Blade with full knowledge that her manipulative father, dynast Daniel Duncan MacGregor, hand-picked her life partner, a gambler who shares Serena's ambition to operate her own hotel and casino. For psychiatrist Tess Court, involvement with churlish cop Ben Paris places her at a career crossroads—preventing a serial strangler

from pursuing lone women on the streets of Washington, D.C., and providing treatment for a psychopath whom she pities for his maimed humanity. The study of obstacles to fulfillment—Tess Court’s workaholicism, Willa Mercy’s fear of losing her virginity, Mackensie’s unsettled mother-daughter battles, and Cilla MacGowan’s reluctance toward intimacy—pleases a female audience that hungers for honest portrayals of difficult, sometimes self-destructive choices.

Contributing to the Nora Roberts publishing phenomenon is her production of alternates to print fiction. The availability of her works via e-book, audiocassette, and Kindle suits a reader demand for varied electronic accessibility. To preserve quality, she chooses skilled readers to emulate accents, such as Roarke’s sexy Irish brogue and the western patois of Montana wranglers. The addition of made-for-TV movies and DVDs allows readers to see characters and settings come alive, including the Atlantic Coast in *Sanctuary*, a refurbished country estate in *Tribute*, and a southern mansion in *Carolina Moon*. An example of the author’s playful attitude toward interaction with fans is her cameo appearance in film, notably, her two-step in the resolution of *Montana Sky*. Personal involvement illustrates her belief in women’s fiction as a source of enlightenment and joy. For her sensitivity to reader wants and needs, Roberts maintains her prestige as the doyenne of American romance writing.

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## NORA ROBERTS: A WRITER'S LIFE

Romance fans adore Nora Roberts as a prolific writer of diverse pictorial fiction. The world's best-selling novelist since 2000, she's a regular on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list and the initial inductee into the Romance Writers of America Hall of Fame. Her skill is a boon to a \$1.2-billion-per-year industry and a £2.4 million cut of Britain's consumer market. A pacesetter at Penguin Books, she competes with Tom Clancy, Patricia Cornwell, Robin Cook, Catherine Coulter, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Ken Follett, Clive Cussler, and Amy Tan, all featured authors of airport, newsstand, and book club fiction. For her reach into twenty-five countries, Lee Bollinger and Carole O'Neill, authors of *Women in Media Careers* (2008), cite Roberts as a "Media Diva" (Bollinger and O'Neill, 148).

Family fuels Roberts's drive to the top of the romance genre. The dynamics of an Irish-American clan set the tone of her career, which often projects her enthusiasm for redheaded troublemakers, doting parents, and Celtic clairvoyants. In *Honest Illusions* (1993), she accounted for her blend of the paranormal with romance: "Love and magic have a great deal in common. They enrich the soul, delight the heart. And they both take practice" (*Honest Illusions*, 286). A Marylander born in Silver Spring on October 10, 1950, she was named Eleanor Marie "Elly" Robertson after her mother. In a Roman Catholic family, the author was "Irish on both sides" (Bertrand). She enjoyed the spotlight as the baby sister of brothers B. E. ("Buz"), Don, Jim, and Bill Robertson and playmate of a host of cousins.

The author developed her narrative gift through print and cinema. In a family of book hounds, she read early and composed stories in her head: “I went through imagining all sorts of things. I would be a ballerina, but I never wore toe shoes in my life; or an actress or a singer, or even a nun—but I wanted to be Mother Superior” (Giffin, E8). Her father, Bernard E. “Bernie” Robertson, Sr., who got Vatican dispensation to wed his third cousin, Eleanor Robertson, enjoyed a life-long love affair. An Irish storyteller, he worked as a stagehand, theater projectionist, and lighting technician. He entertained his daughter with repeated showings of Walt Disney’s *Peter Pan* (1953) and of Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I* (1956). In 1963, her parents founded their in-home R & R Lighting Company, later staffed by three of the author’s siblings.

From a no-nonsense mother, Roberts, like her contemporaries Ariana Franklin, Linda Lael Miller, Jodi Thomas, and Danielle Steel, developed resilient heroines. Reflecting on the elder Eleanor, the author declared that her mother ran the house: “That’s why I was never going to write a book where a woman is waiting around for a man to take care of things” (Bellafante). After nine years of training under nuns, Roberts entered Montgomery Blair High and thrived in English classes. In addition to Spider-Man comics, she chose Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) as favorite reads. At age seventeen, she breached parental authority and dated classmate Ronald E. Aufdem-Brinke, an employee of her father’s sheet metal works and, later, of his lighting firm, the forerunner of Vox-Cam Associates in Silver Spring. The couple married on August 17, 1968, and built a cabin in the woods southeast of the Antietam battlefield and Harpers Ferry and east of the Appalachian Trail. Ronald succeeded as a lighting and sound engineer for television and film.

### ESCAPISM THROUGH ROMANCE

Because of poor spelling, in a time Roberts describes as “another life,” she abandoned a job as a legal secretary to become a stay-at-home mom (McMurrin, 31). At her residence in rural Keedysville, Roberts concentrated on rearing Dan, born in 1973, and Jason, born in 1976. Her daily life consisted of sewing little boy overalls, doing embroidery and needlepoint, baking bread, canning spaghetti sauce, making jelly, weaving hammocks, and painting ceramics.

In her spare time, Roberts emulated other bored housewives—she read romances, works that fulfill the human need for affection and valorization. In a period dominated by Colleen McCullough's Australian saga *The Thorn Birds* (1977) and Judith Krantz's glamour novel *Scruples* (1978), "chick lit" was the serendipity of a lifetime. To the success of her storytelling, Roberts analyzed pathfinders of the romance industry and emulated Mary Stewart, the British creator of a King Arthur–Merlin series that began with *The Crystal Cave* (1970). Roberts's main qualm about pleasure reading was the overt carnality of covers, particularly male-mouth-to-female-breast poses.

After a divorce in 1983, Roberts met Bruce Wilder, a photographer and cabinetmaker from Washington County whom she hired to build shelving at her three-bedroom home on a ten-acre plot on Burnside Bridge Road. Following their union on July 6, 1985, the Wilders settled sixty miles from Washington, D.C. Bruce began specializing in Civil War titles at Turn the Page Books in Boonsboro and vacationed with Roberts in southwestern Ireland at her real estate in County Clare, a featured setting in her *Born In* series. In 2007, the couple managed the antebellum U.S. Hotel and the two-hundred-year-old Boone Hotel, a two-story monument and archives on the corner of North Main and St. Paul across the street from his bookshop. Roberts exulted, "We really love the building. It has a lot of history. We want to respect the architecture, while bringing it up to code" (Waters). During renovation on February 22, 2008, the Boone Hotel burned to the stone foundation, nearly ending the family's intent to open it as a period bed-and-breakfast. She mourned, "The fire took it down to the walls, the stone walls—everything" ("Renovations"). Undeterred, after a total of \$3 million in renovations the Inn BoonsBoro opened in February 2009. The nearby Vesta Pizzeria and Family Restaurant is operated by their son and daughter-in-law, Dan and Stacie Silcott Aufdem-Brinke, parents of Nora's grandchildren Kayla and Logan.

## A WRITING CAREER

Beyond being wife and mother, Nora Roberts is an aggressive, disciplined author. She warned her boys not to interrupt her writing unless they saw blood or fire. With exemplary perception of human psychology, she follows the protocols of intimacy and affection from courtship

and wedlock to a range of humanistic issues. Her beginning was a slow, tedious lesson in delayed gratification. Housebound with a three-year-old and six-year-old during a three-foot snow over February 17 and 18, 1979, Roberts recalled, “Every morning when school was canceled, I wept. We couldn’t even get out to buy Oreos” (McMurrin, 31). After sessions of rearranging furniture and playing Candyland with the boys, she warded off cabin fever by outlining six novels in pencil in a spiral steno pad. She began with a hot romance set in Spain, a 50,000-word starter novel she later described as “really bad” (ibid.).

For inspiration, Roberts emulated fiction about life’s satisfactions rather than hardships. Typing full speed, she reveled at mental images. Her plots demanded male-female fulfillment, from social milieu to attraction, obstacles, acceptance, and betrothal, marriage, and children. For research, she began in the children’s library and advanced to adult reference works, interviews, and e-mailed conversations. She acknowledged commitment to family and declared herself unable to say, “Got to go! Here are the Spaghetti-Os. [Put them] in the microwave, and you’ll be fine” (“10 Questions for Nora Roberts”). She imagined female characters braver and pluckier than she, and insisted “Inspiration is highly overrated. You just build the story” (Waters). A year later, she confided, “A novel is at its core an entertaining lie” (“Renovations Underway”).

Because of a focus on British writers, Harlequin, a Canadian firm, rejected her first six submissions, “charcoal sketches” that she signed “Nora Roberts,” a variation of her real name (Little and Hayden, 16). In 1980, she received encouragement from Editor Nancy Jackson at Silhouette Books, a division of Simon & Schuster that published her

Roberts explained her method this way: “Ideas are infinite—writers are hardwired to think that way. We keep it fresh by using new people, mixing character types and putting them in a different setting” (Little and Hayden). Each work, she noted, repeats the basics told in one of a thousand variations. Her titles bear the standard one-, two-, or three-word image: *Honest Illusions* (1993), *Homeport* (1999), *Purity in Death* (2002), and *Black Hills* (2009). She has also shared space in collected stories and novellas—*Silhouette Christmas Stories* (1986), *Once Upon a Dream* (2000), and *Moon Shadows* (2004)—with contemporaries Mary Blayney, Jill Gregory, Ruth Ryan Langan, CeBBie Macomber, Mary Kay McComas, Maura Seger, Tracy Sinclair, and Marianne Willman.

hundredth book, *Cordina's Crown Jewel* (2002). The firm issued Roberts's debut category romance, *Irish Thoroughbred* (1981), a swift-paced love match aimed at fans of uncomplicated reads. She produced a magazine story, "Melody of Love" (1982), in a tabloid. During this period, she took her agent's advice and built a foundation.

### EGALITARIAN NOVELS

Updating the canon, Roberts fled the theme of materialism. She commented to *New York Times* interviewer Ginia Bellafante, "I guess the Cinderella thing never really appealed." In place of a heroine seeking security by marrying up, she democratized her literary microcosms by "introducing the idea of economic and emotional parity" in couples (Bellafante). She dismantled status barriers and inserted elements of the "New Woman" and first-wave feminism—social equality, autonomy, property ownership, reciprocal relationships, vigor and stamina, and companionable marriage, the conventions that Brontë revolutionized in *Jane Eyre*. Roberts's characters tend toward hyphenated ethnicities and working-class dreams, which a *New York Times* critic described as wish fulfillment. In *Angels Fall* (2006), she follows her high-class chef, Reece Gilmore, to a greasy spoon in Angels Fist, Wyoming. When Reece's lover Brody declares that she will never earn the "epicurean equivalent of the Pulitzer," she snaps, "I'd rather cook pot roast" (*Angels Fall*, 166). With thirty-six authors, Roberts co-founded the Romance Writers of America, a nonprofit network that promotes the rights of freelance authors over a print and electronic market favoring publishers. In 1999, she joined Maeve Binchy, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Jack Canfield, Mark Hansen, Elmore Leonard, and Lisa Scottoline in a two-product venture when bottlers began excerpting novels on Diet Coke packages. For Roberts, the company chose a segment of *River's End* (1999), a thriller about a father who terrorizes his little girl.

The author became an outspoken champion of writers focused on romantic euphoria, the most stable, but least respected, commodity in the pop market. According to *Time* reporter Andrea Sachs, "Nora Roberts is to love as Masters and Johnson are to sex" (Sachs, 150). In *Vision in White* (2009), the first of the author's Wedding Quartet, she maintains her reputation for carnal particulars with a contrast between "tender, soft-focus, angels-weeping sex" and "jungle-drums, swinging-from-the-chandelier sex" (*Visions in White*, 175). Fans of her bedroom talk polled their favorite kiss scenes and selected Brianna and Grayson in *Born in Ice* (1995) and Brenna and Shawn in *Tears of the Moon* (2000). Of the "sexual buzz," Roberts asserts a universal understanding: "All of

those things translate to everyone—no matter what country you are in, what language you speak, or what demographic you are” (Stengle, D1). To critics who pan romances as formulaic fluff, in an interview with *Time* magazine on December 10, 2007, the author retorted that love stories honor affection and physical and emotional commitment. To accusations of gratuitous seaminess, she accused Americans of prissiness, the heritage of New England Puritans. In a riposte to prudes, she described the celebration of love as “something very worthy of respect” (ibid.).

### STRUCTURING FICTION

Roberts pursues writing as she did a nine-to-five desk job for an attorney. She follows an eight-hour daily schedule with breaks for workouts, Winston cigarettes, Diet Pepsi, pretzels, and Hershey’s. For more serious respites, she gardens, lolls in an indoor pool and hot tub, travels, watches movies, and toasts success with Dom Perignon at book signings at her husband’s store, across the street from her boutique, Gifts Inn Boonsboro. For pleasure, she reads Elizabeth Berg, Patricia Gaffney, Sue Grafton, Carl Hiaasen, Stephen King, and John Sandford. For relaxation, she shops for shoes. She rationalizes, “Shoes are one of the things that separate us from the animals. It proves that we are a higher being” (Little and Hayden, 7). Under skylights in her third-floor studio, she works under self-imposed deadlines for individual titles of a paperback series. She focuses each work on a protagonist, location, or conflict, which she describes as her canvas. The varied star players—rancher, college professor, hostage negotiator, zoologist, archeologist, witch, vintner, antiques expert, social worker, florist, arson investigator—function like real people and defeat obstacles to ambition and happiness. She prefers characters with flaws, a forgivable weakness that endears them to readers who identify with human frailty.

A definer of subgenres, Roberts differentiates between love stories and romance. To journalist Bridgette A. Lacy of the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News & Observer*, the author explained, “Romance novels center on developing relationships between normally one man and one woman, an emotional commitment, conflict and happy ending; where a love story centers on a relationship but doesn’t have to have a happy ending,” a mode she compares to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (Lacy, C1). To map out a story, she sketches a first draft before envisioning a longer narrative. Much of the decision-making about character names and situations is intuitive. For Celtic settings, she favors Ardmore, County Waterford, in south-central Ireland.