R
ing is the new sex? Well, not quite, but when it comes to snuggling up under the duvet on a cold night, my companion of choice is a well-thumbed novel. But start reading them early enough — in your teens, say — and male fictional heroes can spoil you for life. Let’s face it: no man can ever match up to Jilly Cooper’s dreamy Rupert Campbell-Black.

This is, in its way, a minor tragedy. One could argue that it is responsible if not for actual singlehood (though it may be, if people wait too long for the real-life version to appear), then for the kind of low-level dissatisfaction many women feel on the domestic front.

Where’s your Rutshire rectory? Where are the Labradors, the roaring fires? Above all, where is the brooding, sneering hero, who behaves appallingly, says terrible things (we’re still on Rupert C-B) but makes your stomach somersault every time he appears? Who is magnificent in bed, and so handsome he makes people double-take?

**Romantic heroes**

Our minds are positively crammed with romantic heroes from fiction, each more wildly dashing, and, well, fictional, than the next. What real, live, flesh-and-blood bloke could aspire to the same swoon-inducing categories as Ally Cooper’s cads, Evelyn Waugh and Oscar Wilde’s weary, decadent aesthetes — or, for that matter, Jackie Collins’s ultramacho, highly-sexed alpha male?

Add to that the fact that, for so many of us, romantic heroes were the recipients of our first schoolgirl crushes — and in many cases our first introduction to the mysteries of sex — and it’s hardly any wonder we feel nostalgic, not helped by the fact that fictional literary heroes have a way of lodging themselves firmly in your mind.

Having just edited an anthology of the sexy bits of novels, I’ve learnt that romantic heroes breakup into several quite distinct categories, though there is overlap. First off, there’s the Cad, a July Cooper speciality; RC-B is perhaps the finest example of the genre. Cruel (but heartbreakingly kind to the woman he loves, natch), glacial, posh, with something slightly wolfish about him, the Cad is responsible for thousands of women believing there are few things sexier than a tough nut to crack, and that arrogance is the acme of desirability. Un-PC, but true.

Brought to you courtesy of Georgette Heyer, and countless other historical novelists, is the Rake. These heroes are invariably titled and, more often than not, possessed of a bejewelled dandiness thrillingly at odds with their macho skills at boxing, gambling and duelling. Rakes are wonderful with horses, waspish of wit, world-weary and irresistibly aloof. They are brilliant dancers. Their hearts are cold. They are seriously sexy.

**Dorian Gray and Mr. Darcy**

Then there’s the Fop. Many of us encountering Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray for the first time, knew that his dark soul and egomaniacal, murderous nature were as morally repellant as he was aesthetically pleasing, but loved him all the same — until halfway through the book, at any rate. The Fop is bored, languid, witty, and breathtakingly beautiful. See also Sebastian Flyte in Brideshead Revisited, whose ambiguous sexuality didn’t deter a generation of schoolgirls from falling for him.

Best exemplified by Mr. Darcy is the Iceberg. He may be melting with love or desire, but he will show no sign of it until he is about to explode. Again, he is cool and detached. With impeccable manners, the Iceberg is devastating. And he has a great big country pile: again, a bit of a theme. And, finally, let’s not forget the Gangster, or as good as. As in Jackie Collins’s Gino Santangelo, the street kid who makes it to the top. Ultra-but, morally suspect, unpleasantly ambitious, enormously hung, loaded and hot.

**The realm of fantasy**

The question is, of course, whether we would really faint with delight were we to manage the unlikely feat of bringing one of these characters to life. I think, on balance, that after the initial encounter, most of us would recoil. Rakes, cads and fops — always arrogant, often misogynistic — might be a little much to live with, no matter how beautifully they fill a pair of breeches. They belong, rightly, to the realm of fantasy — ageless, unlined, free from prostate trouble, suspended in time like flies in amber, for our delectation. And what delectation.
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