

Romance Is In The Air, And On The Shelves

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

The candles were lit. The stage was set. In an alcove of my aunt's attic, ceiling rafters hung low over the old damask curtains we'd thrown over a few storage trunks to conjure the lair of an 18th century English spy. Theatrically attired in bathrobes and hats, my cousin and I whispered to each other as we pretended to lie in wait for Sir Percy Blakeney.

AKA the Scarlet Pimpernel.

While the candles smoked beneath the rafters.

That was the day we almost burned my aunt's house down. A pair of middle-school girls with a box of matches and an obsession with Baroness Orczy's 1905

novel can come to no good. When the smoke had cleared, our parents excoriated us for our lack of common sense. "You've taken this romance stuff too far," they said.

Ah, but what a romance it is. "The Scarlet Pimpernel," a swashbuckling bit of historic fiction set during the French Revolution, tells the story of Sir Percy Blakeney, a chiseled-lipped English lord who masquerades as a fop while secretly rescuing nobles from the guillotine in Paris. He conceals his heroics even from his wife Marguerite, whose damaging interventions on behalf of a beloved brother have led Percy/the Pimpernel to distrust her. But can Percy conceal his passion for Marguerite as well? One of my favorite passages comes halfway through the story, when Percy, all cold restraint during an encounter with Marguerite, finally breaks down.

"...As soon as her light footsteps had died away within the house, he knelt down upon the terrace steps, and in the very madness of his love he kissed one by one the places where her small foot had trodden, and the stone balustrade there, where her tiny hand had rested last."

Not a bodice-ripper; just a good, old-fashioned love story. I read it again recently. No candles this time.

This Valentine's Day, rekindle the flame of your own romantic fancies with a favorite melodrama — book or movie. Here at Snow Library, we can recommend a few, starting with staff favorites like "Doctor Zhivago," Boris Pasternak's Russian Revolution-era story of longing and struggle, told through the characters of Yuri Zhivago,

a physician and poet, and his "Beatrice," the beautiful Lara. The screen adaptation starring Omar Sharif and Julie Christie is sumptuous and sweeping, complete with snow-capped mountain landscapes and dew-eyed moments dissolving in the swell of balalaika strings.

We're also fans of Thomas Hardy, who can be a tear-jerker, but there's nothing in literature like the sublime aching of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles"

for her Angel Clare, even if you know the lovers are doomed. "Far From the Madding Crowd" is sunnier, for a Hardy novel — there's just enough torment in the relationship between Farmer Oak and Bathsheba Everdene to keep readers on their toes without barring a

satisfying end to their story.

The contortions of Mr. Rochester's brow as he grapples with his attraction to "Jane Eyre" have impressed themselves on many a young imagination over the years. Skip the dark stuff in the beginning of Charlotte Bronte's classic and head straight to Thornfield Hall, where Bronte has written one of the best marriage proposal scenes ever.

"Pride and Prejudice" brings us another 1800s heartthrob in the form of the brooding, burning Mr. Darcy. The number of film adaptations of this title alone testifies to the spell Jane Austen can cast, even if none of the on-screen Darcys quite measures up to the image we cherish from our own reading (Colin Firth is wonderful, though, in the BBC version starring Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth). An enjoyable spin-off on Austen's classic is "Eligible," novelist Curtis Sittenfeld's contemporary retelling of the Darcy-Lizzie drama.

If amorous restraint is not your cup of tea, but you'd like some substance with your bodice-ripping, try Diana Gabaldon's "Outlander" books, popular with Snow Library patrons and staff alike. Time travel, Scottish highlanders, love, lust, pirates, Redcoats — Gabaldon's saga has it all. The Starz adaptation is highly entertaining, too, featuring Catriona Balfe as Claire and Sam Heughan as the strapping, kilt-swishing Jamie.

All of the titles mentioned above are available, as book and/or DVD, at a CLAMS library near you.

Happy Valentine's Day from Snow Library.

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