

# Love in the time of Corona: the response of Afrikaans popular romance to the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel analiseer drie romanses in Afrikaans wat afspeel tydens die COVID-19 pandemie. Op basis van die komparatiewe analise van *Liefde in die tyd van corona* (Elsa Winckler, 2020), *Somerson* (Madelie Human, 2021) en *Liefde onbeperk* (Marilé Cloete, 2021) ondersoek hierdie artikel hoe die globale pandemie deur die genre uitgebeeld word en watter narratiewe oplossings die genre bied vir die beperkinge verbonde aan die grendeltyd.

## 1. Introduction

In the first months of 2020, the COVID-19 virus has spread worldwide, causing a global pandemic that altered the lives of most people on this planet. There are long-term physical, mental and emotional consequences of not only contracting the COVID-19 virus but also of living through the global pandemic. The psychological impact of the quarantine measures and social isolation are yet to be fully studied (e.g. Hardyns *et al.* 2020) but we can already state that, due to its extreme infectiousness, the COVID-19 virus changed the ways how most people initiate and experience intimacy.

The objective of the article is to investigate how the genre of popular romance in Afrikaans represents the global pandemic as experienced by the Afrikaans speaking South Africans. A comparative analysis of *Liefde in die tyd van corona*, *Somerson* and *Liefde onbeperk* - three popular romance texts in Afrikaans published in the first year of the global pandemic - will provide information about the ways how people interact and connect with other people (romantically and otherwise) when intimacy can be dangerous. Such an analysis offers insight into possible plot solutions to the pandemic induced limitations on human interaction, as depicted within the popular romance genre. It also serves as a time capsule or a recording of an unprecedented time in the history of the world, South African society, and how it is affecting the genre of popular romantic fiction.

## 2. Popular fiction as register of public feeling

Popular romance (or any other popular fiction genre) functions as “a register of popular feeling”(Kamble, 2008:5) and is therefore an excellent source of information on the state (and pulse) of society. In contrast to “high literature” which generally takes time to be written and published, popular fiction is usually produced very fast. Nora Roberts, the best-selling American popular romance writer, for example, manages to write 5 novels a year (Flood, 2020). The South African journalist and popular fiction writer Erla-Mari Diedericks penned down an erotic corona novel in only four days (Britz, 2020). As a result of this fast production pace, popular fiction provides us with an immediate reflection of what is prevalent in society at that moment. It also promptly reacts to any changes in the social, cultural, or political climate. Contrary to the popular opinion that genre fiction is immune to social development, and aims to reproduce the conservative and patriarchal ideology of a particular society (Modleski, 1982), as well as the reproductive heteronormative imaginary, research has shown that popular romance can take on the role of cultural barometer and that it responds to the reader’s changing position within society (e.g. Dixon & Dixon, 2016). As Tapper argues, “contrary to the stereotype of romantic fiction as conventional and change-resistant, contemporary romance publishers have proven themselves to be consistently forward-thinking and progressive, utilising industry innovations in content, technology, branding and business practice to cement their genre’s status as an exemplary model for twenty-first-century book publishing“. (Tapper, 2014: 249)

Popular romance, presumably a genre written (mainly) by women, for women, about women and women's experiences, could be a valuable source of information on how women experience contemporary society. As Kamble, Selinger and Teo (2020:1) correctly state:

Written and read by women globally, the romance novel provides a public platform for women not only to voice ideals about gender and family relationships, but also to articulate opinions about contemporary social, cultural, environmental, economic, and political issues. The romance novel puts women's needs and desires at the centre of contemporary life and accounts of the past – and this perhaps accounts for the myths that have multiplied about this complex and colossal genre.

This paper will examine three examples of popular fiction in Afrikaans dealing with the pandemic and focus on two aspects: The immediate reactions of the Afrikaans speaking community in South Africa to the global pandemic and secondly, to map out the possible solutions to the pandemic specific limitations in the genre of popular romance.

### **3. The COVID pandemic in South Africa**

On 5 March 2020, Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize confirmed the spread of the COVID-19 virus to South Africa. At that moment South Africa was already at a politically, economically and socially vulnerable moment (Steytler *et al.*, 2021:336). Ten days later, the President of South Africa declared a national state of disaster and announced drastic new measures such as immediate travel restrictions and the closure of schools with effect from 18 March (The Presidency, 2020).

A nationwide lockdown started on 27 March 2020, with severe restrictions on travel and movement, and enforced with the aid of the South African National Defence Force. Originally, the lockdown would be for a three-week period but was later extended to five weeks. All South Africans were obliged to stay at home and work from home, except for health workers, emergency personnel, security services personnel, essential services workers and those involved in the production and supply of food and basic goods.

After that, another lockdown was announced till the end of May. South African citizens were only allowed to leave their houses in order to buy necessary groceries (excluding cigarettes and alcohol), to go to the pharmacy, visit a doctor or collect social welfare grants. Despite the radical measures, South Africa is still considered one of the worst-hit countries in Africa during the pandemic on both counts of infections and mortality (Reuters, 2021).

Compared to other countries, the lockdown measures imposed by the South African government seemed harsh at the time. Such severe measures were, however, considered necessary, considering the high prevalence of HIV and TBC infections in South Africa. The lockdown measures, however, had enormous impact on the lives of South Africans. The national state of disaster highlighted the gap between the poor and the wealthy even further:

Moreover, compliance with severe lockdown regulations highlighted the two different worlds in South Africa. Orders to observe social distancing and stay at home could be complied with (and was readily done so) in suburbia, but it was far less possible to heed them in the cramped living conditions in townships and informal settlements.” (Steytler *et al.*, 2021:340)

The harsh pandemic regulations also limited casual human interaction, making it difficult to initiate and/or maintain romantic relationships. The following analysis looks at a number of popular romance texts in Afrikaans, analysing how their characters initiate and maintain romantic in the times of a global pandemic, and what plot solutions does the genre provide for the limitations on movement and human interaction during a lockdown.

#### 4. The COVID-19 pandemic and the popular romance genre

Even though it is the most popular form of genre literature and the most read type of literary text worldwide (Regis, 2013:xi), popular romance tends to be seen less seriously than other popular genres. That is sadly also the case with academic study of the genre. Popular romance is the most despised and the least studied of all literary genres (Murphy & Matterson, 2018: 53), that “has had to clear several distinctive hurdles” (Frantz & Sellinger, 2021: 2) before it was taken seriously.

The infamous *Kissing the corona virus* (2020), an erotica novel written anonymously under the pen name M.J. Edwards did not make a good case for the academic study of popular romance, nor did it improve the opinion of the general public of the genre. The 16-page story of Dr. Alexa Ashingtonford, however, who, while trying to find a cure for the virus, falls in love with and has sex with it after the virus anthropomorphizes into a muscular, green man, was written in desperation after the author lost her job due to the pandemic.

This reminded us of two important aspects of the genre; firstly, everything is possible in popular romance, and secondly, popular genres are incredibly quick in reacting to what is happening in society. While we are still trying to navigate our way through home-office, a non-existent social life or travel restrictions, we are able to purchase books with protagonists already facing the same challenges. And even though this particular piece of writing falls under the fantasy category and therefore offers very little recognition for the reader, it thematises, however obscurely, a topic that has been on our minds for the last two years.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a very real impact on most aspects of our lives. While one would think that writers can comfortably keep writing at home, they are also suddenly facing some new, practical obstacles in their writing. It is still unclear how everyday human lives and interactions will look like after the pandemic. An interviewed author sums up their writing dilemma as follows: “I’m trying to work out where we might be. Might there be a vaccine? Will getting on a plane feel wildly anachronistic? Will journalists working from an office seem weird?” (Watt as quoted in Flood, 2020).

A literary genre that is probably most affected by the global pandemic is the romance novel, due to its dependence on very tactile human encounters that go against the rules of pandemic social distancing. The romance novelist (and co-founder of the Romance Writers' Association of South Africa) Romy Sommer was writing a contemporary romance set in a Tuscan vineyard but has agreed with her editor to put it on hold until the situation in Italy stabilises (Flood, 2020). At that moment Italy was facing an extreme increase in COVID-19 infections with a high mortality rate which destabilised the country's health care system (Boccia *et al.*, 2020) and publishing a novel located in contemporary Italy was simply not possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic is already changing the way we interact with each other. It can be expected that it will alter human romantic relationships for the foreseeable future. Indian popular romance writer Milan Vohra makes the comparison with the HIV epidemic of the early 1990s (Vohra, 2020) as follows:

In the early 90s, in my other avatar as an advertising writer, I wrote extensively on campaigns for HIV-AIDS awareness—the pandemic that was so close and threatening then. The risk of having unprotected sex became so much more than just an unwanted pregnancy. While the anxiety of living through that time faded, it surely impacted romance writers around the world, who would have wanted to write in safe sex as part of a great sex scene. This deliberate awareness of writing scenes where the characters pause for a few seconds to use a condom in the throes of passion happened so gradually that in most romance novels, mentioning condoms has almost become commonplace.

It is indeed to be expected that the global COVID-19 pandemic will have an effect on how (not only sexual) encounters are perceived, and how these are represented in popular romance. While it is still very early to draw definite conclusions on the topic, we can already observe and see how the pandemic alters the scene of romantic relationships and the human (physical) interactions as represented in popular romance fiction. The Afrikaans texts analysed are some of the already existing representations of romantic relationships in the times of the global pandemic.

## 5. “Corona romance(s)” in Afrikaans

In the last two years after the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa, several popular romance titles set during the state lockdown imposed in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, were published and very likely more will follow. For the purposes of this article I will refer to these novels as “corona romance(s)”. To name a few, titles such as *'n Vreemde tyd vir liefde* (Strange times for love, Marilé Cloete, 2020), *Liefde in die tyd van corona* (Love in the times of corona, Elsa Winckler, 2020), the already mentioned *Agter grendels* (Locked down, Erla-

Mari Diedericks, 2020), *Somerson* (*Summer sun*, Madelie Human, 2021), or *Liefde onbeperk* (*Love without restrictions*, Marilé Cloete, 2021) all deal with the theme of falling in love and finding a suitable partner for their happily ever after during the times of the global COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception of *Somerson* (which is a title in a series with the names of the seasons in the title), the titles of the other COVID romances are all mentioning the pandemic in their title. That is very much in line with the rules of the genre that is supposed to satisfy the expectations of the reader (Ramsdell, 2012:22). Popular romance is a formulaic narrative of “courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (Regis, 2003:19) that places the love story central and ends with an emotionally-satisfying and optimistic ending (Ramsdell, 2018:251). This emotional satisfaction is reached due to identification with the heroine.

Amanda Claassens is an avid reader of popular romance in Afrikaans and a professional reviewer for LAPA’s popular romance titles. Since there is no practice of literary reviews of popular romance in Afrikaans, she is the only professional authority on the topic. Claassens describes in her *Goodreads* review of one of the first COVID romances in Afrikaans, *‘n Vreemde tyd vir liefde* by Marilé Cloete, the deep recognition she experienced of the pandemic reality represented in the novel:

Dit is dan ook meer as net ‘n romanse. Dit bied insig in hoé mense reageer as hulle “normaal” omvergewerp word, gegrond op feite, nie blote fiksie nie. Ek sien myself in die vertwyfeling oor voorrade, oor die angs wat mens onverhoeds oorval. Die nodigheid van roetine, die waarde van oefening, die nerwe wat dun skuur. So tussen die mooi liefdesverhaal deur, kan mens Alta se goeie raad raaklees, want ons is mos almal deur dieselfde meule vanjaar. Vir my is dit ‘n kosbare storie wat ek sal bêre, om eendag, op ‘n ligter trant, die storie van 2020 weer te besoek. (Claassens, 2020)

One can assume that reading a story of a heroine who finds love amidst a global pandemic would intensify the emotional satisfaction of the happy ending, as well as the process of identification with the heroine.

For the purposes of this article, three texts of popular romance in Afrikaans were chosen that illustrate the broad scala of narrative possibilities the global pandemic has to offer to the genre of popular romance. *Liefde in die tyd van corona*, *Somerson* and *Liefde onbeperk* are category romances, i.e. shorter texts of popular romance ranging between 50,000 and 85,000 words that are (due to the limited page count) highly formulaic and are published in series (Ramsdell, 2018:39). The most important category romance series in Afrikaans is Romanza which, under the LAPA publishing house, publishes four category romances in Afrikaans each month. Interestingly, during the time of the pandemic, the popular romance genre in Afrikaans further diversified. Romanza, the major publishing line for category romance in Afrikaans, included in 2021 *Inspirasie* (inspirational) and *Fantasie* (fantasy) subgenre lines. While this might as well be the result of the ongoing diversification of the genre of popular

romance, as illustrated earlier (Vitackova, 2018; 2019), these newly established subgenres also offer an ideal way out of the writers' dilemmas addressed in the introduction. Writing a fantasy or historical subgenre seems to be the logical solution to the writing issues caused by the pandemic restrictions. It is however just as interesting to see how different authors tackle these limitations in their contemporary romance writing.

*Liefde in die tyd van corona*, *Somerson* and *Liefde onbeperk* each present a different viewpoint on the pandemic. Winckler's novels were published a few months into the pandemic; *Somerson* almost a year into the pandemic, and *Liefde onbeperk* a year and half after the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in South Africa. The chosen novels vary from erotica to a mere chaste kiss; they vary by location, including both rural and urban settings, and by the moment where the books are placed in the pandemic timeline. The texts were chosen deliberately to illustrate the scale of romance plot options offered by setting them within the global pandemic.

### 5.1 *Liefde in die tyd van corona* (2020)

*Liefde in die tyd van corona* was published in June 2020, only a few months after the first COVID-19 cases in South Africa and the announcement of the national lockdown. It is the first (of already quite a few) romances in Afrikaans that thematise COVID-19, proving how soon popular genres respond to change in society. It tells the story of Jenna, who just before South Africa goes into lockdown, finds her fiancé in bed with her best friend. Jenna flees to a beach house, owned by a friend of hers, only to find Jacques there. Jacques, a local winemaker, wanted to make use of the lockdown to do some renovations on the beach house. There is an immediate attraction between the two of them, and it does not take long before they react on it. Initially, both regard this as a mere chance encounter. After their first night together, Jenna recollects the night as something she will never be able to feel sorry about: "Oor laas nag kan sy nooit spyt wees nie. Om so te kon liefde maak, om soveel genot te kon ervaar, is 'n onverwagse, eksotiese geskenk – een wat sy altyd in haar hart sal koester." (58%, Kindle location). However, as they spend a lot of time together, and find out that they like the same movies and music (71%, Kindle location), emotions start growing between them. After they have both worked through their emotional baggage, they finally admit their real feelings for each other. Jacques comes back to the beach house and asks Jenna to marry him, without a ring, because all the jewelry shops are closed due to the lockdown: "Ek het nie 'n ring nie, al die winkels is toe, maar sodra hierdie grendeltyd verby is, gaan soek ons vir jou een." (99%, Kindle location).

The novel begins with the announcement of the nationwide lockdown at stage five and thematises especially the very beginnings of the pandemic in South Africa. The narration opens with Jenna having a bad cough, assuring her friend that it is not COVID-19: "(...) ek het nie die virus nie. Die dokter het dit vandag bevestig. Ek het 'n hele sak vol pille gekry, ek

sal oukei wees.” (5%, Kindle location). When Jenna finds out the house is already occupied, she attempts to get a special permit from the police to leave the beach house and return back home: “Bly gerus, dis ’n groot huis,” answers Jacques (24%, Kindle location), who is already attracted to her. Later, Jenna states that with the modern technology she can work from anywhere, meeting with colleagues via Zoom (68%, Kindle location), something that was generally not the norm before the pandemic. In this particular novel, the pandemic serves more as a background to the story and apart from bringing (and keeping) the hero and the heroine together in the beach house, it has very little function in the plot. That can be explained by the fact that *Liefde in die tye van corona* was published only a few months into the pandemic and since the author has not experienced the pandemic, she could not include it in the novel. She did, however, make use of the pandemic to create a situation where the erotic relationship between the hero and heroine can evolve, undisturbed by the outside world.

## 5.2 Somerson (2021)

*Somerson*, published in January 2021, is the third book in the Groeneweide inspirational series by Madelie Human. Inspirational or “Christian” romances generally feature a hero, heroine, or both, who have (or find) faith in God, and this conversion plays a major role in the text. These romance novels are striving to inspire a Christian worldview (Ramsdell, 2018:149). *Somerson* comes after *Herfswind* and *Winternag* (*Autumn wind* and *Winter night*, both published in 2020) and is followed by *Lentemelodie* (*Spring melody*, published also in 2021).

Sabrina comes to Groeneweide to redecorate a friend’s house and meets their neighbour, the horse whisperer Ruan. Even though she feels very attracted to him from the very beginning, Sabrina tries to keep her distance from the sexy cowboy. She is committed to her interior decorating business in the city and as a good Christian, she would not engage in casual sex, even though she is tempted. Compared to Winckler’s book, the narrative does not start with the global pandemic or the nationwide lockdown. COVID-19 stays on the periphery, only mentioned in conversations as something happening in other parts of the world, until halfway into the book. Then, just as Sabrina is about to leave the village and return to Bloemfontein before South Africa goes into the nationwide lockdown, her car breaks down as an example of *Deus ex machina*, a Godly intervention that forces Sabrina to stay in Groeneweide. Ruan clearly perceives the vehicle malfunction exactly in that way: “Die res laat ons in ’n Hoër Hand. Moenie dit sien as druk wat ek op jou plaas vir enige verbintenis nie. Ek beskou hierdie tyd saam met jou as ’n bonus. As ons vir mekaar bestem is, sal dit so gebeur en indien nie, sal dit eenvoudig nie gebeur nie.” (76). Sabrina moves in with Ruan at the Rolbos estate, making use of the guest bedroom, Ruan’s study and the uncapped wifi so that she can keep up with her business. In the meantime Ruan asks her to help him redecorate the house

according to her taste, to choose what she would herself if the house were hers: “Wys my wat jy sou kies as dit jou huis was,” Ruan tells her (77), proving his confidence in her as an interior decorator, but also as future homemaker and wife.

From this moment the pandemic plays an important role in the plot of the story. While redecorating the house, Sabrina and Ruan are facing small practical issues, like masking redecorating material as necessary groceries (82) and using local artists’ work instead of the usual store-bought decorations (98). There are also big, life-changing issues. Just as many other small business owners in real life, Sabrina is facing the bankruptcy of her interior decorating business due to the pandemic. As one client after another cancels her services, Sabrina is neither able to pay the rent for the storage and office space in Bloemfontein, nor her employees’ wages: “Wat ’n ramp! Die wêreld is in ’n pandemie vasgevang, haar besigheid op die rand van bankrotskap en sy doen so ’n dom ding soos om te gaan staan en verlief raak,” (101).

The promising young interior decorator must reevaluate her life priorities, ask for and accept help from her the people around her. Sabrina’s financial/business hardships due to the pandemic are a chance for the hero to prove himself worthy, and without offending her pride. Ruan finally comes with a solution, offering to move Sabrina’s storage and workspace to one of the empty buildings at his farm. From there, Sabrina starts running a workshop that manufactures interior decorations out of fabric scraps based on her designs. The small business offers sewing work for the women from the village, not only saving Sabrina’s business but also creating work opportunities in the local community. Sabrina has to accept that all is a part of God’s plan and she has to subject herself to it. She also has to accept Ruan’s unconditional love and of course his marriage proposal. They decide to get married as soon as possible, with their friends and family attending the ceremony via Zoom, with a reception later on, after the pandemic: “Sabrina gee haar oor aan die vurige omhelsing. Hierdie besluit is die regte ding, daarvan is sy nou doodseker, want sy het God toegelaat om dinge vir haar te laat uitwerk, nie volgens haar eie planne nie, maar volgens sy groter plan vir haar lewe.” (143).

### **5.3 *Liefde onbeperk* (2021)**

*Liefde onbeperk* is already the second COVID-19 themed category romance by Marilé Cloete, after *Vreemde tyd vir liefde* (2020). Whereas both the Winckler and the Human novels are set in rural locations, *Liefde onbeperk* is situated in the city. The romance addresses mental health issues as a result of the prolonged lockdown and social isolation, emphasizing the lack of community and the isolation in urban space. Such mental health issues as an immediate result of the pandemic restrictions are being labelled as a “second pandemic” by mental health experts (e.g. Ganesan *et al.*, 2021).

Both Estelle and Bernard live alone and work in the city. As extroverts, have both been having a hard time emotionally during the first lockdown, missing social interactions. Estelle

is still recovering from a recent heartbreak after finding out that her boyfriend was already married. Bernard is a chronically single man, suffering from lockdown isolation and touch deprivation – a well discussed effect of the pandemic regulations: “Hy het regtig die afgelope maand velhonger geword”, Barnard admits to himself surprised by the eagerness with which he seeks out a conversation with Estelle (9%, Kindle location). They meet at a party organised by Estelle’s sister and her husband, disregarding the strict COVID measures. After attending the party, they both contract the COVID-19 virus. Since they are both living alone, Bernard decides to move in with Estelle so that they can take care of each other whilst they are ill. Estelle, who works as a beautician, is without an income and Bernard ends up taking care of her financially as well. In the meantime, they fall in love. In the end, Estelle has no other choice than to admit that she is in love with a very attractive (and single) man who did much more for her in her times of need than her own sister (61%, Kindle location). Going to that party (and subsequently contracting the COVID-19 virus) might have been the best thing she has done in a long time (62%, Kindle location). However, she first must let go of the idea that she is Bernard’s “charity case” and accept that his feelings for her are real and his intentions pure. When he finally asks her to marry him, Estelle happily agrees, proclaiming that the lockdown brought Bernard to her. Bernard then admits that he has never felt so free, “want die liefde kan nie ingeperk word nie” (99%, Kindle location). Quite counterintuitive to the enclosed lockdown setting, the novel is a slow-burn, sweet novel, without any sex scenes. While they have spent most of the novel locked down together in one tiny apartment, Estelle and Bernard only passionately kiss at the end.

In this novel, Cloete describes the strict COVID measures almost as the new normal, concentrating on the practical limitations and the impact the lockdown has on single people and especially on extroverts, such as the hero and heroine. In *Liefde onbeperk* people are losing jobs (like Estelle), work from home (like Bernard), struggle to find face masks and hand sanitizer, face the scarcity of COVID (28%, Kindle location), whereas Bernard’s hair grows too long because he, just as his fellow South Africans, cannot get a haircut during the lockdown.

Cloete describes the very real terror and loneliness Estelle feels (19%, Kindle location) as she realizes she will have to go through the illness alone in her apartment but also the anxiety after the end of the lockdown (88%, Kindle location). She also touches on the feelings of guilt and shame of those who have caused people contracting the COVID-19 virus, as is the case of Estelle’s sister because it was at her (illegal) party both Estelle and Bernard got infected.

In another illustration of the speed at which popular genres can react to the changing social situation, Cloete presents us with the weirdest romantic gift in the times of a global pandemic – a forehead thermometer. Estelle receives the device from Bernard to check the temperature of her clients so that she can run her business safely: “Dis seker een van die eenaardigste geskenke wat ’n vrou nog ooit ontvang het, maar in hierdie vreemde tyd maak dit soveel sin,” admits Estelle gratefully (92%, Kindle location).

## 6. Conclusion

While humanity is still searching for a way to live and cope with the permanent threat of a global pandemic, so is the genre of popular romance seeking ways how to represent intimacy in situations when random encounters are scarce and potentially dangerous. An analysis of three “COVID romances” in Afrikaans shows us a range of different approaches to this new situation, not only on the level of popular romance plot but also on the level of society. Contrary to the aforementioned *Kissing the coronavirus*, the COVID-19 virus does not enter the romance plot literally, but functions as a catalyst that brings and/or keeps the hero and heroine together, and tests the strength of their relationship.

While the COVID-19 pandemic generally meant a major step backward for the gender relationships, with women taking up most of the household work and childcare (e.g. Alon *et al*, 2020), it is worth mentioning that in all three analysed novels the heroines do not have to sacrifice their professional careers in order to be worthy of love, and the hero. In all the three texts the hero and heroine find a way how to combine their jobs and lives so that it suits both of them. Jenna, for example, will continue working remotely from Jacques’ farm: “Met deesdae se tegnologie kan ek van die huis af werk. Ek sal seker soms wel kantoor toe moet gaan,” Jenna proposes. “Enigiets, solank ek net weet jy kom een of ander tyd weer terug,” Jacques replies (99%, Kindle location). Sabrina in *Somerson* had to sacrifice her original interior decorating business but immediately starts a new one, which also benefits the local community. In the end, Estelle can return to her beauty salon but also keeps her second career as a singer, with Bernard’s help, but she would not accept his money. In all three presented texts the pandemic functions as a test of character. It is also a relationship test. The pandemic setting creates situations in which the hero and heroine must be honest with each other and cooperate in order to survive.

As these three popular romance texts illustrate, we find “corona romances” in different (sub)genres. While Winckler chose to write a steamy novel, Cloete stays within the general (saccharine) popular romance parameters: her hero and heroine, despite their physical proximity in the course of the whole narration, merely share a kiss at the end of the book (80%, Kindle location). *Somerson*, then, is an inspirational romance where, at first, the couple does not want to acknowledge their mutual attraction, yet eventually they get married as soon as possible. “Corona romance” is thus not limited to erotica or steamy romance, as is evident from the novels discussed here.

The three discussed category romances in Afrikaans, thematising the COVID-19 pandemic, provide us with three different approaches while using the “locked up together” trope. *Liefde in die tye van corona* presents us with two strangers coincidentally forced to share the same space and using this time for an (originally) casual sexual relationship. *Somerson* uses the nationwide lockdown as a means of bringing and keeping the hesitant (but very interested) hero and heroine together. In *Liefde onbeperk* the lockdown and compulsory isolation after

contracting the virus create a space where the hero can prove himself as a caring partner, worthy of the heroine's love. It would seem that even in the state of a global pandemic, people fall in love or find romance. As Bernard in *Liefde onbeperk* states, no one in the whole world knows how to deal with things at the moment. Everyone just struggles along as well as they can: "Eintlik weet geen mens in die hele wêreld op hierdie stadium presies hoe om dinge te hanteer nie (...). Almal ploeter maar aan so goed soos hulle kan." (69%, Kindle location). Such sentiment is very much recognisable indeed. During the pandemic, corona romance texts provide a much-needed escape for their readers (Ramsdell, 2012:22) while offering a stronger emotional engagement, due to the relatability of the represented pandemic struggles.

While the pandemic logically restricts plot options within the genre of popular romance, the analysis above shows that it also opens up new plot options for the genre. The pandemic can function as a means of bringing the two protagonists together (*Liefde in die tye van corona*, *Liefde onbeperk*), keeping the hero and heroine together (*Somerson*, *Liefde onbeperk*), or how the hero can prove himself worthy of the heroine (*Somerson*, *Liefde onbeperk*). Furthermore, this article proves that even though popular romance as a genre reacts swiftly to changing sociocultural situations, it still provides its readers with the expected "happily ever after" - even during a global pandemic.

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