

Is there a place for romance in the ELT classroom?

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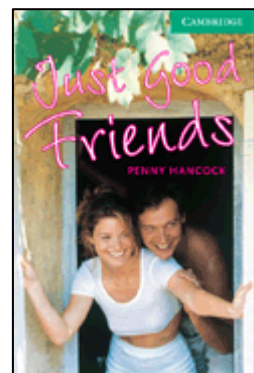
While some teachers may have reservations about using romances with students, either for reasons of sensitivity, or because they consider the genre of less relevance to men than women, the romances in the *Cambridge English Readers* series can indeed be used successfully. They offer a surprising number of opportunities for language extension, which should be of equal interest to both male and female students.

There will be few students from any walk of life who will not be familiar with the romantic genre, whether it be romantic fiction in a first language, film or even childhood fairy stories. Familiarity with a genre makes for an accessible read.

However, familiarity with a genre is not enough alone to capture the interest of a diverse class of students. A good romance, like any work of fiction, needs a good story, and above all, characters we can identify with. It would be condescending to expect students to enjoy a predictable story line. Just as care has been taken to ensure the stories do not equate a low language level with limited life experience, so has it been taken to ensure the stories do not equate the accessibility of genre fiction with simplicity of plot.

In other words, while the romantic themes touched upon remain firmly within the genre, other issues and ideas are embedded in the story lines. The romances in the *Cambridge English Readers* series will appeal to students who are interested in human relationships in all their complexities, the way people interact and communicate, with all the accompanying misunderstandings, outbursts of feeling and hidden desires. Discuss the implications of the title and the cover photographs, and the blurb, before choosing a romance, to ensure that these themes have whetted the students' appetites to read on.

Having chosen a romance as a class reader, one of the first exercises teachers might like to try, is to ask what students' expectations of a romantic story are. At lower levels, students may just like to come up with the names of well known romantic stories or even songs, in their own languages. Ask what these stories have in common. Students can then look out for ways the characters and plots in the readers differ from the conventional stories they have discussed. For example, although we normally expect the heroine in a romance to be a sympathetic character, Stephany in



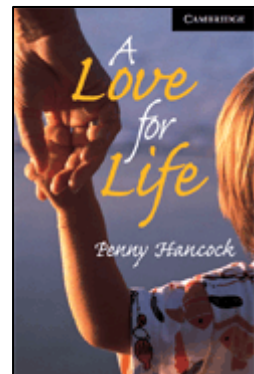
Just Good Friends is harder to like. Also, there is no happy ending. Instead, as in real life, certain things are left unsaid, and Max and Stephany's futures remain uncertain.

At higher levels, teachers may like to use the romances in the *Cambridge English Readers* series as vehicles for discussion about other issues regarding human relationships. For example, when I wrote *A Love for Life* I was interested in exploring the preconceptions we have about men's and women's emotions. Rod is able to put himself in other people's shoes, while Leah seems incapable of doing this.

Students may like to discuss whether the opposite, more archetypal model is more often true, or whether now that women are taking on higher paid roles in the workplace, there is now room for men to express their softer sides. Students can discuss whether the desire for a child felt so strongly by Fanella, is instinctive or a result of social expectations, whether it is right that a single woman should be allowed to adopt a child, and whether this should be true for single men, too. I also wanted to explore whether men can take on jobs that remain, even today, firmly in the female domain, and to consider the underlying hostility they may receive as a result. (When Rod is accused of hurting a young child in his class, it belies a lack of trust amongst the parents in a man's ability to do the job as well as a woman.) Students may be interested in comparing the different cultural attitudes towards these themes.

The characters are real people with real feelings who talk to each other about how they feel. Students can write short descriptions of some of the characters in the books, including their feelings towards them. Comparing reactions in this way can give rise to some lively debate.

While the vast majority of readers of romances may be women, the romances in the *Readers* series should appeal to men as well. The heroes, like the heroines, are complex characters, with problems and ideals of their own. For example, in *Just Good Friends*, Carlo is a man committed to his family, who wants to remain faithful, but who falls prey to the artful charms of Stephany. Max is looking for a serious relationship with Stephany. Both men are duped by her superficial nature. In a way this story turns the traditional expectation of a man as a cad and a bounder on its head. Students may like to discuss whether we judge a woman in this role more harshly than we do the traditional man, and if so with what justification?



In *A Love for Life*, men may identify with Rod, who, in trying to keep together a job, a marriage and a reputation, hits hard times and loses his direction. They may like to consider the pros and cons of taking on another woman's child, of adoption versus having their own children, of career versus becoming a house husband.

The *Readers* offer endless opportunities for exploitation in the classroom. However, within all this, it must not be forgotten that the *Readers* are written primarily for students to enjoy, and with the aim of increasing their grasp of English at their own pace. Once students are engrossed in a good read, don't be tempted to interrupt their flow! After all, avid reading, above all, is what we are hoping to engender in our students, and hopefully, this is what the romances will help to achieve.