

Reading by Flashlight: Confession of a Genre Junkie

My name is Jai O'Neal (at least, that's my name for the purposes of this article) and I have a confession to make. I have been reading paranormal romances for the past year. In fact, I am currently reading my fourth paranormal romance series. Yes, I'm referring to those books with a Fabio-like character on the front cover, which you can often find in your local grocery store checkout counter or in the magazine section. You're probably thinking that I'm one of those lonely, bored housewives who is obsessed with watching soaps and eating bon-bons and has bookshelves filled with bodice rippers. On the contrary, I'm an independent woman working in a school library. I have my MLIS degree and will be a certified teacher-librarian with her B.Ed in May of this year. I'm an avid reader of all literary genres; nevertheless, I have not broadcast my love of what my dear friends would call "smut literature" until now. I want to break down the stereotypes associated with "smut literature" and show that it does have some redeeming qualities. And no, I'm not drinking or taking anything while I write this article.

Never in a million years did I think I would read a romance novel. That all changed when I read Stephenie

Meyer's now omnipresent *Twilight* saga. In fact I started the *Twilight* series before it gained popularity and was made into a movie. I was instantly drawn to Meyer's exploration of will power in which the main character, Edward, balances his conflicting desires to both kill and love a particular human. For me, the saga brought back good memories of being innocent and the thrill of having a first crush. My fellow adult fans of the books recommended other authors they enjoyed and I began to read those series too. Truth to be told, at the end of a long work day and after watching or reading news filled with violence, poverty, famine, and other issues that leave me feeling distressed, I just want to read an engaging story where the characters find love and have a happy ending. Is that so wrong? Well, if you knew my cultural background, you would say a resounding "Yes!"

I'm known as the "flashlight girl" in my inner circle of adult romance readers due to my conservative Southeast Asian background. In my culture, men and women do not openly display physical affection; it is considered strictly private and never discussed. As a child, I never saw my parents kiss, although I'm sure something happened, otherwise I wouldn't have been born. In the Southeast Asian culture, there is a difference between sensuality and sexuality; this is clearly demonstrated in the vastly popular Bollywood films, India's version of Hollywood. In a Bollywood film, the main plot centres on a hero and heroine falling in love. The first hour is dedicated to the hero meeting the heroine. The second hour traces the development of their relationship and the third hour resolves any stumbling blocks that are in the way of the hero and heroine marrying. In the entire three-hour plus film,