February 14, 2024 / Why America loves faerie smut

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Fairy Waltz>

EMMA ALPERN (*Vulture* writer): My name is Emma Alpern, and I write about books for *Vulture*, and I recently went to the midnight book release party at the Barnes and Noble Union Square for the latest in a romantasy series by an author named Sarah J. Maas.

*<NATSOUND> EMMA: I’m actually a reporter with New York Magazine. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?  
INTERVIEWEE: Sure, yeah! <UNDER>*

EMMA: The atmosphere was a little like one of those Harry Potter book releases from the early 2000s, except that instead of crowds of kids in capes with wands, it was adults and faux leather and elf ears.

*<CLIP> INTERVIEWEE: I painted it myself today…*

EMMA: All of a sudden I hear the room just start to erupt in a scream…

*<NATSOUND> Screams*

EMMA: I turn around and Sarah J Maas is here!

*<CLIP> AUTHOR SARAH J MAAS: I write these books, but tonight is about you guys.*

EMMA: It was like we just conjured her up. Like with faerie magic.

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Ahead on *Today, Explained*: How America fell for faerie smut.

*<CLIP> MAAS: This is about what you guys have done, the fandom you have built. <screaming>*

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram here with Kathryn VanArendonk, who recently wrote a piece for *Vulture* titled “Sarah J. Maas is the Mortal Queen of Faerie Smut.”

KATHRYN VAN ARENDONK (*Vulture* critic): So faerie smut is a loving way of describing an incredibly popular genre of books right now. I want to be very clear that smut in this context is not meant as a pejorative…

SEAN: Hm.

KATHRYN: …and is in fact a way that people are very happily describing the kinds of books that they are reading, in the same way that we imagine reclaiming things that were once considered trashy or below us.

SCORING <Fairy Godmother>

KATHRYN: These are books that are also referred to as “romantasy”, although not all romantasy has to be about fairies. But they are books about fantastical worlds, often including mythical creatures.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: A prison breakout, a car chase, intergalactic parasites, world- hopping, prophecies…*

KATHRYN: And they have a combination of big fantasy-book world-building – Maps. They have maps at the beginning, and you are looking at different political situations and you're talking about, you know, Chosen One narratives, magical systems, all that kind of stuff.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: We’ve got the antihero high prince, we’ve got his slightly psychotic brother. And we’ve got their protective bestie slash guard. And obviously we have a badass female main character.*

KATHRYN: But also, key to the structure of these books, there is a romance plot. And so the fantasy worlds are built at the same time and often through the mechanisms of a romance structure. And so the big climactic scenes of these books tend to be this huge moment of satisfying romance, resolution – or, climax as you would have it – And then, but then also, you know, overthrowing an evil, say, king.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Yes, we love some faerie smut, but that’s not JUST what this is. And I needed to say that.*

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Yeah, look, I came for the spice but I… stayed for the plot.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And speaking of. I want to talk about romantasy’s – faerie smut’s – mortal queen, Sarah J Maas, who we heard about at the top of the show. People were screaming when she showed up to a Midnight … Maas?

KATHRYN: <laughs>

SEAN: – book release, if you will. She sounds like she's super popular.

*<CLIP> SINGER/ TALK SHOW HOST KELLY CLARKSON: <applause> Welcome back, y’all, my next guest is one of the best-selling authors on the planet. <duck>*

KATHRYN: She is immensely popular. Her books have sold over –

*<CLIP> CLARKSON: <up> 40. Million. Books. And redefined the fantasy genre.*

SEAN: Wow.

*<CLIP> CLARKSON: You did this release and, like, it just blew up. It literally was like Taylor Swift was releasing an album…   
MAAS: <titters>   
CLARKSON: All these people showed up. Is that normal?   
MAAS: Um….*

KATHRYN: They are Target endcap-type books. Like, they are so popular that you can find them anywhere not even books are sold. Grocery store aisle-level popularity. And she is also so popular and has been around for long enough that you're not just going to see Sarah J Maas books on those shelves. They are also going to be shelved next to a lot of other authors whose prominence is thanks in part to the popularity that was demonstrated by Maas’s work.

SEAN: Hm.

KATHRYN: So authors like Christa Broadbent and Jennifer Armentrout and Rebecca Yarros, who was very popular in this last year. They exist in these big marketing spaces because of how popular Sarah J Maas’ work has been over the last five years or so. Sarah J. Mass has been writing for a lot longer than five years. It feels like it's taken a little while for mainstream media to really catch up to the narrative of, like, how immensely popular those books are. And so it's really only now that I think we are starting to see this huge boom in awareness for who she is. When her most recent book, *House of Flame and Shadow*, came out in January, she did an exclusive interview with the Today Show about it. Like, that's the level of popularity we’re talking.

SEAN: Hmmm.

<*CLIP> TALK SHOW HOST JENNA BUSH HAGER: In your wildest dreams, had you ever expected that?   
MAAS: No. No. When I was first getting started as a writer, like just trying to get my book published, I told myself that even if it took me until I was 90 years old, I would just get one book published.*

SEAN: So what took so long for people to catch up to this immense popularity?

KATHRYN: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of things happening here.

SCORING <Dark Enchantment>

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: So I just finished ACOTAR. The first book. Let’s talk about it…<DUCK>*

KATHRYN: Like every other element of culture, social media plays a huge part.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: <DUCK> First of all, I have not actually wanted to read a book in years. Once I got to page, like, 100 in this book, I could not stop.*

KATHRYN: It's a little bit hard to distinguish because BookTok came to exist at around the same time as the pandemic. So people are at home watching a lot of BookTok at the same time that they're at home and not able to be out doing other kinds of activities. And so there is this perfect storm for why you would be sitting down and reading 600 page fantasy novels about fairies having sex.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: How do we feel about Tamlin? I’m obsessed with him. But then I looked on TikTok and everyone’s like, making fun of him. I don’t get - why are we making fun of him? I don’t get it.*

KATHRYN: And it has taken the media a little while to kind of realize that there's this big, invisible, or at least only online audience who are happy to show up in person because it's been a while between all of that happening, and then Sarah J Maas actually releasing a new book that finally happened this last January. And so suddenly you get these midnight release parties that people are so excited to show up and scream about, and it feels like it came out of nowhere, but it's actually been building for a long time.

SCORING OUT

KATHRYN: For Sarah J Maas in particular, *Throne of Glass* was originally shelved as – and is still often considered – a Y.A. series.

SEAN: Ah.

KATHRYN: The combination of Y.A. and the very romance elements, including sex scenes, explicit sex scenes, also make these the kinds of books that have had a hard time being recognized as culturally-important literature in the world. These are the kinds of things that people tend to either not admit that they read to their friends and family, or they do admit they read in these little sort of safe book club type spaces.

*<CLIP> MAAS: One of the most mortifying moments of my career was: my mother-in-law pulled me aside. She goes, ‘were all those steamy scenes inspired by you and Josh?’ I wanted to just… walk into traffic.*

KATHRYN: So there's a combination of like a lot of, like, cultural baggage. But, you know, one of the other things that I just want to mention is we live in an age of audiobooks and Kindles now, and so people can be reading lots and lots and lots of things with covers that they may not be, happy to have other people see them reading on the subway. And now everyone can read whatever they want, and nobody has any idea what, what is actually happening on their screens.

SEAN: Can you give us a sample reading? Do you have a favorite passage?

KATHRYN: The piece that I wrote for *Vulture* does begin with this excerpt from *A Court of Mist and Fury.* That's the second book in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series. And it is a sex scene. And I wanted to begin there, I think because we have this squeamishness about sex scenes, this idea that, like, that's the part of the book that because it sounds silly, sort of invalidates the rest of the book, and also because that's the thing everyone is sort of most fascinated by. But I do want to say: the identities of the people who are hooking up in this sex scene could be considered a spoiler if you've never read these books and are really hoping to. So just so you know, I'm going to say who former-human-now-faerie, Feyre, is having sex with in *A Court of Mist and Fury*.

SEAN: <chortles>  
  
KATHRYN: The setting here is that they are in a magic cabin …

SCORING <Swan Lake Suite 2>

KATHRYN: …and they are having sex for the first time, and, they are so excited about it that they have had sex all over a table covered in art supplies. So, his name is Rhys – Rhysand – and she says ‘Rhys picked up a bar of that pine tar smelling soap and handed it to me. And then passed a wash rag. ‘Someone, it seems, got my wings dirty.’ My face heated, but my gut tightened. Illyrian males and their wings. So sensitive. And then Faber starts watching Rhys and she, like, looks over his shoulder into the bathtub. And she says –

SCORING PAUSE

KATHRYN: – ‘At least the rumors about wingspan correlating with the size of other body parts were right.’

SCORING FLOURISH AND OUT

SEAN: <laughs>

KATHRYN: So he does have wings. He has giant bat wings. Just for reference.

SEAN: Very hot. Are these books GOOD?

KATHRYN: Okay, this is a complicated question. I love these books. I read them with a level of absorption that can only at times be called child neglect, as I do have two small children. And I think they are astonishingly well-designed books in a lot of ways. From a prose level, I often find myself frustrated or noting a lot of repeated words – where I wonder where I feel like if I were an editor, I would be making notes or choices.

SEAN: Mmm.

KATHRYN: But it does not matter. Like I'm still reading them. And I think on other levels, the sort of plot structure, the design of them, the way that they are able to blend these two different spaces, this like big fantasy mechanism – which is really hard – with this romance structure, which is also – it's really, really hard to get this stuff as right as these books get it.

SEAN: Does something about this feel new? Because romance isn't new and fantasy isn't new. And surely the two have been combined before?

KATHRYN: Yeah, they absolutely have been combined before. And when I was, what would be a young Sarah J. Maas reader now – when I was like 14 or 15 – I was reading Anne McCaffrey books. And those are sci fi fantasy books about dragons. And when the dragons get horny for each other, the people who are bonded to those dragons also get horny for each other.

*<CLIP> “GAME OF THRONES”: Please, Daeny.*

SEAN: Nice.

KATHRYN: And it does feel like we go through sort of generations of this, and each generation doesn't always remember all of the, like, leading lights of the past generations. And part of that is because we don't have, like, a canon of this. When we say, like, ‘Who are the great novelists of this era and that era?’ And we haven't done a great job of remembering the people who came before in these spaces. But they do exist.

SCORING <Halloween Goofs C>

KATHRYN: I also don't think it's an accident that a genre like this, that is about this sort of, you know, big fantasy types of world-building, that happens to appeal largely to women is now as popular as it is in the years after Marvel and DC have become mainstream kinds of popular texts for – look, it's everyone, but I'm going to say men, right?

*<CLIP> “AVENGERS”, BRUCE BANNER: That’s my secret, Captain. I’m always angry.*

KATHRYN: They're more focused on big battles, they don't have really interesting romance. The character development really kind of sucks. And if you're a woman and you're watching them and you're thinking like, ‘But I would really rather spend a lot more time with why she is in pain. And then like, once we understand that, then she can kiss each other. But I still want all the fantasy stuff,’ like, that's where a Sarah J. Mass comes in. And there's we are more accepting of these kind of subcultures that actually have become mainstream now.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, what the romantasy boom tells us about … us!

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> MAAS: When you go through an orc massacre, you’re going to have some trauma, right? It felt like a natural thing for my characters to face emotional consequences.*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Kristen McLean works at the market research company Circana. She’s spent 30 years analyzing what sales of books and videogames tell us about the people doing the buying, aka: you and me.

KRISTEN MCLEAN (Circana analyst): So the primary data set that I'm most well-known for is the books data set. And what's really interesting about tracking books is that books are really ideas in between two covers. Right? So when you watch what people are buying in the book market, especially in a very large data set like what we have, it's almost like a Maslow's hierarchy of needs or a ticker tape for what people are thinking about. So, you know, a book is a book, but a book is also saying something about what people want to cook next or what people want to spend their time doing in terms of entertainment. What are they reading for fun? And also, what are they researching? What do they need answers on? What problems are they trying to solve? So it's a really, really interesting way to just get at what's in people's minds.

SEAN: So we talk about romantasy in the first half of the show. Can you tell us how popular it is right now, just out the gate?

KRISTEN: So romantasy is really the latest wave of genre fiction that has taken off in the United States. And we can trace that trend back to 2021, during the pandemic, when people had a lot more time on their hands and they decided to spend some of that time reading. And so in 2021, we saw adult fiction really take off. And, and there are a lot of reasons why that happened. But categories like romance, for instance, were very strong.

*<CLIP> “BRIDGERTON” TRAILER, 2015: All is fair in love and war. <DUCK>*

KRISTEN: One of the things that really kickstarted romance was, *Bridgerton*.

*<CLIP> TRAILER: <DUCK> Miss Daphne Bridgerton!  
DAPHNE: You have no idea what it is to have one’s life reduced to a single moment.*

KRISTEN: And *Bridgerton* is really interesting because *Bridgerton* – the author of *Bridgerton* – Julia Quinn, is considered a traditional romance author. But the adaptation of Bridgerton onto streaming and the reimagination of that, visually got a lot more people excited about traditional romance.

*<CLIP> “BRIDGERTON”, DAPHNE: I burn – for you.*

KRISTEN: So romantasy is really the next wave coming off romance. So it’s romantic stories, set in a fantasy world. And, right now, the top authors in the overall bestseller list in the United States are all romantasy authors.

SEAN: Maybe I'm projecting here, but when I think 2024, I think of two very old, not very sexy men running in an election against each other.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: You say I’m over the hill! Don Lemon would say, ‘That’s a man in his prime.’ <laughs>*

SEAN: I don't think of faerie sex. Tell me what book sales looked like in a previous, maybe more quote-unquote “normal” election year. Let's say 2012. What were people reading back then?

KRISTEN: Normally there's a pretty standard pattern in a political election year, right? So we would expect to see strong sales, the year before the year of and the year after an election. So we went back to 2012. That was the middle of the Obama administration. You know, we would have seen prominent journalists and others writing biographies about the president…

*<CLIP> CNN: The story of Barack Obama’s unlikely rise has already been told by the President himself in a pair of memoirs. The journalistic challenge for Pulitzer Prize -winning author David Marannis was to dig deeper…*

KRISTEN: We would have seen commentators writing about historical stories or other political stories. But generally those books – poli-sci, we call them – would be on the rise the year before and the year of an election. What's really interesting about what's happening now is that actually, I don't see any of that happening. And in fact, political science books are down 50%. New political science books, down 50% here at the top of an election year. Very unusual.

SEAN: Wow.

KRISTEN: And this is the third year of decline for political science in January. So we really are seeing a lack of momentum in the category. And to be honest, I think kind of a lack of interest on the part of the consumer market. I think, because these are essentially two guys, who have both already been in office – and let me just say, the Trump presidency was one of the best things for political books ever. We sold more political books in, in 2020 than ever before in the United States.

SEAN: Wow!

*<CLIP> THE DAILY SHOW, TREVOR NOAH: This is a very simple title on the book: “Why We’re Polarized.” Donald Trump, right? No, yes, maybe?   
VOX COFOUNDER EZRA KLEIN: No. Donald Trump is symptom, not cause.*

KRISTEN: So, it was, it's been a comedown. And honestly, I'm not sure how many new stories there are to tell about these guys. Right? So…   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
KRISTEN: Part of it is there just isn't as much momentum and fire in the overall market for these books.

SEAN: Okay. But still, even if there's nothing new to say about these two dudes…

KRISTEN: Mm.

SEAN: ...and even if we kind of, you know, spent all our money on books about politics, the last time, literally these same two guys ran against each other. How do we go from political books to faerie sex?

SCORING <Bone Cracks>

KRISTEN: Well, I think that it's a bigger question than even an election year, right? I mean, if we think about what has happened to us, you know, globally since 2020, and we look at data around how people are feeling, and we look at the fact that we have two ground wars happening globally right now. We have a lot of economic uncertainty.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: We are in a vibe-cession. That’s the word. Vibecession.*

KRISTEN: Frankly, I think a lot of PTSD coming off the pandemic. We had disruptions to school, we had disruptions to work. We have climate change, you know, anxiety. Like, it's a very anxious time with a lot of uncertainty.

*<CLIP> RACHEL MADDOW: You are not wrong to think that things are very bad right now in lots of different ways. They’re terrible.*

KRISTEN: And one of the things that we see during times like that is people look for escapist ways to relieve their stress. And so we see that in people really loving nostalgia, for instance, we see it in people, wanting to create a stronger sense of community for themselves in lots of different ways. And we see them consuming content that takes them out of themselves. And, and reading escapist fiction is one of the classic ways to escape reality. Right. So I think that that is all at play in, in why we're seeing, some of these fictions like romance and romantasy and fantasy and horror, all of these things emerge – sci fi – because they really are very strong ways of helping people just get out of their own anxiety and into a great story, which relieves that tension for a while.

SCORING OUT

KRISTEN: And then the other thing that I think is really interesting: we saw during the pandemic the emergence of TikTok as a major force in the US book market. And that was really about fiction, and fiction that appeals to younger audiences. So we did some research in 2022 on who this audience was, and one of the things we discovered in that consumer research is that about 80% of the people who are heavy TikTok users, also heavy readers, are under the age of 34. And like 1 in 10 is under the age of 18. So I think the other thing that's really driving this is that there's a lot of fiction being bought and talked about by younger consumers, and these guys just really love genre fiction.

SEAN: Does that mean that this is just a trend? Does that mean that faerie smut is just the flavor of the week?

KRISTEN: Yeah. I mean, I think that's the nature of fiction. I think that there you know, if you think back on, say, the last 15 years, you can think about the things that popped and then died away. So you think about Twilight, for instance, right? That was all about vampires. We went through a big vampire phase there.

*<CLIP> “TWILIGHT”, EDWARD: Say it… out loud.*

KRISTEN: And then you think about Hunger Games…

*<CLIP> “THE HUNGER GAMES”, RUE’S TUNE*

KRISTEN: … and dystopian fiction, and that had a moment and a lot of people following on. And that has kind of died away a little bit. We saw the rise of romance, and that is giving way right now to romantasy. There will always be fans for fantasy. There will always be fans for sci fi. And I do think that this next generation of readers is building a real market for romance and for romantasy. But will there be something else that catches people's imaginations, or the next big book that comes up that isn't romantasy? For sure. So I think that's just the nature of of the reading cycles and what people get excited about and how they talk about it.

SCORING <Halloween Goofs>

SEAN: That was Kristen McLean from Circana.

Earlier in the show you heard from Kathryn VanArendonk from Vulture, and at the very top of the show, her colleague, Emma Alpern. She wrote a piece for Vulture called “Midnight Maas”. Maas is with two As and one S for those of you not in the know. *Vulture* is a part of *New York Magazine,* for those of you not in the know. You can subscribe at n y mag dot com.

Today’s show was produced by Amanda “Big Dragon” Lewellyn. It was edited by Amina Al-Sadi. Laura Bullard fact-checked. David Herman engineered.

We are *Today, Explained.*

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]