

ROMANCES

By Donna Freitas

Best Extended Foreplay and Most Likely to Get Married

And the winners are Bella and Edward from *Twilight* (Little, Brown, 2005) by Stephenie Meyer. I'm aware that *Twilight* -bashing is all the rage, but come on, people-get over it (at least for the month of February). *Twilight* is the very definition of a page-turner and a romance novel, Meyer is a fantastic storyteller, and Bella and Edward-well, they manage to sustain an erotic tension the likes of which I haven't seen elsewhere over the course of more than 2,000 pages (counting, of course, the entire series). I suspect that with the release of *Breaking Dawn* (Little, Brown, 2008), the final installment of the "*Twilight* Saga," some readers got angry when they discovered it was "simply" a quintessential romance, tied-up neatly with a bow (granted, the baby thing was a bit much) and not something weightier, like Philip Pullman's "*His Dark Materials*." But Meyer's gooey, happy ending is exactly what makes a romance novel satisfying. Why else would so many teens swoon over it?

Most Likely to Melt Your Fingers While Reading Because It's So Hot

Hands down, the gold star goes to Katsa and Po from *Graceling* (Harcourt, 2008) by Kristin Cashore. In my opinion, this fantasy novel is the must-read of 2008 (in general), and certainly the must-read if what you're looking for is romance. The irony of *Graceling*? Everyone and their publisher is trying to hit the *Twilight* jackpot with yet another novel about an undead-human relationship, yet Cashore surpasses the erotic tension between Bella and Edward with her heroine and hero, Katsa and Po, and they aren't even the littlest bit undead! How about that? Just imagining the intense, hand-to-hand combat sessions between the two of them-whether in full view of the king's court or out in the woods (um, well, especially in the woods)-is enough to make a girl steamy.

Best Declaration of Love

First place goes to Gen from *The Queen of Attolia* (HarperTeen, 2000) by Megan Whalen Turner. Gen (short for Eugenides) is not only an adventure-seeking, quick-witted, loyal right hand to the Queen of Eddis, but an agile, clever thief who falls head over heels with his brutal but beautiful enemy, the Queen of Attolia. Whalen Turner has that rare talent of planting the tiniest of hints that something like romance is afoot between Gen and Attolia. So by the time Gen declares his love to his unusual beloved, readers may simply forget to breathe. Of course, to fully enjoy Gen's escapades, romantic and otherwise, one must start from the beginning with *The Thief* (1996) and roar right on through *The Queen of Attolia* to *The King of Attolia* (2006, both HarperCollins). Lucky are those readers who still have this series ahead of them.

Best Budding Relationship

Pass the prize to Marcelo and Jasmine from *Marcelo in the Real World* (Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine Bks., March 2009) by Francisco X. Stork. You're in for a treat with this soon-to-be-released novel. Marcelo is one of the most unique, endearing protagonists to come along in ages and readers are not only sure to fall in love with him as he learns to navigate "the real world" in his summer job at his father's law firm (Marcelo has Asperger's), but will fall for Jasmine, his coworker and first, true friend. It's not that sparks fly between Marcelo and Jasmine, exactly, but it's hard not to sigh as these two not only discover friendship, but the beautiful possibility of something more on the horizon.

Headiest Falling in (and Out of) Love Scenes

It's hard to top Paul and Noah in *Boy Meets Boy* (Knopf, 2003) by David Levithan. A satisfying romance rests not only on an author's ability to pull off a good kiss (or four or five), but even more so on the anticipation that accompanies all that kissing. Levithan is masterful at evoking the excitement and anticipation of an about-to-be-had kiss and other, similar romantic moments. Check out the scene where Paul and Noah are in Noah's room, painting. Between the setting, the waiting, the music

(naturally), the revelation of two selves falling in love, the gazing, and the hand-holding, it's difficult to imagine a sexier situation in which to discover the beginnings of love.

Most Likely to Break Your Heart

This definitely describes Lyra and Will from *The Amber Spyglass* (Knopf, 1999) by Philip Pullman. In addition to the fact that Pullman's trilogy, "His Dark Materials," is a literary masterpiece, he gives us an extraordinary story of friendship and fierce loyalty that slowly, but inevitably, gives way to the most tender of first loves. Lyra and Will meet in the unlikeliest of circumstances at the beginning of *The Subtle Knife* (Knopf, 1997) and journey together to save their worlds and everyone in them through to the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, when they are taken by surprise that love is indeed what they feel for each other. Sigh. The end of this series is a 10-hanky affair, so be prepared.

Best Preparation for Good First-Time Sex

This one's a snap: the medal goes to Samantha Madison from *Ready or Not* (2005) by Meg Cabot. I'm pretty sure that *Ready or Not*, the sequel to *All-American Girl* (2002, both HarperTeen), is Cabot's response to those required abstinence-only education programs. Squeaky clean Cabot gives her readers quite a few lessons in love and sex via Samantha (who, incidentally, is dating the president's son), including detailed conversations with sis about methods of protection, how to practice having that all-important female orgasm, not to mention the value of having honest conversations with your partner ahead of time—all in order to foster the best possible circumstances for pleasurable, fulfilling, first-time sex. And Cabot manages all this education without sacrificing her signature sense of humor or lighthearted characters.

Best First Kiss

The honor goes to Morning and Portia from *Suck It Up* (Delacorte, 2008) by Brian Meehl. Like any good first kiss, just before Morning (a very funny vampire) and Portia (a very cool, alterna-chick) lock lips, there's the requisite nervousness, blushing, pulse racing, and fumbling, as well as the final moment of delightful giving in. But poor Morning; he's so taken by Portia's lips and the intense barrage of feelings that accompany a serious kiss, that he ends up with a bad case of *dentis eruptis* (aka fangs) and the kiss gets cut short. Lucky for him, Portia is forgiving.

Most Romantic Gesture

It's difficult not to root for Ed Kennedy from *I Am the Messenger* (Knopf, 2005) by Markus Zusak. Ed, a young taxi driver, is the chosen deliverer of strange messages that are designed to change his life, as well as the lives of strangers and friends, in ways both big and small. After many highs and lows (and a few bruises), Ed receives one last message that's intended to heal some hearts, including his own, which aches for Audrey, his best friend and fellow taxi driver. The message sets the stage for one of my favorite, sweet encounters in YA literature: as the sun rises, Ed and Audrey slow dance with each other and decide to allow themselves to be in love "for three minutes."

Best Romance Under Duress

No one ever said love is easy, and that's especially true for Tally, David, and Zane in the "Uglies" trilogy (Simon Pulse) by Scott Westerfeld. The dystopian backdrop of Tally's world, where conformity is orchestrated via plastic surgery and a numbing of young minds, provides the perfect high-stakes scenario for romance amidst a revolution. Deciding which of Tally's loves—the "ugly" David or the "pretty" Zane—is best is challenging not only because they're both appealing (and there are some pretty good kissing scenes), but because they both manage to capture Tally's heart amid the action-packed hoverboard chases and the overthrow of the government.

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