

**BOOK REVIEW**

# **In Curtis Sittenfeld's 'Romantic Comedy,' the perfect man (and a global pandemic) derails an otherwise smart, funny romance**

**By Rebecca Steinitz** Updated April 6, 2023, 6:16 p.m.







guaranteed. Best-selling novelist Curtis Sittenfeld, who loves a literary challenge, successfully dipped her toe in the romance waters with “Eligible,” her 2017 “Pride and Prejudice” update. Now she dives in with “Romantic Comedy,” taking on romance, comedy, and the pandemic with frustratingly mixed results.

Narrator and heroine Sally Milz is a writer for “The Night Owls,” a late-night comedy sketch show and pitch-perfect replica of “Saturday Night Live.” One of the delights of “Romantic Comedy” is how it re-creates the workings of the show, from “sketches pinned to a corkboard and “the iconic crane that ... swooped in for the guest host’s entrance,” to pitch meetings and afterparties, to Sally’s officemate, Danny Horst, a Pete Davidson doppelganger with a dash of Colin Jost.

“TNO” is Sally’s “dream job,” where she gets to write feminist sketches like “Nancy Drew and the Disappearing Access to Abortion” and hang out with her funny friends (who are indeed funny — Sittenfeld should write comedy!). After embarrassingly mistaking a friendly colleague for a soulmate, she has given up romance for “decent sex” with men who won’t distract her. Then Noah Brewster, “a cheesily handsome, extremely successful singer-songwriter who specialized in cloying music and ... dating models,” shows up as “TNO”’s guest host and musical guest. You can probably guess what happens next.

Of course that’s the point in romance novels, but Sittenfeld keeps it funny and feminist. Danny and pop star Annabel Lily have just gotten engaged after a few whirlwind weeks of crazy, stupid love. And Danny isn’t the first grungy “TNO” male writer to date — or marry — a glamorous female guest star. So Sally proposes a sketch about The Danny Horst Rule, “where men at ‘TNO’ date above their station, but women never do.” Like I said, you can probably guess what happens next.

The first chapter takes place during the week leading up to Noah’s “TNO” episode, and it is pure pleasure. Sittenfeld’s up-close account of how the show builds from Monday’s

pitch meeting through Saturday's performance marks the beats of Sally and Noah's budding romance.

She edits a sketch he's written. He sings to her in a music rehearsal. She tells him the Indigo Girls are her favorite singers. He says "Yeah, they're incredible." She says, "I think of 'TNO' as the love of my life." He replies, "I feel that way about my music." She feels "a wild surge inside me." He gives her a "strangely rapt" gaze.

When Noah asks Sally for help with a sketch, he tells her a colleague says "you're a genius with structure." Sally, like Sittenfeld, is a firm believer in "the rule of three." "Romantic Comedy" has three chapters and three romances. All three sketches Sally pitches are chosen for Noah's episode ("You got a hat trick, Chuckles," says Danny). And of course boy meets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl.

Sure enough, just as Noah seems to be going in for a first kiss, everything falls apart. Which is to be expected in a romance novel, except in this case the bump in the romance derails the novel. Alas, three things take "Romantic Comedy" off track: the pandemic, Sally, and Noah.

The epistolary second chapter begins in July 2020, two years after Noah's "TNO" appearance, when he e-mails Sally, "Is this still you?" Six days of increasingly frequent and flirtatious e-mails ensue, paralleling the six days it took to create Noah's "TNO" episode. But if replicating the inner workings of "SNL" is entertaining, replicating the pandemic is a drag.

Sally and Noah dutifully report on ambulances in New York, masks, and online school; racial disparities in health care, Black Lives Matter protests, and wildfires. They laboriously get to know each other — Sally: "Fun fact: I've been a pescatarian for seven years." They earnestly share their feelings — Noah: "It's [expletive] great to be writing and receiving long emails!" And they discover new similarities — she is finally working on a romantic comedy screenplay and he is experimenting with ... rockabilly!

As “Romantic Comedy” winds through its ups and downs, as romances do, Sally becomes an increasingly neurotic impediment to her own happiness. The creator of *The Danny Horst Rule*, who has never described her own looks, anxiously frets over whether Noah really likes her and worries that “it would disrupt the space-time continuum for a world-famous singer who looks like you to get involved with a TV writer who looks like me.” Meanwhile, Noah, of the “piercing blue eyes, shaggy blond hair ... and jacked body,” not to mention “perfect” forearm and fingers (both perfect, on two separate pages) responds to her concerns and travails lovingly, considerately, sympathetically: in a word, perfectly.

The flawed heroine and seemingly perfect hero are classic romance tropes. But the funny, feminist, contemporary romance novelists who deploy them to perfection, like Jasmine Guillory, Emily Henry, Sonali Dev, and Ali Hazelwood, know that for a romance to maintain its energy, the heroine needs to be perfect in her own way and the hero needs flaws.

“Romantic Comedy” has a lovely ending: poignant, funny, and satisfying. If I’d just read the first 130 and last 30 pages, I’d be giving this book a rave. But structure only gets you so far, even in romance.

## **ROMANTIC COMEDY**

By Curtis Sittenfeld

Random House, 320 pp., \$28

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