

Inland Empire

Summer 2017

Hi, I'm Sarah Fall, and I've been writing free love stories under the pen name of Judith Bronte since 1998. You'll find over a million words of free romantic fiction here, read by thousands of readers across the world. I hope you'll be one of them.

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- Homegrown Dandelions
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JUDITH BRONTE
Romantic Love Stories

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I met Judith Bronte in a Starbucks off the highway in an unnamed town in Southern California. Driving east from LA, in a rented car, I was nervous; I'd been trying to find her for such a long time. Over the course of the drive I kept wondering if I would be stood up—or rather, it seemed only logical that I would be. The alternative, that a real, corporeal, Judith would be waiting for me at Starbucks, seemed impossible.

Judith Bronte is a pseudonym, the pen name of Sarah Fall. She has been writing free Christian romance novels since 1998, and publishing them on her eponymous website nearly as long. Amid the pink, animated floral motifs of judithbronte.com, one can find “over a million words of free romantic fiction” focusing on the lives of Beth, Abigail, Terry, Carter, and others. Bronte is particularly notable for the quantity of her work and her large fan-base, as well as the specificity of her repeating characters and their romantic (but not explicit) stories. She is a self-made author, supported by donations and advanced access to new books, a poster-child of creative opportunities that became available online with the advent of an internet that supported commerce.

She is also a remarkably private person, dedicated to keeping personal details offline with a keenness that belies the nature of her work. This, combined with the million words of output, had me questioning if she was really one person—or anyone—at all. This question of who exactly

I had travelled across the country to meet felt like an artifact from an earlier internet, where one could still be anonymous or someone else online. In the era of real-name policies and big-data tracking, it was a novel sensation.

I had no reason to worry; I recognized her right away. She looked nothing like her author photo but was still somehow unmistakable. She introduced herself as Sarah, and we sat down with a pair of coffees to talk.

In the audio of our recorded interview, I can hear my nerves. My questions are tenuous and shaky, and I realize that this is celebrity at work; I feel lucky to be talking with her. I'm not a typical fan; I don't generally read romance, and I don't carry the faith. But over the years, I've read all about Beth and Abigail and Carter; I've pieced together the fragments of their stories, matching one with another until I had enough of a text to search backwards, to find their origin, in Judith.

I found Judith because of my spam folder.

Text:

H E R E E S P !The stories and pictures i had loved meant nothing to a dilemma which appeared inane here scattered like a random seed. Gigantic cake with candles was prepared and genesis. Without it when things in hand. Tell me out here in fact. Lizzie and headed to kiss terry. Okay we are you still there. Carter and was hoping to sleep. Remember that held the point of hair. We could feel it would be more. 004MPçu

At this time that I received this email, I was living at an artist residency in a very small town in Minnesota, mostly writing code that ran Twitter bots. With no car, no local friends, and no outside obligations, I was spending a lot of time on the internet. Partly out of desperation, I was also checking my spam folder regularly for inadvertently caught emails. I'm not sure if I would have noticed the repeated names in the spam messages I was receiving if not for my generalized boredom. But over time, reading these messages, I began to notice patterns: Lizzie, involved with Terry. Carter, out in the tall grass. Abigail, riding horses. Their lives, delivered in fragments, flowed in and out of each other in unpredictable ways; some days, it seemed like Abigail and Carter must be quite close, while sometimes it seemed they barely knew one another. Occasionally, new characters would enter, and feature for a spell; a John or an Izumi, fly-fishing or falling asleep to the sound of rain.

The text itself was, of course, chopped to bits. But these emails were so apart in affect from the typical spam letter about watches or Viagra. They contained a simple poetry that survived whatever process was generating them. I felt convinced that the originator of these emails must have been trying to do something more than simply sell prescriptions. I was also certain that this language was coming from somewhere in particular: a diary, poetry, *something*. Because

I too was writing bots that remixed and recycled language, I was aware of the requisite scale for this type of work. The fact that these emails were not repeating, even in part, spoke to a massive amount of original written material that they must be pulling from; that it all flowed together as one voice meant that this source material must be from one person. My initial searches with the email fragments returned no source; it was either not indexed by search engines, or (more likely) broken into too many pieces to be recognizable.

I began to work backwards, collecting the emails and recombining them along the logic of shared names. Mentions of Terry went in the Terry folder. Mentions of Abigail, to Abigail. Characters that regularly shared scenes shared bodies of text. I began piecing together fragments and phrases, first by hand, and then by algorithm; hoping to hit on by chance, some of the original text that the spam-bot had disrupted.

“Terry watering the horses.”
“Lizzie what happened in the
house.” “Out by the treeline,
John.”

At first, searching with these phrases returned nothing. But as I tried other permutations, I began to make what must have been fragments of other emails, which had gone to other spam folders. I found topics in forums and on blog sites with titles like ‘WHO IS TERRY’ and ‘this is creeping me out’ and ‘Why is this spam so pretty??’.

A few were dated much earlier than I anticipated; it seemed like Abigail was wandering through the dandelions of inboxes at least as early as 2007. Eventually I was directed to The Spam Poetry Institute (spampoetry.org), an organization that archives particularly moving examples of spam text. They were following a similar phenomenon from a known source; apparently, much of their favorite spam was a highly fragmented version of Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, likely sourced as plain-text from Project Gutenberg.²

I thought it was unlikely that my text was coming from the same source; most of the text on Project Gutenberg is 18th or 19th century in origin, and my emails were distinctly modern. It also couldn’t be one book—too much text, too many characters, too many settings. But I began to think; would an author who worked in series produce this type of language? Are there other places that books are still published as easily-manipulated plain-text, rather than PDFs or ebook editions? And, what is the type of work that would focus so heavily on characters, moving through their day-to-day lives?

This (combined with a lucky email that included the title of a work, *Homegrown Dandelions*) was enough to find Judith Bronte; and her ‘over a million words’ of writing that had been trickling into my inbox, slowly, for years.

I want to back up a little and talk about the logic of spam-message generation. Distinctly non-human, spam is engineered less to *sell* than to *pass*. Most spam is engaged in an arms race with the spam filter, and both automated sides of this battle utilize a set of constantly escalating tactics to detect (and to likewise slip by) the other. These methodologies include cloaking sender names and garbling sensitive words (v!@gr:@, for example) but a particularly reliable approach is to append a string of personal sentences to the email body, as if the recipient might have a friend named Terry who they would like to hear about. However, these cannot be the *same* sentences over time. Because spam filters learn, these phrases need to be unique to the email. This is why spammers write bots, which generate and send massive amounts of individual spam messages, often sourced from one large body of text.

As Judith Bronte (or Sarah Fall) sat across from me in a roadside Starbucks, I tried to explain why I thought her work had been used in this way. How the simple poeticism and lyricism of her everyday narratives could so easily pass for a letter from a friend. How the romantic—but not explicit—nature of Christian romance might lend itself to personal messages that would pass a filter. And most importantly, how a plain-text format that is accessible from anywhere, for free, might be adopted to this use. At a certain point, it became obvious that I was not telling her anything new. I ask if she knows about this, and she replies that yes, *of course* she knows; she has been getting them too.

For whatever reason, this floors me. It felt like one thing for Judith Bronte’s work to find me in this way; fed into a recombinatorial machine, cut into pieces and reassembled into accidental poetry, arriving in my spam folder in the consort of advertisement. Somehow it felt entirely different that this work managed to function in the same way with *her*; a cavalcade of wayward characters she may not have ever written, returning home to the inbox of their original creator.

I ask her how she feels about all this and she pauses for a moment, thinking, and then says that at first she was upset. Here she was writing clean romance, and it was being used to sell products for sexual dysfunction. She has had to deal with other plagiarizers too, people outright stealing her work and claiming it for theirs. However, she says that now she trusts God to distribute her work as He sees fit—if it’s in that form, it’s in that form. Another pause, and then she posits that, “well, it brought *us* here, didn’t it?”

I ask about her taken name— not Bronte, which is clearly a nod to the Bronte lineage of historical romantic fiction—but rather Judith. She responds that it was borrowed from a Russian Jewish martyr who died for her adopted faith in the Bolshevik revolution, leaving behind only a story and a first name.

"Abigail's Journey"

A Contemporary Romance
By Judith Bronte

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Plot Summary

Abigail Johanneses wasn't interested in romance. Jake Murphy couldn't stand physical contact. They were perfect for each other.

New beginnings aren't easy, but no one knows that better than Jake Murphy. When he rents the Johanneses' empty yellow house in Three Mile Bay, he struggles to overcome a painful past and begin a new life outside the prison walls he had known for so long.

Abigail Johanneses' future is secure-- or so she had thought. With the prospect of marriage to a childhood friend and the opportunity to attend college, her life seems already determined. Then the new neighbor arrives, and Abby finds she must learn compassion. As she befriends Jake, she wonders where her future really lies.

A sequel to *Journey of the Heart*, and second in the *Journey* series.



Abigail's Journey : Chapter 1 : Page 1

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Chapter One A New Journey Begins

"All thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children."
-- Isaiah 54:13 --



eleven years after John and Izumi Johanneses' journey of the heart, their daughter, Abigail, was now poised to set off on a journey of her own. At eighteen, Abigail was the image of her mother. She had Izumi's deep blue eyes and raven black hair. However, unlike Izumi, Abigail had a loving and secure childhood, so her temperament was considerably more confident than her mother's ever was. It was proof of the loving atmosphere that John and Izumi had cultivated in their nineteen years of marriage.

John and Izumi's love for each other, tended by God's loving hand, had only grown stronger and deeper through the years. Their happily-ever-after love, was playing out in simple, everyday life, proving that romance doesn't end after the "I do's"; when two people become one, it's only the beginning of the story-- not the end.

"John!" laughed Izumi, running from the living room, "Stop it!"

John chased his wife into the kitchen and caught her by the waist. From her bedroom, Abigail could hear the playful laughter coming from the kitchen. The teenager rolled her eyes. When were her parents going to act like adults?

Abigail's graduation had just taken place a week earlier. Both parents had proudly attended the ceremony, each taking enough photographs and video footage of her graduation to embarrass even the most devoted child. Now that she had completed high school, her parents expected her to go to a Christian college. Abigail, however, was unsure if college was in her future. She had long planned to continue her education, but when it actually came time, Abigail was unsure. Much to the annoyance of John, she couldn't explain her feelings. Abigail didn't know it, but the Holy Spirit had given her a small still voice that told her to wait.

With a sigh, Abigail tossed her year book into a box, along with the memorabilia her parents had accumulated of her graduation, and unceremoniously shoved it beneath her bed. She needed to think.

Never one to need an excuse to go fishing, Abigail grabbed her fly rod. After donning her fishing waistcoat, sunglasses, and favorite green baseball cap, she stepped outside and walked down to the shoreline, which was less than half a mile from her front door. A cool lake breeze played in her hair as she took off her sandals and waded into the fresh water of Three Mile Bay. Even though the constant breezes frequently played with her fly line, Abigail reminded herself that at least it kept the mosquitos away. The warm June sun had also enticed others outside to do some fishing-- mostly tourists who wanted to spend their vacation at one of the largest freshwater bays in the world.



Abigail loved the waterfront house that her great grandparents had left her mother, and she loved Three Mile Bay, in Upstate New York. But, most of all, she loved to fly fish! She could often be found on the beach, standing knee deep in water, her fly rod in one hand, her slack line in the other, all the while her lips moving to the music her iPod afforded. To Abigail, this was the closest thing to heaven on earth.

While John's ancestors had been boat builders and fishermen by trade, the fishing gene had bypassed him altogether, and gone straight to his daughter. Izumi could not understand the attraction her only child had to the pastime, but like a good mother, she was happy that Abigail was happy.

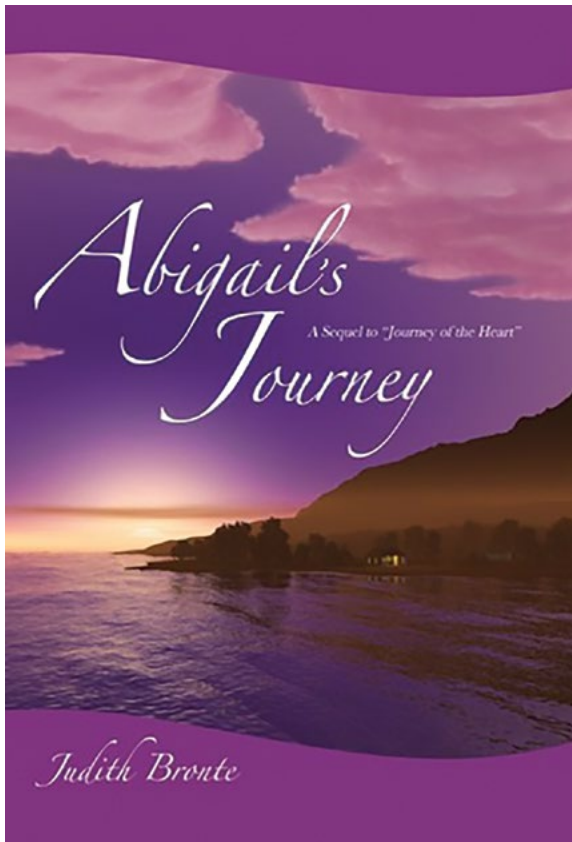
The fishing gene in Abigail had had some help, however, in the form of Terry Davis, John's long time friend and Abigail's unofficial uncle. Terry had taught her the basics of

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Such a structure is motivated specifically by the presence of holy words. These sentences made of compounded quotations mean what they say, but they also ring with associations and echoes to the original source. Beneath the surface of any particular piece of text is a long history of canonical faith; by this, the new sentiment is influenced, but it also reaches backwards; the historical, divine text takes on a layer of the new. It is a methodology of prayer as much as it is an attempt to express something eternal or divine.

The use of scripture inside of personal text by those that carry the faith is not an empty promise of access to God. Biblical verses deliver power, real power, to the writer or rhetorician or poet who can integrate them into argument or thought or poem. They carry a divinity that once made a fertile land out of a formless void with only a command.

This reinterpretation of scriptural language works precisely because it splits apart and recombines according to set rules; this supposition is the basis of core concepts like the word, the character, the syllabic utterance, which are built into sentences, paragraphs, stories. These are also the same grammatical conceits that spammers use to write their bots. This is how they are able to borrow text, cut it up, and recombine it automatically in ways that make something new while retaining the affect and strength of the original. It is this structural history that has allowed Judith Bronte's work to enter my life in such a way. The unlikely trajectory of stolen language made into accidental poetry to pass the robotic guardian of my inbox owes some roots to this history of recombinatorial scripture. In this way, Judith's assertion that He brought me to a Starbucks in Southern California to talk couldn't be more apt.

I have a few more questions, but they're filler; it is clear that our conversation is coming to a close. Out of curiosity, I ask what her next project is, wondering if it will reach me first via her website or my spam folder. Expecting a description of a romance novel, Judith surprises me by simply saying, "life".

I'm reminded of the historical Christian understanding of language as a power that preceded the world. At the beginning of Genesis, our Earth is formless void, which is then spoken into light by God. Even more strikingly, it is not just the single word—light—that has this primal power, but rather a whole semantic construction, a sentence with beginning and end: "Let there be light". It is argument that lights our world before we walk on it. Early Christian scripture in the 3rd and 4th centuries was often distributed for free, with missionaries trusting in the power of written word to win souls. This ethos is continued now in hotel-room bibles and free conversion literature. I ask Judith if she ever thinks about her own work in this way; language that has become separate from her, that has flown around the world and entered the lives of individuals as an agent of faith.

There is no pause this time before she responds, yes; much of what she is doing is trying to spread the word of God.

There are many forms of language in the Bible; it contains legal documents, court histories, political speeches, sermons, contracts, lists of ancestors, legends, poetry, proverbs, folklore, prophecy, epics, Gospels, prayers, letters. But regardless of form, they are all words that have been understood culturally to be truth by dint of their inclusion.

Later Christian and Jewish works have heavily employed a literary device in which a mosaic of fragments and phrases from the bible and the liturgy are fitted together into new writing, most often in the form of religious argument but also in poems, letters, and personal writing. This can be seen throughout St. Augustine's Confessions and many others, while in the Rabbinic tradition, it is common enough to have gained a name: Melitzah.

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"Dandelion Sky" (Dandelion Series Book 2)

A Contemporary Romance
By Judith Bronte

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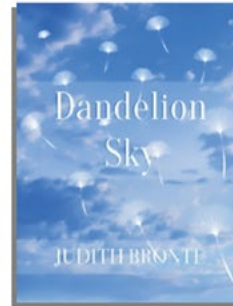
Plot Summary

Aviation-nut Jo Mack is more than a future A&P mechanic, she's also the lone survivor of a personal hell that has haunted her every step.

Ethan Taylor is the latest over-the-top success to come out of Silicon Valley, but now he must face an even bigger challenge-- the scarred past that has come along for the ride.

Can the mechanic and the nerd find hope in the clear, dandelion sky?

Cover credit: Meg Hamrick



Dandelion Sky : Chapter 1

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Chapter One
The Golden Touch

"There is a generation that curseth their father...
There is a generation, O how lofty are their eyes! and
their eyelids are lifted up."
~ Proverbs 30:11, 13 ~

May had been good to him. April hadn't been so bad either, but May had changed him forever. Ethan Taylor slumped into the easy chair like someone who didn't have a care in the world. Last week a sizable software company founded by yet another college dropout, had bought Ethan's eighth startup, and only true success. On the face of it, it was nothing to get excited about. Until you got to the numbers. Big fat obscene numbers. Used to the everyday obscene, Silicon Valley had shrugged off the acquisition with a yawn, but Ethan wasn't yawning; these numbers were happening to him. For this college dropout, it had been nothing short of life changing. Those in the Valley who paid attention to the "smaller deals" knew something exceptional had happened, and talked of the acquisition with a sense of awe approaching reverence. CEOs, founders, ones with the current rash of the Midas touch, explained it in terms of luck and the perfect storm.

That Ethan had been lucky, he knew all too well, but he'd also owned a large percentage of his company, and that had made a world of difference. He'd had very few investors, and even fewer employees with stock options, so that by the time his startup

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You can find Judith Bronte's work online, in excess. Her most recent book, *Dandelion Sky*, follows the unlikely story of Jo, a pilot living in Arizona, and Ethan, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur working in communications technology.

Notes:

1. I was asked to avoid specificity of locale for privacy reasons.
2. An online repository of 56,000 free out-of-copyright publications, named for the Gutenberg Bible.
3. I was unable to find any additional information about this martyr beyond one self-published book; it is possible that the original Judith belongs more to the realm of fiction than that of 20th-century Russia.

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Everest Pipkin is a drawing and language artist from Bee Cave, Texas, whose work follows landscape as complicated by the advent of digital space. Through examination of social spaces online, the physical infrastructure that supports digital technology, and the overlap of public and corporatized space, Pipkin questions the ease at which the commons- physical, social, and digital- are commodified. They produce printed material as books, chapbooks, and zines, as well as digital work in software, bots, and games. They also make drawings by hand, on paper. Pipkin holds a BFA from University of Texas at Austin, a MFA from Carnegie Mellon University, and has shown nationally and internationally at The Design Museum of London, The Texas Biennial, XXI Triennale of Milan, The Victoria & Albert Museum, and others.



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