

SOCIETY

THAT OLD FLAME

At sixty, the grand dame of romance publishing is still enslaving readers. What's Harlequin's secret?

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“*And there he was. Jack Dolan. Her first love. Her last. A waft of expensive cologne filtered past her, over-riding the scent of petrol fumes on the service station forecourt as surely as he’d overwhelmed her with his passion and eventually his indifference, leaving her to cope with her father’s scorn resting squarely and solely on her slender shoulders.*”

This passage appears on the second page of *Tycoon’s Valentine Vendetta*, part of the Silhouette Desire series, a division of Harlequin Enterprises. The protagonist is Lily Fontaine, daughter of the powerful, ruthless Charles Fontaine. Lily has been away for ten years, working as a supermodel, but she’s come back to find that Jack Dolan, her former—and formerly poor—love, is now as powerful and ruthless as her father, and is determined to bring the old man down. The jacket copy outlines the story: “Luring Lily back to his bed was the master stroke in his revenge plot; having the socialite bear him the child he’d long been denied would be a just desert.”

What follows is a Montague-Capulet story of parental disapproval, class differences, misunderstandings (a lot of misunderstandings), and, of course, love. When Jack kisses Lily for the first time (“She tasted of smoky marshmallow and good wine, of the past and of forbidden love”), she is weak with desire. Yet she resists his advances until page 128, when “she wanted—no, she *needed* to feel his heavy weight over her body, his total possession of her.” Lily succumbs to Jack’s charms, which are eerily similar to her father’s. She is a rich girl who has become poor, and at the end wealthy Jack steps in to rescue her from poverty and ruin. To tie up any loose Freudian ends, her (now insolvent) father is crippled by a stroke.

Well, you can see why critical theorists are having a field day with this stuff. First, there is the consistent popularity of the romance genre: 32 percent of adult mass-market paperback sales are romances, and Harlequin is the dominant publisher of bodice-rippers worldwide. In 2007, it sold 130 million books; since its inception sixty years ago, it has shipped more than 5.6 billion. And its wares are recession friendly—in the last quarter of 2008, with its parent company, Torstar, suffering heavy losses, Harlequin’s profits rose by 11.2 percent.

Especially alluring for the theorists is the natural dialectic: i.e., are these books perversely, even dangerously anachronistic, trapped within a dated, patriarchal framework? Or are they in fact empowering: fiction written by women for women, in which there is always a happy ending for the female characters? If you factor in reader demographics—Harlequin reports that 53 percent of its overwhelmingly female readership has at least some college education, and 45 percent work full time—you have the makings of a feminist studies seminar, the central question of which might be, what is the appeal of these books, and is this a bad (in the critical theory sense of “bad”) thing?

Harlequin’s head office is in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills, and driving there, past the dead lawns of November and the modest, well-tended houses, it is easy to imagine women in their housedresses cleaning the toaster oven and

dreaming of escape. Next door, the paper boy is masturbating to fantasies of lonely housewives.

It is the vast, barren landscape between these two fantasies that has given rise to separate empires: romance for women and pornography for men. That there is so little intersection between the two helps explain why each has grown into a multibillion-dollar industry. Male fantasies remain inherently adolescent (the paper boy growing into a plumber, the housewife more desperate and inventive), but the underlying premise remains wild sex without responsibility. The Harlequin fantasy is meaningful sex that symbolizes a lasting emotional connection, and often an end to financial responsibilities. The heroine’s only real responsibility is to her man and to love itself, whereas the loveless world of porn is driven by submission and anonymity.

Nevertheless, critics have highlighted similarities between the two worlds. In the *Guardian*, Julie Bindel recalled the romances of the British publisher Mills & Boon—which celebrated its centenary last year and was an early partner of Harlequin—with alarm. “In every book, there was a scene where the heroine is ‘broken in,’ both emotionally and physically, by the hero,” she wrote. “My loathing of M&B novels has nothing to do with snobbery. I could not care less if the books are trashy, formulaic, or pulp fiction...But I do care about the type of propaganda perpetuated by M&B. I would go so far as to say it is misogynistic hate speech...This is what heterosexual romantic fiction promotes—the sexual submission of women to men.”

Whether it was technically porn or not, Bindel was saying, men came out on top. The late feminist writer Andrea Dworkin, for her part, once wrote that romance literature was “rape embellished with meaningful looks.” But if the romance genre is a form of porn, is it as psychologically enslaving? Certainly the fourteen-year-old paper boy staring glassily at the Drunken Moms website knows, in his dark, pimpled heart, that he isn’t holding the moral high ground.

Harlequin’s beginnings were modest and largely chaste. The company was founded in 1949 in Winnipeg by a consortium that included Richard Bonnycastle, who had been a lawyer and a fur trader for the Hudson Bay Company before taking a job at an outfit called Advocate Printers. At the start, Harlequin supplied Advocate with product, reprinting British and American paperbacks—romances, westerns, detective fiction—for the Canadian market. In 1957, it became the North American distributor for Mills & Boon, which had started publishing hardcover romance novels in the ’30s. Bonnycastle, by then Harlequin’s primary owner, found that the genre was extremely lucrative, and eventually began publishing it exclusively. In 1971, Harlequin bought Mills & Boon.

That same year, the company hired a self-described “soap salesman” named W. Lawrence Heisey as its president. A Harvard MBA who had worked for Procter and Gamble, Heisey adapted consumer product tactics to the staid bookselling model. He did market research on the romance reader, featured the Harlequin name more prominently on the cover in order to promote brand awareness, sold the books in supermarkets (“where the women are”), advertised on daytime television, and at one point included sample romances in boxes of

Bio-Ad laundry detergent. He developed a subscription system whereby readers could have books delivered directly to them, which enabled rural customers to get the books, eliminated retailers and returns, and provided the company with valuable data about its consumers.

Heisey also launched Harlequin’s first romance series set in the US. Until the ’70s, the company had mostly been selling reprints of British books. The new direction prompted others to enter the increasingly lucrative market, with Simon and Schuster launching Silhouette, and Dell starting its Candlelight Ecstasy series. Silhouette took Harlequin’s marketing ideas even further, soliciting the approval of 200 test readers before it would publish a book. In 1981, Torstar, owner of the *Toronto Star* and already an investor in Harlequin, bought the remaining shares of the imprint, then began buying up its competitors, including, in 1984, its largest American rival, Silhouette. Since then, “Harlequin Romance” has become all but synonymous with “romance novel,” so dominant is the brand.

The Harlequin empire is housed in a nondescript nine-storey concrete bunker in a commercial zone of Don Mills. Inside are 350 employees, more than a quarter of the company’s global workforce, which also operates in New York, London, and sixteen other cities. I wish I could report that my flashing emerald eyes melted the icy core of publisher and CEO Donna Hayes, but Ms. Hayes was (tantalizingly, heartbreakingly) unavailable. Filling in were Katherine Orr and Marleah Stout of the publicity department, who took me on a whirlwind tour of the company’s extraordinary success. “Basically, it’s a great business model,” Orr says. “Characters meet, fall in love, and start a family.”

The books are written by hundreds of different writers, and are necessarily formulaic in order to maintain consistency. The company receives roughly 1,000 unsolicited manuscripts a month and reads even the worst of them. Harlequin Romances are easy to parody, less easy to write. There have been almost 1,300 successful Harlequin authors, winnowed from hundreds of thousands of aspirants. Those who make the cut tend to be true believers, sympathetic to both the genre and the characters. Laura Shin, a former Harlequin editor, told me her authors were a varied group: Ph.D. students, university professors, lawyers, women who have never worked outside the home, insurance adjusters, music teachers, technical writers for Coca-Cola, and a retired US Air Force colonel who lives in Texas (one of the very few male romance authors; occasionally there are husband-wife writing teams).

Harlequin authors have their own web pages, with photographs, blogs, news, bios, and email addresses so readers can get in touch directly. A few superstars number among the writers’ ranks. On her website, Nora Roberts (born Eleanor Robertson) lists more than 200 books she has written since 1981, including twenty-three between 1982 and 1984. Of these, 147 have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In 2007 alone, she had thirteen books on the list. The sheer volume seems obsessive.

Her zeal is matched by Harlequin’s readers, who may de-

vour upwards of a book a day. “There is a strong bond between author and reader in the romance genre,” Shin says. It was this bond that Stephen King cleverly exploited in *Misery*. In the novel, the writer-protagonist kills off his popular heroine, Misery Chastain, prompting a deranged fan, menacingly played by Kathy Bates in the film version, to take offence. There are, presumably, Harlequin readers who spend a great deal of time in the fantasy world. Perhaps they’re floating through life in a blissful romantic cloud. Or they’re Kathy Bates, standing at the foot of your bed with a sledgehammer. King’s lesson, in any case, was clear: the writer can’t betray the reader’s trust.

For Harlequin, that trust is inscribed in editorial guidelines for each series that lay out the theme, the profiles of the hero and heroine, the acceptable amount of sex, and the number of words. The specs for the Desire series describe the hero as powerful and wealthy, “an alpha male with a sense of arrogance and entitlement. While he may be harsh and direct, he is never physically cruel.” The heroine, on the other hand, is “complex and flawed. She is strong-willed and smart though capable of making terrible mistakes when it comes to matters of the heart.” Other series are described as being “grounded in reality” or “heartwarming” or “what it means to be American,” or focus on “breathhtakingly charismatic alpha-heroes who are tamed by spirited independent heroines.”

In the Steeple Hill series, it isn’t acceptable for the unmarried hero and heroine to stay overnight in the same house without a chaperone. In the Desire series, “*She circled the engorged head, her fingers wrapped around his shaft...*”

Harlequin often responds to shifts in readers’ desires. Complaints are monitored (“Too many babies,” “The hero shouldn’t swear as much”) and adjustments sometimes made. Whatever else it is, the romance genre is democratic. The writing is editor driven, and the editors are reader driven. And what drives the readers?

For a while, they could seek only vicarious love in Harlequins—no sex. Now, some series and lines (Harlequin Presents, Silhouette, Spice, LUNA, MIRA,

among others) have specific guidelines for “sensuality.” In the Steeple Hill series, which has religious themes, it isn’t acceptable for the unmarried hero and heroine to stay overnight in the same house without a chaperone. In the Desire series, one of the most adventurous of Harlequin’s lines, “*She circled the engorged head, her fingers wrapped around his shaft and pulling slowly, rhythmically, along its length. She bent lower...*”

These two opposing themes—more explicit sex, and religious romance—emerged, unsurprisingly, at the same time. The evolution of sex was a slow, consensual process driven by experienced writers who wanted more freedom, and by readers’ first tentative requests for more sex. According to Peter Darbyshire, a former English professor at York University, sexually explicit romances and what he describes as “a line of romance novels concerned almost solely with the dissemination of right-wing religious values” dovetailed during the ’90s. The religious-themed novels showed a “strong anti-feminist bias,”

in his words, with the heroines embroiled not in romantic or sexual crises so much as crises of faith.

But sex, even in the most graphic series, is always secondary to and coincident with love. And what is love? There is an anthropological case that romantic love doesn't exist, that it is a cultural delusion imagined by the West. Love grew out of the development of a leisure class with time on its hands, and an artisan class seeking to sell its wares. What love there is, is a by-product of sex. The marriage that follows is simply an agent of socio-religious control.

The argument that romantic love itself is a biological imperative, as fundamental as fear or anger, has its champions, though. Helen Fisher, author of *Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery, and Divorce*, has made that case, as have others. But if love didn't exist, we would have had to invent it—and perhaps we did. The extraordinary success of romance novels seems to lie in their ability to manufacture, or at least uncover, a desire, then to satisfy it.

Though the books may be meticulously unsubversive, reading them can be a subversive act. When the reader picks up a romance novel, she is spending time on herself, escaping the very thing that may be giving her her social identity.

At the Powerhouse Casting offices in Toronto on an overcast Saturday, dozens of men have answered Harlequin's casting call for "Authentic Heroes for Its Covers." The company has requested real firefighters, police officers, and paramedics who are good looking and between the ages of twenty-five and forty-eight. "After 9/11," Katherine Orr told me, "there was a huge reader response for men in uniform—men in control, taking charge. You know, the safety factor."

Covers have always been an integral part of Harlequin's marketing. They are known for "the clinch": the heroine being held by the hero, eyes locked in a mutually meaningful stare. As part of Harlequin's sixtieth anniversary celebrations, a retrospective of covers, titled *The Heart of a Woman*, is showing at a New York gallery. The ones from decades ago are surprisingly lurid, with enticing titles (*Pardon My Body*, *Virgin With Butterflies*, *Brittle Bondage*). All of the early books had illustrated covers, but by the late '80s, most featured photographs, which are now sometimes treated to resemble illustrations—a hedge against too much reality. Harlequin shoots 120 covers a month, so the authentic men chosen today won't be restricted to fireman poses. They could end up as cowboys, or powerful, ruthless millionaires. Some of them may be digitally aged so they look like older men, which Harlequin maintains is easier than finding actual middle-aged men.

With the exception of the gloriously inauthentic *ET Canada* television people, I am arguably the least authentic man here—though authenticity is an imprecise concept. Almost all the authentic heroes are buff, clear-eyed, square-jawed men with Hollywood smiles. Some have the thick orange colour that comes from tanning salons. Body hair has been sculpted, shaved, and plucked, and some of the precise haircuts have discreet highlights. In the audition room, the men are filmed, photographed, and interviewed in five-minute segments by a

casting director and a team of art directors. The most promising are asked to take off their shirts, displaying a fair amount of ink. Tattoos are now featured on Harlequin covers, though they are usually Photoshopped on for maximum appropriateness and appeal (a winding, sensuous lizard on a shirtless cowboy, say, rather than the name of the model's girlfriend written in dripping blood). "I just had a double hernia operation," one of the firemen laments. "I'm down fifteen pounds of muscle mass. I'm a bit pale, too. I mean, I don't want to reiterate. I'm a bit tired. I'm just not feeling that *rosy*."

The judges' decisions are instinctive, almost instantaneous, and almost always unanimous. Sometimes it's obvious: a buff physique, hair like Fabio, a killer smile. Other times, it's subtler, less quantifiable, something in the model's brief monologue, a quality they like but can't articulate.

The advent of firemen's calendars, which date to the mid-'90s, has created a curious beast. Almost all the men at the casting call have posed for calendars for their local fire halls, and they have bloomed in that exhibitionist culture. At charity events, women line up for their autographs. A certain male power has been re-

leased. Most of these men have done modelling and/or TV work, and outside in the waiting room some speak about callbacks and pilots and casting calls, or chat with their agents on cellphones. In many ways, they are the perfect Harlequin creations: they have the beauty of male models but less of the toxic narcissism—genial family men grounded by a dangerous job that involves the fundamentally Harlequin notion of rescue. In these coiffed, understated, muscular, businesslike young men lie the dreams of 10 million women. If not these men specifically, then the tousled hair and washboard abs and everlasting love they are paid to represent.

In *Surrender to Marriage*, wealthy, powerful Jake Reilly returns to a Newfoundland village "to claim the one thing that still eludes him..." This thing is Shaine O'Sullivan, the fiery love he left thirteen years ago after a misunderstanding. The Harlequin formula for the first four books I read deconstructed to this: Star-crossed lovers are introduced in heavily expository paragraphs. One or both feels betrayed by something that happened years ago, and they argue and inch toward each other until they fall in love all over again and prepare for marriage.

The books effectively recreate the world of high school romance, when every nuance contained volumes. In grade twelve, there were girls who, simply by saying hello, could make me mute with joy, whose touch on my forearm was electric. There were always misunderstandings and misinterpretations and sexual dramas. Even the breakups had terrific appeal, those first forays into angry soliloquy. The chief attraction was its all-consuming aspect, that you felt so vivid and so *adult*. Meanwhile, the adults were settled in the suburbs, battling mortgages, complacent or murderous in their marriages. And that's why so many Harlequin books end where they do, at the moment that

all the drama and misunderstandings and the guilty/fulfilling sex are over. Because after that moment, you step into Updike territory, the land of ennui and bitter divorce.

In *Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta*, there are quite a few moments when you wish you could sit the two ex-lovers down and straighten it all out. And yet if you stick with the book—if you plow past the manufactured crises; accept the implausibilities; overlook the fact that the resolution is clear by page eight; and forgive that there really aren't any other characters in the entire book, and that these two are one-dimensional and coincidentally almost identical to the hero and heroine in thousands of other Harlequins, you get swept up in the emotional payoff that comes at the end.

Worse, by far, was when I got a bit weepy as Jake united happily with the son-he-didn't-know-he-had at the end of *Surrender to Marriage*. Emotion is a poor critic. I have cried at lame, nakedly manipulative movies I've seen on airplanes in that odd, muffled state of suspension and wouldn't have otherwise watched with a gun to my head. If you know you're being bluntly manipulated by what is effectively a marketing team even as you're watching and building up a vicious resentment, then what do those tears mean? At this level, we're like those laboratory monkeys that will trade food for cocaine. We know it's bad, but we like the feeling.

According to Jayne Ann Krentz, a romance writer who champions the genre in the collection *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, "For those who understand the encoded information in the stories, the books preserve elements of ancient myths and legends that are particularly important to women. They celebrate female power, intuition, and a female worldview that affirms life and expresses hope for the future."

Little of this was evident in the books I read. They celebrate handsome men with limited communication skills and a somewhat steely emotional core. The male characters are rich (usually self-made) and powerful and athletic, and have thick, tousled hair and strong jawlines. They can sail, drive fast, cook. In *Tycoon's Valentine Vendetta*, Jack throws several condoms on the bed and declares to Lily, "I have more." This comes only minutes after they've had sex. So, a tireless stud in the bargain.

The women in both *Surrender* and *Tycoon*, meanwhile, are either poor or become poor, and in the end are taken care of



by men. In *Surrender*, Shaine has been celibate for the thirteen years she and Jake have been apart, while Jake has had empty sex with an army of supermodels. In *Tycoon*, Lily is "whimpering with hunger" upon getting into bed with Jack, and worships him as he tosses fresh scallops on the grill. "'You amaze me,' Lily said as she watched him, mesmerized by the play of muscles in his forearm as he flipped the spatula again... 'You're so capable. Is there anything you can't do?'"

You might think the passivity of the women and the Bond-like qualities of the men would work as male fantasy. Yet they don't. That's likely because Harlequin narratives are driven by misunderstandings and foggy interior monologues that express, more than any other feeling, doubt. "Why did she want him so? Why? Her brain told her to walk away. To walk away and not look back. But her body whispered something else." And all this uncertainty is wearing.

How is it, then, that these quaint, patriarchal tropes work so well on a female audience? In 1984, Janice Radway published *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, at the time the most comprehensive study of romance novels and their readers. When she interviewed women for her book, it wasn't the content of the novels they talked about, but the act of reading them. She argued that though the books may be meticulously unsubversive, reading them can be a subversive act. When the reader picks up a romance novel, she is spending time on herself, escaping the very thing that may be giving her her social identity. For those few hours, she is getting rid of her children, and ditching her husband for a masculine icon who loves her deeply (though he may have difficulty expressing it).

Radway's study was conducted twenty-five years ago, in the pseudonymous Midwestern American town of Smithton, presumably a fairly traditional society. A majority of North American women were married then, and still worked in the home. So the fantasy offered was essentially quantitative; readers were presented with a fictional husband who was richer and sexier than the one they had. But now most women work outside the home, and a smaller percentage are married. The stated target market for Harlequin Romances is someone in her forties with a college education and a career. What's in it for her?

It may be that as society drifts further from the norm of a happy, stable marriage, the books have more currency as fantasy. The idea of surrendering to a gravely rich man whose forearms ripple sexily every time he picks up a spatula has appeal in part because it is so far removed from actual aspirations (getting a raise, a promotion), and from the actual middle-aged men women know (paunchy, anniversary-forgetting toads for whom a handful of condoms is a year's supply). Women can even read the books with a sense of irony, dismissing the stock characters and plots while still indulging in the emotional jolt. Harlequins succeed, in this light, because they are brilliantly forgettable one-night stands that blur, slim 178-page companions that vanish by the next day. Each morning, you wake up a virgin. ↘

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