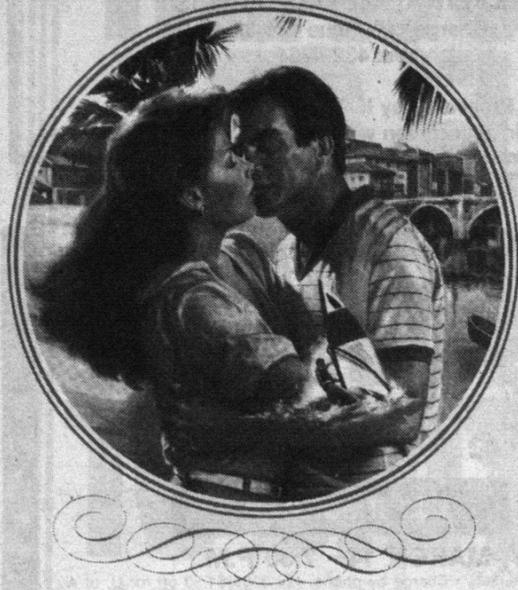


Confessions of a Harlequin Romancer



Harlequin Romance



by Samantha Brennan
Canadian University Press

Enter the world of Harlequin Romances.

Welcome to a world of travel, love and adventure, where young orphaned women meet strong capable men. Girl meets boy. Girl hates boy. Girl loves boy and finally boy loves girl. It's a world of fantasy and whether right or wrong, it's an escape many women need.

For Susan, a 20-year-old Dalhousie University student, Harlequins are a much needed break from a stream of essays, tests and papers. She's living far away from home and in need of emotional support. On Sunday afternoons she often picks up her roommate's most recent Harlequin (she says she'd never buy one) and relaxes for an hour of mindless adventure.

Susan is not alone. Thousands of women read Harlequin Romances. But the negative and stereotypical portrayal of women in Harlequins has feminists asking why women read them at all. The inadequacy of existing research on this subject has some feminist academics giving Harlequins a fresh look.

Angela Miles, a sociology professor at St. Francis Xavier university in Nova Scotia, says she recently "came out" as a Harlequin reader and is touring the lecture circuit to talk about her experiences and ideas.

She says understanding why women need and read romances is essential to an understanding of women's lives. Miles believes the deeply emotional experience of Harlequin reading is about love not sex, nurturing, not seducing and mother love, not hero worship.

Miles says that her interest in Harlequins made her look for other feminists work on the issue. When she found it, she says it was disappointing.

Instead she found essays that talked about how horrible Harlequins were without asking why women read them. Miles says the feminists who actually did talk to Harlequin readers still treated them as an other, an alien species.

"We all recognize the faint echo of the myth of the knight in shining armour riding off on the white horse. What is it about this myth that attracts women?"

When speaking in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia her lecture "Confessions of a Harlequin Reader" attracted a crowd about as unusual as the lecture topic itself. Sitting in a semi-circle around Miles were feminist academics, women Harlequin readers and one male aspiring Harlequin writer anxious to meet his readers.

"You don't have to do a lot of research to find out that Harlequin's message is that your life has no meaning without a man."

She admits it's no surprise feminists are upset with Harlequins and the myths of women's powerlessness they perpetuate. But Miles says we must take the questions further and ask what is it about the Harlequin romance that is so attractive to women.

"I have been out as a Harlequin reader for awhile now," says Miles. She says she realized she was addicted to the Harlequin experience when in the middle of her PhD thesis she wanted to go home and read a Harlequin romance. She says the turning point came when she actually considered buying one.

Miles said as a feminist she realized the personal is political and couldn't accept making Harlequins an unquestioned area of her life.

She says this led to her asking the question: "If they are so bad, why am I reading them and if they're not why can't I tell my friends?" This is when I knew I had to "come out" as a Harlequin reader, said Miles.

"I didn't send out cards," she says, "but I dropped it into the conversation whenever I could." She says she watched herself finding ways to defend her habit.

"I asked them (my friends) what is wrong with women fantasizing about finding love, never doing housework and see exotic places?" But still those reasons failed to satisfy her questions.

Miles says she began to look at the dialogue and plot of Harlequins to find out what was so attractive to women, including herself. She says she found that the male hero in Harlequin romances, the knight in shining armour, is a mother image. The male hero may be arrogant, but he's also self-sufficient, strong and nurturing, says Miles.

"One thing Harlequins are about is not having to mother men, which is something married women know lots about. If you're looking for mothering you turn to Harlequins."

She says Harlequins are able to provide women with emotional rewards society fails to provide them—love, affection and nurturing. These are things we associate with our mother,

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"What is wrong with women fantasizing about finding love, never doing housework and seeing exotic places?"

says Miles.

Using dozens of quotes from Harlequins, Miles shows the male hero as someone who washes the heroine's feet, tucks her in bed and buttons up her coat. The woman is childlike and submissive. Miles says it's significant that the heroine in Harlequins is usually an orphan living in the home of the male hero.

Miles says you can pick up any Harlequin romance to find examples of these characters. She's right. *The Turn of the Tide*, a Harlequin Romance by Samantha Day, tells the tale of Stefanie Hart, a woman who recently left her job and is vacationing in Nanaimo, B.C. Stefanie is an orphan without family or friends and she's getting away from a shattered romance.

Almost since birth, Victoria had been groomed to work in her father's company. Why should she care about people that were uprooted when the vast corporation bought out their livelihoods? Business was business; that was how the game was played. It was after she'd concluded another profitable deal that she got caught in a sudden flood. And ended up stranded in a cabin with Nicholas Sangster, who showed her another way to look at life!

Enter Jesse Stuart—the older man. He mistakes Stefanie for a teenage girl and this is the base from which their romance forms. She plays the part of the young impetuous girl anxious to learn and he is only too willing to teach her.

She sat quietly, an embarrassed flush staining her cheeks. After last night she was all too aware that she deserved the censure she could hear in his voice. To her surprise, he reached across the table and touched her clenched hand with gentle fingers. . . "Just make sure you don't do it again," he said severely, then flashed her a wide smile.

Only later when she falls in love with Jess does Stefanie realize that it's essential she tell Jess her real age. The book chronicles Jess' many attempts to care for Stefanie—he's saved her from drowning, given her tours of the beach and even cooked

"It has to be a nice world."

meals for her. Fantasy.

This is the key to the Harlequin experience — fantasy and emotion.

"She's on an emotional roller coaster ride created by the writers."

Miles says the heroine moves from resistance to love to rejection and then to reconciliation.

Both Harlequin romances and mother-child relationships contain this mix of nurturing and dominance, she says.

Miles is quick to reject the theory that women have a psychological need to reconcile conflict with their mother. Instead she says Harlequins can act as a psychological "level" to each pressure in difficult times.

Claire Harrison is a writer of Harlequin Romances. While Harrison also says emotion is the key to the Harlequin, she says the genre has changed considerably since feminists began attacking it for its portrayal of women as helpless and unsuccessful without a man.

Harrison says the Harlequin heroine is now older, sophisticated, smart and well able to support herself. But she admits that the details of the heroine's life aren't that important to the overall book.

"What's important is that the emotional terrain between the two has to be mapped out precisely...Who cares what the heroine's career is, what the hero's career is?" Harrison says.

On the last page of *The Turn of the Tide*, Jess turns to Stefanie as they lay in bed. "Marry me soon, love," her murmurs. "Very soon." The fantasy is complete for Harlequins rarely tell what happens after the kiss and inevitable proposal.

They're nice books about nice people lead nice lives. "It has to be a nice world,"

Harrison. The readers don't want to read about a world where there is cancer and the threat of nuclear war or inflation."

And although readers, writers and analysts all agree Harlequins are an escapist fantasy, as Miles says they're better than other routes women use to escape like valium or alcohol.

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