

CONFESSIONS OF A HARLEQUIN READER

"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."

BY SAMANTHA BRENNAN

What's love got to do with it? Lots if you're a reader of Harlequin romances.

After years in the closet, feminist and sociologist Angela Miles has "come out" as a sometimes reader of Harlequin romances and she's more than willing to talk about it.

Speaking at the Dartmouth regional library Jan. 8, Miles said that understanding why women need and read Harlequin romances is essential to an understanding of women's lives. She believes that the deeply emotional experience of Harlequin reading is about love not sex, nurturing not seducing and mother-love not males hero worship.

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," said Miles. She admits that its 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," said Miles. She said 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 said the turning point came when she actually considered buying one.

Miles said that as a feminist she realized the personal is political and couldn't accept making Harlequins a no-struggle and unquestioned area of her life.

She said 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 said. "But I dropped it into the conversation whenever I could." She said 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?" said Miles. But still these reasons failed to satisfy her questions.

Miles said she began to look at the dialogue and plot of Harlequins to find out what was so attractive to women, including herself. She said 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, said Miles.

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

She said that 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, said Miles.

Using dozens of quotes from Harlequins, Miles showed the male hero as someone who washes the heroines feet, tucks her in bed and buttons up her coat. The woman is childlike and submissive.

Miles said its significant that the female hero in Harlequins is usually an orphan living in the home of the male hero.

"She's on a roller coaster emotional ride created by the writers," said Miles. She 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, said Miles.

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

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

Feminists just haven't applied the feminist principle of using your own experience when dealing with Harlequin romances, said Miles. 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 knight in shining armour riding off on the white horse," said Miles. "What is it about this myth that attracts women?"

And for Miles this is the main question. Besides being a priority in her work, asking questions was a priority for Miles in her lecture. Throughout her talk women were able to add to her description of the "Harlequin experience."

Although Miles says she's not advocating that women read Harlequins, she says its a safer escape than other routes women in our society may choose.

"It's better than valium or alcohol," she concluded.

Miles is a sociology professor at St. Francis University. Her lecture was cosponsored by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

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