

A FINE ROMANCE, MY DEAR, THIS IS

Audrey Thomas

“Does the man in this book have hawklike features?”

“Aquiline. He has aquiline features. And dark hair, as usual.”

“Same thing,” Alice said. “A fancy name for hawk-like. What colour are his eyes?”

“He’s blind. He wears dark glasses all the time.”

“He’s *blind*? They’re never handicapped. He won’t stay blind, you wait and see. That’s just to get Nurse Prue to Ceylon.”

Intertidal Life

IT’S PROBABLY NOT the “done thing” to quote from oneself but I began reading *Harlequins* at about the same time I started on the second draft of *Intertidal Life*. The store at the government wharf at North Galiano has a free library of books discarded by weekenders and summer people and, as one might suspect, most of these books fall into the category of popular fiction, books by Richard Ludlum, Harold Robbins, Arthur Hailey, mysteries, romances. I had never read a romance until I went to Galiano. My mother and the women I baby-sat for when I was a teen-ager read the *Ladies Home Journal*, the *Women’s Home Companion*, *Redbook*, and the serials in *The Saturday Evening Post*. If they had romantic fantasies they kept them well hidden and frankly I think they were much more inclined to fantasize about post-war kitchens and RCA Home Entertainment Centres. I read the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, Charles Dickens and later, in plain wrappers, books like *God’s Little Acre* and *The Chinese Room*. I had plenty of romantic daydreams but I didn’t read romances. So I picked up a couple of *Harlequins* from the store, more out of curiosity than anything else and my daughter and I read them out loud to one another. The first two were Nurse books — *Nurse Sally’s Last Chance* and *Nurse Prue Goes to Ceylon* and they were pretty much as I expected. The girls were pretty without being beautiful (the rival girls, the scheming connivers were the beautiful ones); they had, however, vulnerable mouths and lovely eyes and were decent girls, nice girls, who, in the end, won through to their hearts’ desire (a man with hawk-like features

and an income of £5,000 a year — or I should say the 1950's equivalent of Mr. Darcy's income). These books seemed innocent enough, silly, but innocent and the sexual awakening of these girls (we finished those two and went back for more, and more) was described in such flowery language, often using images from nature — fires, floods, acts of god, clouds, rainbows, etc., etc. — that it was great fun reading bits out loud.

Something within her seemed to melt, to deliquesce,¹ a sensation like vertigo seized her; she felt as if she were adrift in a strange, multi-coloured cloud, frightened and yet filled with delight. (*Next Stop Gretna*, Harlequin 1970)

Oh Symond, please, it's more than enough. I only want what you want, and it's been that way for some time. (*The Black Knight*, Harlequin, 1977)

This was madness, Diana thought wildly and fought with all her strength. Then somehow she was free. She swallowed convulsively.

"But how can you behave like this when you are going to marry Felicena?" The tears fell.

He frowned. "Who says so?"

"Everyone knows."

"Except me." (*A Kiss in a Gondola*, Harlequin, 1969)

Debby looked very young and very vulnerable lying in the warmed bed with the elevated feet and the protective cradle around her. She was on plasma and saline, and according to Kevin's notes on her chart was on oxygen inhalation and morphine injections. (*Nurse Deborah*, Harlequin, 1970; Perhaps this one should have been re-named *High as a Kite?*)

So, these girls started out with careers, usually but not always in the bud stage, they were perky and smart, often fought with the hero — usually only verbally in the early stages — experienced strange unfamiliar sensations whenever the hero was around, symptoms similar to a heavy attack of "flu" but which they came to recognize, after many setbacks and much anguish as love love love. Often, as in the case of Nurse Deborah, they suffered an accident, nothing *disfiguring* you understand, and, through approaching unconsciousness — or the haze of oxygen inhalation with morphine injections — they heard the hero cry out "Darling!"

They meet, give up their careers, marry the hero and presumably live happily ever after. For whatever the setbacks (and Harlequin romances are real comedies of errors, everything from mistaking the brilliant, wealthy architect for an ordinary worker on a building site to mistaking the heroine for a boy) the Harlequin Girl, like the mythical Mountie, always got her man. This is one of the dogmas of Harlequin Romance — there is *always* a happy ending. The settings of these books were usually exotic, Greece, Italy, and Spain being really popular — but nothing east of Athens unless the hero is a caucasian working in Saudi Arabia or

Africa, in other words, as the English would say (and these books originated in England) “no wogs.” Scotland was also considered exotic, Holland was, and is, *very* popular, and hospitals were exotic as well. (Mainly because of all those handsome, unattached surgeons running around or, rather, striding through corridors, their white coats flying behind them.)

We read them and we laughed, tried to see who could find the worst image (I won with “she melted against him like butter on a hot biscuit”) but spent most of our reading time on the “good stuff,” the stuff that would excite a child’s imagination and enlarge her love of language: *The Wind in the Willows*, *Alice in Wonderland*, C. S. Lewis, Tolkein, the Beatrix Potter books, Edward Lear.

The old romances were touted as “heartwarming” and they were so obviously silly that I couldn’t see that they were doing us, either of us, any harm. It did bother me that the heroine, if she wasn’t a nurse, worked always as a secretary or an assistant of some kind; she was never an executive, she was never actually *in charge* of anything, or nothing larger than a hospital ward. The hero, whether doctor, lawyer (never Indian Chief), architect, or artist was definitely in charge of his life; he was successful. If he had to work for a living he had worked hard and had arrived.

The heroes and heroines, whatever their names (and an entire essay could be written on the names of romance characters. Henry James would love it. How do you like Jason Carver, for a famous artist? Almost as good as Caspar Goodwood, wouldn’t you say?) always played the same roles. Like Holiday Inns (whose motto is “we never surprise you”) or McDonald’s hamburgers, they were absolutely predictable. They are like the cheapest panty hose which declare on the package, “one size fits all.” In a recent guideline for the writing of a Harlequin Romance (“our original and longest-running romance line”) the editors say:

The plot should not be grounded in harsh realities — Romance readers want to be uplifted, not depressed — but at the same time should make the reader (and “the reader” is always female) feel that such a love is possible if not probable. (Why the “but”? They seem to imply that love is more probable when grounded in harsh realities. Probably just a slip of the word processor.)

SO THE READER KNEW, when she went into the drugstore or supermarket or second-hand bookstore that if she bought a Harlequin Romance she was guaranteed a “good read” with a happy ending. And because of this an interesting psychological phenomenon took place. *The reader knew more than the heroine*. The heroine might be out on a sheep ranch in New Zealand or in a fabulous villa on a Greek island but she was crying her eyes out because she

thought the hero didn't love her. The heroine was extremely confused, about her own feelings and the feelings of the hero. She sorts out her own long before she ever understands that the hero is in love with her. The hero, who is recognizable to the reader the minute he steps on stage, *is* in love with the heroine, and the reader, curled up in bed or in an easy chair, knows that all the rudeness, hostility, and patronizing remarks are just a cover for the growing awareness of his own vulnerability where the heroine is concerned. ("‘I was a swine,’ he admitted apologetically.") The hero — his remarks, his general attitude — makes the heroine feel young, foolish, inadequate, and very very vulnerable on her part. ("vulnerable" is a very common word in these romances, as is melting, even when disguised as "deliquesce." All the heroines eventually deliquesce.) The reader, who knows the ending, feels superior to the heroine even if the reader is sitting in a shabby chair in a room she doesn't like married to a man who is neither a prince nor charming. At least *she* knows where she stands!

One might mention at this point that we do expect, when buying or borrowing a detective novel, that the book will have a pre-ordained, "positive," if not exactly happy, ending — the murderer will be found out, justice will triumph. And if we like murder mysteries we probably have a favourite writer — Naigo Marsh, Dorothy Sayers, Simenon, Nicholas Freeling, Agatha Christie — and even a favourite detective. I can't think of anyone who would be ashamed to admit to reading detective stories or even adventure or intrigue. These books are read by both men and women and, I would guess, men and women from all walks of life. Yet who among our acquaintances (and it would have to be a woman, males simply don't read Harlequins) would admit to reading Harlequin Romance, or even some of the newer, presumably more modern, more "realistic" lines — Harlequin Presents, Harlequin Temptation, Harlequin Intrigue (a kind of "detective" story), Harlequin American Intrigue. Who would write her name on the inside of the book under the statement: "This Harlequin Romance belongs in the personal library of . . . N. . ."? Yet there are millions of women who do, 20 million Harlequin readers in the U.S. alone, and, in our country, Harlequins account for 28 per cent of all paperbacks sold!² Harlequins are translated into twelve languages and sold in 98 countries. That's a lot of women; that's a lot of books. As Bob Dylan would say, "Somethin's Happening Here." But why? Asking why is becoming almost as popular as reading the things. And not only asking why but asking the question I began to ask myself, as Harlequin introduced its new lines and the action became more violent as well as more explicitly sexual (but never *described* too explicitly of course. He touches her "moist femininity"; she feels his "force" pressed against her) — are these books doing actual harm?

In her interesting examination of the Harlequin industry, *Love's Sweet Return* (which was originally written as a Ph.D. thesis I believe) Margaret Ann Jensen seems at first to take the position that the criticism of romance fiction is unfair

and sexist “based as it is on acceptance of males and their fantasies as the measure of worth.” This may or may not be so — it’s certainly something to think about. Is criticism of romances just one more example of the general put-down of literature written by women (and 99 per cent of Harlequins are written by women)? If so, the criticism, that they are “Trash,” doesn’t seem to inhibit all these millions of women who snap up Harlequins every month, as soon as they appear on the shelves, or sooner if they belong to the Harlequin Reader Service — “take these four books and Tote Bag FREE” — and I assume that they do this quite openly, don’t hide them in bottom drawers beneath the underwear or sweaters, as men often do with pornography; I assume they don’t rush home and wrap them in brown paper. I doubt if they see the reading of romance fiction as an act of defiance on their part (“you can call this trash but I’ll read it anyway”); I doubt if husbands feel threatened if they see their wives looking at them over the top of *Dear Conquistador* or *A Kiss in a Gondola*. I doubt if Harlequins have ever been named in divorce suits and yet some women, what Jensen calls “heavy” users, read as many as sixty books of popular fiction (romance readers read all kinds of popular fiction) a *month*. They are addicts. Most of these women are full-time housewives/mothers, women in the labour force, elderly women who don’t get out much. Reading these books is what Jensen calls a “removal activity.” This is an activity which “allows one to be physically present but mentally absent” and is “one of the few luxuries that women can afford to give themselves.” (They come as low as 25¢ at the Sally Ann and I am sure there are other places, like the store on Galiano, where they are traded or given away for free. Jensen tells us that McDonald’s gave them as a gift one Mother’s Day and they have been known to turn up in boxes of laundry soap or sanitary napkins.)

If a housewife/mother sits down to watch television when anybody else is home the chances are pretty good that she won’t be able to watch the program of her choice. If she buys something sweet and self-indulgent (jelly do-nuts, a box of *Turtles*) she’d better eat it sitting on a bench in the park. But supposing she has something that *she* wants and nobody else wants? Why then she’s home free. Her husband isn’t interested in Harlequins nor are her children (and anyway teen-aged girls now have their own romance lines to choose from, *Wildfire* “for girls 12 to 15 years old,” *Sweet Dreams* and *First Love* “for 11-16 year old girls,” and several others. This is like giving young girls root-beer flavoured chapstick. They’ll get addicted to having something on their lips and be buying lipstick at \$4.50 before you know it). Traditionally men have always been able to “get away” physically. Work took them away during the week and their leisure activities either had to be done away from home (golf, fishing, “pub night”) or were dangerous (“don’t touch Daddy’s table saw!”). And even when families were all for mother having a “room of her own” it rarely worked out that way (unless it were a sewing room or laundry room). Read Doris Lessing’s

“To Room 19” to see to what terrible extremes a woman will go to have privacy and peace; read Alice Munro’s “The Office.” So women have to “make walls,” to do, as one Harlequin ad puts it, their “disappearing act.” I don’t think romance readers care one bit that the situations are repetitive or even, all claims to the contrary with the new lines, that they have very little to do with real life. They hold something in their hands that is not only cheap (and therefore a forgivable personal indulgence on mother’s part) but easily recognizable by the rest of the family as non-threatening. I know that satisfied readers do write in to the Harlequin company (“Thank you for bringing romance back to me. J. W., Tehachape, Calif.” “Harlequins are magic carpets . . . away from pain and depression . . . away to other people and other countries one might never know otherwise, H.R., Akron, Ohio”) and give an assortment of reasons why they are so satisfied. But underneath it all they know that they can sit down, put their feet up, keep an eye on the kids or the oven, and indulge in something that is uniquely theirs, something safe, yet fun, something they like which doesn’t have to be shared.

SO ARE THEY HARMLESS or maybe even *helpful* to women? (I’m not talking about the women who *write* them. As Jensen points out, the successful Harlequin writers, “anathema of feminists,” make as much as corporate executives and are doing what they like doing at the same time.) I no longer think they are harmless. I think, in fact, they are more and more approaching pornography, if they have not already arrived. If by pornography I mean stories containing sex and violence then the new Harlequins are full of it. They are ostensibly “new compelling stories of passionate romance for today’s women.” But when I started looking at the newer ones — and I think the change started in the mid-1970’s — I was appalled at the element of fear and violence, if not actual violence, that occurs. In *Duel of Desire* (1979) by Charlotte Lamb (!), the heroine, Deborah, who was left an orphan when her parents died in a fire and she was found crying in the garden in her pram, is a high-profile well-paid, executive assistant to Alex St. James, a music-industry executive. The plot is the usual far-fetched nonsense. Suffice it to say that Alex and Deborah (who gradually discovers, to her horror, that she loves this arrogant womanizer) ends up having to spend several days in an upstairs bedroom of Alex’s mother’s French farmhouse. Mama has left because of a flood threat which becomes a reality after Alex and Deborah arrive. Alex at one point kisses Deborah so hard he bites through the skin on the inside of her mouth, he pulls her hair, he shouts “you lying little bitch,” says “damn you” several times, scares her by his violent behaviour and yet she agrees to marry him — because she has fallen in love with

him! Later on he explains that it was her seeming coldness towards him that "drove" him to such behaviour. Also, at the end, when he suggests that now she's his wife she'll have to find another job and she doesn't see it, he frowns. "Damn you, my wife isn't working, especially in the same office as myself." And he uses, as an excuse, the rationalization, "How the hell would I get any work done." Kiss (passionately) and fade out. This is really old wine in new bottles. The language is coarser and hero and heroine go to bed at least once (*de rigueur* now in the more spicy lines, Harlequin Presents and Harlequin Temptation as well as Harlequin Intrigue) but *he* is always in the power position, seems in fact to be ruder, cruder, and nastier than ever. Jensen says "concern about economic security, loneliness, powerlessness and sexual violence against women pervades romances" but then you get the inevitable happy ending.

I have read perhaps two dozen of the "modern" romances and they scare me. The happy ending simply doesn't make up for all the fear. Jensen says "the romances we get are a product of literary history, contemporary social changes, and the corporate drive for profitability." It's that last bit we should pay attention to. Harlequins were slipping financially so they "modernized" the plots a little, followed current trends in T.V. and film, and now their sales are up again. Harlequin's heroines are older but not necessarily wiser. They still melt under the aggressive sexuality of the hero. They may have wonderful careers but they give them up at the drop of a panty. I have *yet* to read one when the heroine is going to continue to work after marriage. The hero, who wants her at any price, may say she can work but she, on her own (ha ha), has decided she's fed up with the lonely life at the top. She is, in short, a R.E.A.L. woman again.

I don't know how one can stop all this. It worries me that millions of women are buying the violence and abuse, the *humiliation*, along with the happy ending. He didn't really mean it; I drove him to it anyway. I'm still thinking about all this and have no real conclusion. There's a lot of anger against women right now, perhaps more than there has ever been (who gets beaten up or verbally abused when a man loses his job! It's often "women and children first," not the boss). *Women* are writing these books for other women to read. You've come a long way baby, sure you have. A long way down. These aren't really "light reading" any more and the messages coming through are very disturbing. I have no answers at the minute, only questions. Why are women exploiting other women in this way and what's to be done about it all?

NOTES

¹ In the old Harlequins you got a lot of this sort of language; one didn't "mow the lawn" for instance, one "trimmed the verdant sward." Or the gardener did; the gardener trimmed the verdant sward. This isn't the world of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; Harlequin heroes were, until very recently, rich, rich, rich. Was that, to

the Harlequin reader, the moral equivalent of my mother looking at the ads for Kelvinators and Wallace Sterling?

² These figures and many of the quotations (identified as such) are from Margaret Ann Jensen, *Love's Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1984).

AT THE OCEAN'S VERGE AGAIN

Ralph Gustafson

Everyone on the beach carries the seeds of
immortality,
Everyone. It is more than provision for singular
thanksgiving,
The mortal derivations are of extravagant
proportion:
Pitched footballs, frisbees caught
underleg,
High kites, all for joyfulness
like churchbells;
And something for something else: chewinggum
transistors,
Incorporated squattage and abandoned
beercans.
Tolerance is the lowest virtue
of goodness.
*(Helpless Jesus loves them, this
I guess.)*
I concentrate on a green and orange
spread
Umbrella and the fat girl emerged
from the ocean,
Her dowsed horse downside up,
the arriving
Wave coming waterworthy jump
and scream.