

THE LIBERATION OF PULP ROMANCES

BY CAROL THURSTON

Most people have a stereotype of the "paperback romance" as a historical novel featuring a sweet, submissive virgin whose only goal in life is to win the love and protection of a rich and rakish hero, with fade-outs and euphemisms in place of explicit sex. Another stereotype pictures the typical romance reader as an uneducated, emotionally deprived housewife (shackled to an Archie Bunker type) who, when she's not reading romances, spends her time lost in the syrupy fantasyland of television soap operas.

Like many stereotypes, however, these images of the novels and their readers are largely inaccurate, as I discovered recently when I conducted a national survey of romance readers and took a close look at some of the current trends in publishing.

Despite potshots from critics, romances have emerged as a major entertainment medium over the last decade, and now dominate the paperback publishing business. Total sales for paperback romances added up to \$300 million in 1982. Industry estimates of romance readers put the total audience at 20 million, which rivals that for the most popular television shows.

Who are these people? In a survey of 600 regular romance readers, nearly all women, I found that they mirror the general population in age, education, and marital and socioeconomic status. By no means are they all housewives. About 40 percent are employed full-time; an



equal percentage have family incomes over \$30,000, putting them solidly in the middle class. Nearly half of them have at least some college education. Most do watch television, but much less than the national average, and they tend to prefer news and movies to soap operas.

About 20 percent of these women read at least one romance a day, and 40 percent read one every two days. Why? Many find them a helpful antidote to the increasing stress in their lives, particularly as they have entered the labor force while trying to keep up with home and family responsibilities. Wives and mothers, especially, expressed a compelling need to have some time alone. They said they find mental escape in these stories even when they can't manage to find physical

privacy. As one said, "Reading romances is an escape of sorts, but from the stress of family and job, not unhappiness. Losing myself in a romance refreshes me, makes me better able to face my own problems." Readers also reported using romance novels to obtain information about history, about various careers women are taking up today, and, of course, about sex. They want to learn about the kinds of relationships that other women develop with their sexual partners, and they want to know how they behave in them.

As these motivations clearly imply, the romance fiction that readers are getting has changed, even though many of the books still carry laughable titles like *Flames of Passion*. In the last few years readers have demanded, and publishers have rushed to supply them with, heroines who are independent and assertive—in bed and out—and heroes who are sensitive and fallible. In fact, the submissive heroine story has been only one segment of the market from the very beginning, and for the last two years publishers have watched sales of that type fall off sharply. The popular erotic historical romances of the 1970s featured feisty women who fought for independence and the right to self-determination, even in time periods when it was anything but common. In Bertrice Small's *The Kadin*, for example, Scotswoman Janet Leslie tells her lover: "Ye may have my love, my

body, my undivided attention . . . even my money! But I'll nae wed again! It's extremely pleasant being yer mistress, but 'tis even more pleasant being my own mistress."

Since 1980, the booming market for "sensuous" romances with contemporary settings has prompted publishers to launch their own "brand name" series: Dell's "Candlelight Ecstasy" books, Pocket Books' "Silhouette Desire," Jove's "Second Chance at Love," and Bantam's "Loveswept." These series have brought more "reality" to romance publishing, meaning current settings, detailed sexual descriptions, and mature heroines whose lives are not dominated by the heroes.

As these new heroines engage more openly and more assertively in explicitly erotic sexual scenes, feminist critics will undoubtedly continue their tirade against them as "soft porn." But today's romance reader sees nothing pornographic about sex when it's a part of love, which is the way it's being portrayed. Thoughts as well as acts are being described, and it's difficult to see how feminists could find them seditious. We are told after one quite explicit scene in Nina Coombs's *Love So Fearful* that the heroine "had never imagined a love like this—warm, tender, and amusing. Or that she would enjoy taking the initiative. She enjoyed having him, in a very real way, in her power."

With the advent of the "sensuous romance," the erotica famine women have suffered for generations has turned into a feast, and they're indulging with the gluttony of the long-starved.

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