

The Wicked, Loving Life Of Rosemary Rogers

By Mary Murphy

“... ‘I’ve known pain, loneliness, fear,’ says America’s best-selling novelist. ‘I’ve been abused, loved. People thought I was exotic’ . . .”

Will the tawny-gold heroine overcome her guilt after murdering an attacker with a wine bottle in the cellar of a Mexican church? Is she addicted to “headache powders”? Is the Czar of Russia really her long-lost father? Will Steve forgive her for running off with a Russian prince? *Steve!* Every time she thought of him she remembered how he had taken her so savagely and how some deeply rooted primitive femaleness made her want to be near him. And now he had *amnesia*. Was it an act? Did he actually believe he was a Comanche warrior? Or, was it a cruel plot to drive her mad?

These dilemmas of passion represent the fantasies of a raven-haired, almond-eyed, 43-year-old Carmel mother of four named Rosemary Rogers. By writing them, polishing them all night at her IBM Selectric, and marketing them through Avon Books she has risen from a \$9,000-a-year secretarial job to a position as no less than the best-selling novelist in America. Her latest book, a paperback titled *Wicked Loving Lies*, is number five on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller list with 3,050,000 copies in print. Her earlier novels—*Sweet Savage Love*, *Dark Fires* and *The Wildest Heart*—have had a total press run of almost 10 million copies. “Any author on the hard-cover best-seller list would love

to trade royalty checks with Rosemary Rogers,” says a spokesman for the B. Dalton Pickwick bookstore chain. Last year she earned almost a million dollars.

Before a recent taping of an *AM Los Angeles* television show, one of the guests sat hunched over a paperback novel, which she kept hidden inside a newspaper. “It’s *The Wildest Heart* by Rosemary Rogers, and I’m embarrassed,” she said, “but I can’t put it down.” The woman, a Harvard-educated television reporter and consumer columnist, is a Rogers devotee: “Her books,” the woman explained, “are puzzles with good plot machinations. They are a blend of history and romance that appeals to a lot of hard-charging ladies, not just housewives. The women who grew up on Nancy Drew are the same people who read Rogers. Her heroines win by their wits.

“I only wish,” she said, slipping the paperback into her purse, “that the covers and titles weren’t so lurid.”

The titles and covers of Rosemary Rogers’ books are usually torrid come-ons—a couple in a naked embrace with, say, a three-masted schooner and wind-swept field as a backdrop. Inside, settings and details change, but basically Rogers’s novels are all written in the same code: an exotic location; a riches-to-rags-to-riches story line spanning at least three continents; sex and violence and violent sex; a fiery multiorgasmic

and strong-willed heroine who is taught the pleasures of her own body—crushed, so to speak, with cruel kisses—by a strong, dominating male character; and a tidy, upbeat ending.

What makes Rogers’s novels different from most Gothic prose is that they are better researched (she spent a year, on and off, studying the Reconstruction era in the United States, and Mexico during the period of French intervention before writing *Sweet Savage Love*) and that her characters are more vividly drawn. Also, in most cases the women in Rogers’s novels fight dependence on men.

“I hate most Gothic heroines,” she says, “they are dull, stupid and passive. If they take action it is usually the wrong action and they have to be rescued by some hero. My women are resilient and strong. They force men to accept them as real individuals, not as chattels or vessels.” But they also are raped a lot, multiorgasmically, which has brought Rogers strong criticism.

Romantic fiction such as this reportedly ranks among the top ten items sold at supermarkets across the United States: 98 percent of the purchasers are women. “They provide the same escapist appeal for women,” says Rosemary Rogers, “that *Playboy* or James Bond does for men.” She is not self-deceptive. She sees herself clearly as an entertainer as opposed to a serious writer. “The main purpose of my fiction is to keep people entertained, so I write what I

Windswept heroine: Rosemary Rogers on the jagged rocks near her Carmel beach house.

“... In her bedroom is a watercolor of Clint Eastwood. He’s the model for her dashing male characters such as Dominic Challenger...”

want to read for relaxation—historical adventures.” Rogers believes that the women who read her books “feel like they are living the adventure, yet they don’t get hurt. They also tell me their sex lives improve, especially if they can get their husbands to read the books, too.”

Beyond pure cultural escapism, perhaps the most critical reason for the new wave of popularity of romantic fiction such as Rogers’s is the current sexual revolution. Contrary to today’s freedom, conduct in all of Rogers’s novels is rigidly circumscribed. Rape victims usually marry their rapists, even the most tempestuous affair has a highly predictable outcome, and idealized love acted out by well-mannered Victorian players is a lot easier to deal with than, say, open marriage. Rogers’s fantasies, in other words, have limits within which her readers find a great deal of security.

She has not, ironically, applied the same limits to her own life. Her life story, which she told one day at Carmel recently, is more amorphous and erratic than that of even her most spirited heroine. And listening to it, one couldn’t help conceiving her in her own style:

Rosemary Rogers could feel the wind whistling through every crack and corner of the beach house, even though it was strongly and securely made. The day was bright with winter sun as she sat staring out at the deep blue waves crashing over the jagged rocks below and watched a crowd of nude bathers frolic on the sand. It was fortunate that she lived next to a nude beach, she laughed, since few men—except her friend the conductor, who had never even made a pass—came to visit these days.

“I’ve become a loner,” she said, sipping golden Tuborg beer, while the wind played havoc with her lustrous, carefully sprayed raven hair. “I sit here at night listening to music and to the ocean, and I meditate or write until the sun comes up or I fall asleep at my typewriter. I don’t know a man in the world who would put up with that schedule.”

She hadn’t always had the luxury of solitude, of a \$150,000 beach house with a sunken sea-view bathtub or a Mercedes 450 SL. Or, in her bedroom, a watercolor of Clint Eastwood, the man she says is the model for her dashing male characters such as Dominic Challenger.

This Ceylon-born school principal’s daughter had seen desperate days in this part of the world. The decade between the breakup of her second marriage and

the publication of her first novel in 1973 was the lowest point in her life. She gritted her teeth whenever she thought of it. “If it hadn’t been for the children being completely dependent, I would have ended it all,” she confessed.

Now, when she looked back at herself, at the way she was four years ago, it was like looking at a different person. Then, she lived in a small tract house in Fairfield, California, with her four children and her parents. She drove a beat-up white ’64 Chevy and toiled away in a secretarial pool at the Solano County Parks and Recreation Department. To keep what was left of her sanity she wrote novels, madly, passionately, on her lunch hour and at night, sitting at a table in the living room, blocking out the sound of the television and the kids with a stereo headset that played Bach and Beethoven. Now, three kids were grown and had moved away, while the fourth, a thirteen-year-old, lived with his uncle—and her stereo had five speakers. Life was glorious, and she liked the person who stared back at her from the seashell mirror.

She might never have sent off her first novel to Avon, she recalled, if it hadn’t been for a hysterectomy in the early seventies. “It left me feeling so empty, I woke up at night with terrible nightmares of people snatching floating babies away from me. I had written for myself all my life, but finally I knew it was time to try and sell my work. As I had willed my children well through yoga, I now willed myself a best seller.” As she spoke, her almond eyes flickered with pride like amber glass in leaping candlelight. Abruptly, she headed outdoors to the cliffs beyond the house. As she walked she lit a cigarette and reminisced.

The memories that now came thick and fast flooded her tired mind (she had been up until dawn finishing her latest novel, *The Crowd Pleasers*): There was the sheltered childhood in Ceylon as the daughter of Barbara and Cyril Jansz, wealthy Dutch-Portuguese settlers. . . . The awkward adolescence when she was a bookworm and her favorite authors were Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, when painful shyness forced her to retreat into her subconscious where she imagined vivid stories about everyone she knew. . . . The years in college when she met and married Summa Navaratnam, a track star known as “the fastest man in Asia,” who had been her first lover. Wiping her forehead now, as if to erase the images, she recalled how their sex life turned “lousy” and how

Summa flaunted his other women constantly. “He liked big boobs, and I was very skinny.”

Writing had been the passport out of her first marriage. She became a reporter for the *Ceylon Daily News*—against her husband’s orders—and, finally having achieved minimal economic independence, filed for a divorce in 1958 and moved with her two daughters to England. There, in 1959, she married Leroy Rogers, a black Air Force sergeant stationed in London. “He lived in my apartment building,” she says simply, “and we were both lonely.”

She realized in 1964, after he had been transferred to Travis Air Force Base, that it would never work. “For the first time I felt discrimination—not towards me, people thought I was exotic, but towards Leroy and where we lived and who we were friends with. It put a great strain on the marriage. But even more, he was mean, and he drank terribly.”

Looking back she said that without these experiences she would never be able to write the way she does. “I’ve known pain and loneliness and fear. I’ve been abused and loved, and added to that I have a great imagination. But now I’m scared. I’m frightened to get into a relationship with any man who might think he can own me, I’m content living alone. Even my children respect my need for privacy. The only time I feel I want to share all I have is at sunset when the world is rosy and peaceful.”

But what does she envision as her own happy ending—a fate she imposes on all her characters. Doesn’t she, like the heroines in her novels, need a lover like Clint Eastwood, the model for her fantasy men?

Rosemary would only give a deep short laugh when that subject was broached. She wouldn’t think about her dreams. No.

But Clint Eastwood would.

“I’m a good guy,” Clint Eastwood said a few days later. “Even though Rosemary has a watercolor of me in her bedroom, I swear I’ve never been in there.” In fact, Eastwood said, he didn’t even meet Rosemary until after the publication of her first novel. “She came into my restaurant in Carmel and told me she had dedicated a book to me. I was flattered. She wanted me to do a Gothic film. I wasn’t interested.”

But the ending may be a happy one after all. “Now she’s writing a contemporary novel,” Eastwood said. “And that,” said the model for Dominic Challenger, “I may do as a film.”