

"PURE AS THE DRIVEN SLUSH"

With apologies to Tallulah, the new romance novels may bring a blush to your cheek.

By Mary Ellin Barrett

Lacey sensed his flaring arousal and took a deep pleasure in the knowledge that she could excite him as much as he excited her. It made her bolder, more adventuresome than she would ever have given herself credit for back in Iowa!

—Stephanie James, *Velvet Touch*

Ten years ago, when romance heroines were a starry-eyed and straightlaced lot, such a racy adventure would not have been Lacey's fate. She would have had to settle for some hand-holding, a chaste kiss or two and a promise of more excitement after marriage. But now all sorts of doors have opened up to her, not the least of them the door to the bedroom. Under the covers of today's trendiest romances, heroines like Lacey are being unlaced and passions unleashed as publishers compete in a heated race for readership.

Romance novels are among the most popular books being published today — boasting some 22 million readers and more than 320 million books sold worldwide in 1981 — and the latest rage in romances is sensuality. In the past two years, three major romance publishers have introduced sexy lines of books and at least three more sensual series are due out in 1983.

There was a time when romance fans could be enticed with virtuous sagas and ingenuous heroines who received only a few kisses before wedding their heroes and shutting out the reader at book's end. But it seems as if today's romance enthusiasts want more intimate details. Observes Kathryn Falk, publisher of *Romantic Times*, a bimonthly newspaper for devotees of the genre, "Readers are tired of nurses, governesses and older heroes. They like the sexier books." As a result, she adds, "Many of the books are getting spicier. They don't leave as much to the imagination as they used to."

More precisely, the new recipe calls for additional spice, while at the same

time retaining a measure of old-fashioned, sugary idealism. To achieve this mix, writers keep their explicit lovemaking above the waist, while the sex act itself is described euphemistically. "We have lavish detail," explains Carolyn Nichols, a senior editor at Bantam Books, "but the language of love that has been developed for these books has a high poetic and metaphorical content, and never ever do we use clinical terms." Adds Robin Grunder, an associate editor for Signet Books, "The scenes don't describe what's happening as much as what the characters are feeling. While they make love, he says beautiful things to her. There's a lot of emphasis on foreplay and afterglow."

... she was consumed by a raging inferno. When her eyes met his briefly, she saw that he, too, was burning with desire. And when the two fires met, they consumed the hunger that fed their fury. . . .

—Pamela Wallace,
Come Back, My Love

And there's always fidelity. As Vivian Stephens, editorial director at Harlequin Books, explains, "If she goes to bed with him on page 1, that's who she has to end up with."

It is Stephens who is most often credited with launching the new trend. It began a few years back when she was an editor at the Dell Publishing Company, hoping to boost sales of Dell's old-fashioned Candlelight Romances. "How could I get a woman who had lived through the sexual revolution to read about a virgin?" recalls Stephens. "I had to bring this genre into the here and now. If they were in bed, what was going on?"

The result was Candlelight Ecstasy Romances, launched in December 1980. Jove Publications jumped on the bandwagon in June 1981 with its *Second Chance at Love* series; Silhouette Books followed suit with *Special Edition* (February 1982) and *Desire* (June 1982); and in 1983, Signet Books will introduce its *Rapture* series, Harlequin will offer its new

Sweet Romance

Sexy Romance

Silhouette Desire

Silhouette Romance
 SONDRA STANFORD
 Tarnished Vows



modest neckline

restrained expression

hero's hands discreet

scarlet border

pastel border

daring neckline

passionate expression

hero's hands suggestive

RITA CLAY
 Wise Folly



Photos: Corbis/Silhouette Books

sexy American Romances and Bantam Books will also be bringing out a line of sensual romances.

Publishers report that reader response has been glowing. Dell predicts that the sales total for Ecstasy by the end of 1983 will be 30 million. Al Liberman, senior vice president and director of marketing for Silhouette Books says that the Desire and Special Edition romances have had a 90- to 100-percent sellout rate each month at the stores.

"Women have become more and more open about their sexuality," explains Anne Gisonny, senior editor, Candlelight Romances. "It's all right now for a woman to admit to sexual fantasies." Monique Baux, 43, a romance fan from Urbana, Ill., seems to agree: "If the books were not spicy, I could not relate to them."

This is not to say that there aren't plenty of readers who still prefer their romance novels unsullied. One book-industry consultant says that the sexy novels account for only a fraction of romance-book sales. "The vast majority of volume in the business is squeaky clean," he observes. In 1981, for example, Harlequin's three romance lines (all of them tamer than the forthcoming American Romances) sold 200 million copies worldwide.

Parris Afton Bonds, romance author and vice president of Romance Writers of America says she, for one, prefers the less explicit type. "I like a

little titillation," she says, "an exchange of words, looks, touches."

And author Barbara Cartland, whose virtuous 18th- and 19th-century romances have sold more than 300 million copies worldwide, decries today's trends. "Disgusting," says Cartland, who is also stepgrandmother to the Princess of Wales. "I think they're absolutely filthy. The girl is raped in revolting ways on every page, and then at the end when the hero says, 'Will you marry me?' she blushes. It's untrue to life and I don't believe women like it. Women of every age read me because I'm pure. I give them beauty and love. No woman of any age likes pornography."

Grunder offers an equally passionate reply. "I would be very insulted if someone came up to me and said, 'What you are publishing is pornography.' I don't think it is pornography. It's not prurient when people are making love. These are two individuals sharing an experience. It's romantic."

Rory was conscious of nothing in the world save Eric. All other thought had been forced from her mind except that of his body near hers, beside hers. . . . She thrilled again and again at the beauty of his touch, the spiraling passion that carried her higher than she'd ever dreamed possible.

—Billy Douglass, **RW**
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