

U.S. Has Canada to Thank for Harlequin Romances

By STANLEY MEISLER, *Times Staff Writer*

For days she had been refusing to acknowledge what was really the matter with her. Sick with despair, her nails driving into her palms, she admitted the extent of her folly. She could never marry Giles because she was heart over head in love with Raoul St. Clair.

—“Castle in Corsica,” by Anne Weale, *Harlequin Romance No. 537*

TORONTO—A couple of years ago, Mordecai Richler, the Canadian novelist, wrote an article ridiculing his fellow countrymen for their incessant complaints about American television swamping their culture.

“Take Heart, Canada!” the article was titled. “For every ‘Gong Show,’ it said, “we give them back a Harlequin romance.”

There is little doubt that Harlequin romances—the ubiquitous pap-

erback novels with the happy ending plots of love and courtship in a modern setting—make up Canada’s greatest cultural export to the United States and, in fact, the rest of the world.

\$70 Million in U.S. Sales

In 1979, Harlequin sold 168 million copies of its romances in 10 languages to readers in Canada, the United States, Britain, Japan, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Mexico, Greece, Sweden and a host of other countries. Its sales in the United States, the largest market, came to almost \$70 million, close to 10% of the value of all paperbacks sold there Harlequin claims 14 million American readers.

The women who read harlequins and other romance novels do so mainly for escape.

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STEVE FONTANINI / Los Angeles Times

It's strictly for escape. Harlequin sold 168 million copies of its books in 10 languages in 1979.

HARLEQUIN: Canada's Cultural Export

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“They’re very open about it,” said Janice Radway, assistant professor of American civilization at the University of Pennsylvania, who is conducting a study on the popularity of the books. “They say that it is an addiction. Many of them that I talked to said, ‘Well, you know, it’s just like drinking or it’s just like popping pills. Only this doesn’t harm anybody. This doesn’t hurt my family, and it really doesn’t hurt me, either. But it makes me happy and hopeful.’”

Success Spawns Competition

The phenomenal success of Harlequin romances has spawned a good deal of competition. The Silhouettes of Pocket Books, Dell’s Candlelight series, Fawcett’s Coventry series and Warner’s Library of Regency Romance have joined Bantam’s Barbara Cartland novels in trying to whittle down Harlequin’s huge share of the American market. In fact, Harlequin has filed suit against Pocket Books, its former U.S. distributor, contending Silhouettes imitate Harlequins too closely.

The phenomenal success has also spawned some concern by feminists. In a recent article, Ann Douglas who teaches English at Columbia University, attacked Harlequin romances as “dramas of dependency” in which helpless women cling to dominant males. Harlequin executives deny this but they sometimes betray defensiveness about their product.

“We have been unhampered by the need for critical literary acclaim,” W. Lawrence Heisey, president of Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., wrote in the 1978 annual report.

“Rather, we have centered our attentions single-

mindedly on readers, who are the real critics of our publications.”

Yet, perhaps out of conscience, Harlequin finances the annual literary awards of the Canadian Authors Assn. in fiction, nonfiction, poetry and drama. It is safe to guess that no Harlequin romance will ever win one.

Although its headquarters in Toronto and is run by Canadians, the Harlequin romance is not very Canadian. Most of the books are written by middle-aged British women who like to set their virginal British heroines down in exotic settings in Europe and Africa.

‘Understands How You Feel’

The most Canadian aspect of the product is in its packaging. Harlequin executives like to say that Heisey, a former Proctor & Gamble marketing man, packages and sells Harlequin books like soap. Harlequin does not promote individual titles and authors; instead, it pushes the line as a whole in an advertising campaign that assures the readers, “Harlequin understands how you feel about love.”

Dealers in supermarkets, drugstores, variety stores and bookstores cannot pick and choose from among the dozen Harlequin titles that are published each month but must display them all. Readers, who write letters to the company boasting about their “addiction,” are not selective as they grab as many as they can from the racks.

In a sense, the authors are the unsung heroines of Harlequin since the company promotes the series as a whole rather than the individual writers. “I do not have a preference in authors,” Val Higgins of Merced, Calif., said in a letter to the company recently. “As long as it has the Harlequin trademark, I will read it.”