

No Longer Bashful About Their Secret Vice, Romance Fans Can't Get Enough of That Sexy Stuff

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Last June they stormed Houston, 670 strong. All were women except a handful, all rabid romance readers or readers turned neophyte writers gathered for the first convention of the Romance Writers of America. In speeches and seminars and standing ovations and elevators and late-night chats in hotel suites, they pledged their everlasting pride in their genre. The mood of the conference, according to one pleased participant, was "Look, it's us against the world. It was like a sisterhood."

Most of the women, like romance readers in general, were between 25 and 40 years old, and they threw themselves a banquet, with roast beef and crème de menthe, and dressed for it in evening gowns, rhinestones and corsages. Three promising new writers received gold heart-shaped pendants. But the spirit of the get-together was much grittier. The women had trooped in from every state but 10; one sold a saved-up supply of food stamps to pay the \$105 fee. They scribbled in notebooks, as editors ladled out advice ("I want very sensual love scenes," commanded Vivian Stephens, editor of Dell's Candlelight Ecstasy romances, "kisses described in depth. I'd like to know about the warm interior of her mouth"). Fans collared established writers and proffered all sorts of their own advice ("They'll give you the entire plot of your next book," groaned one author). And they nabbed agents, publishers and editors with demands that they spot-read proposals, outlines, manuscripts. One band of editors resorted to a buddy system for bathroom visits. ("You're not getting out of here," a would-be writer only half-kiddingly informed an editor paying a solo call on the ladies' room, "until you read my proposal.")

Welcome to the world of romance. For its aficionados—granted, RWA represents its hardest-core fans, but the madness is mushrooming—the fluffy, frivolous part steps with the stories. The women read them with a vengeance, many devouring at least 20 a week, or about \$150 worth a month (RWA president Rita Estrada took a part-time job to support her habit and says lots of other compulsive readers have done the same). Vivien Lee Jennings, president of a bookstore chain in Kansas and Missouri, says, "We don't even have to take the books out of the boxes" when shipments arrive. As many as 50 customers stand sentry on delivery days. "I've seen them with these huge shopping bags," says Carolyn Nichols, editor at Jove Publications, "going down the racks grabbing them, boom, boom, boom."

And they read with single-minded intensity. Barbra Wren, an employee at B. Dalton's in-



dependence, Mo., outlet and its ad hoc adviser to its romance readers, says one nurse takes only moderately compelling romances to read when she has emergency room duty, for fear of neglecting the patients.

They possess, it seems, an unslakable thirst. Four volunteer-staffed newsletters ("Barbra Critiques," edited by Wren, is the largest, with 150,000 readers at \$60 an annual subscription) dish out authors' biographies, horoscopes, favorite recipes and flowers ("If you see a 'white tornado' accomplishing impossible tasks, such as writing six books . . . that whirlwind isn't Mr. Clean! It's our own Parris, doing her thing!"), collectors' queries (some women possess all but a few of Harlequin's 2,500 titles) and—precious information,

"like finding gold," says Estrada—the various pseudonyms of favorite authors. Estrada and a few pals trek hundreds of miles for overnight get-togethers like their recent Margarita-Sippin'-Sleeping-Bag-Slumber Party. "Our husbands have to stay home and watch the kids while we go trotting," says Estrada. "We sit down and drink beer and chew the fat."

Hardly oblivious to the phenomenon, publishers are courting readers more energetically than ever. Harlequin holds "bridal luncheons" in hotels around the country, introducing authors to 200 women selected via questionnaire for the honor. The luncheons feature bridal bouquets tossed to the guests and Harlequin personnel assuring them that the company "understands how you feel about love." So it seems: there are now two Harlequin clones, Silhouette Romances and the slightly more "sensual" Candlelight Ecstasy. Other category books, tailored to specialized audiences, are sprouting up too. First Love from Silhouette, Bantam's Sweet Dreams and Scholastic Inc.'s Wishing Star and Wildfire series all aim at the teenage crowd; Jove Publications has recently introduced Second Chance at Love—six books a month for divorcees and widows. Two ex-editors of the National Enquirer have launched tabloid-size Rhapsody Romances to be sold in supermarket checkout lines. And in February, Pinnacle Books will publish Love's Leading Ladies, the first Who's Who of romance writers.

All the recent visibility of the genre has only made its defenders more forthright. Wren and her friends have forbidden husbands to harass them about their habit. "We've lost our defensive air," says she. "It's not quite defiance but it's close." Barbara Keenan, editor of *Affaire de Coeur*, a California newsletter, reports that she and her friends have quit buying their romances in grocery stores whose long receipts conveniently camouflaged their purchases. "Women are recognizing that their favorite fiction is just as acceptable as what their husbands read," says Romantic Times publisher Kathryn Falk.

The army of readers has also begun to exercise considerable clout with publishers. When they don't care for a book, they howl loudly—in letters and boycotts. Thanks to their protests, what one reader calls "wimpy little girl" heroines have been replaced by pluckier women; rape and brutality are out, humor and career women are in; and heroes are curbing their carefree promiscuity. "Women want fidelity from their heroes," says Jennings. "They want men to cut that other stuff out." ♦