

## Innocence is latest twist in romantic teen novels

By N.R. Kleinfield

NEW YORK — These are the names of some of their heroines: Mariah, Lisa, Elyne.

These are their problems: a first love who is seriously ill (Mariah); an awful fear of not being as beautiful as her beautiful, steady girlfriend (Lisa); how to hook Kip, the most gorgeous boy in the world, who already is dating cute, bouncy Merri (Elyne).

These are the titles: "P.S. I Love You," "Flowers for Lisa" and "Dreams Can Come True."

For years, paperback publishers have been mustering sizable piles of money by grinding out a seemingly endless barrage of gushy, steamy romances for women.

But the latest wrinkle along Publishers Row is squeaky-clean romances featuring heroines still in their teens that softcover editors and marketers are betting will spur teenage girls to shell out their baby-sitting money to buy.

So far, three paperback publishers are luring the young market with romance lines aimed at girls 12 to 16. Doing the spide-work was Scholastic Inc., the magazine and textbook house that long has catered to the reading whims of school-age children. It introduced its Wildfire Romances almost two years ago.

Sensing profit opportunities, Bantam Books, the country's biggest publisher of soft-cover books, moved into the market with its Sweet Dreams line, followed by the Silhouette subsidiary of Simon & Schuster with its First Love imprint.

"We're very bullish on this market," said Barbara Marcus, Bantam's marketing manager for young adult books.

The romance meters of booksellers, as it happens, first detected the demand. Scholastic had been publishing original romances for teenagers that were sold through its Teen Age Book Club. Retailers told Scholastic that they sensed there was an appetite in bookstores for these kinds of titles. Why not bring out a line for bookstore distribution?

Scholastic agreed and turned to Ann Reit, who had been senior editor of the Teen Age Book Club, to supervise the project. To date, 24 Wildfire titles have been published. They have become regular dwellers on the juvenile best-seller lists of the bookstore chains, with total sales having approached two million copies.

As tends to be true with many adult romances, there is a certain formula to the teen-age romances. Reit describes it this way: "The girls are all 15 or 16. The boys are a little older. No sex. No four-letter words. Preferably they take place in small towns and small cities, since that's where the bulk of the readers are. They deal with early emotional development. All of the books end on an upbeat note. The girl matures and grows in some ways. She learns something."

Scholastic has been heartened enough by its Wildfire success — it churns out two titles a month — that it kicked off a second line called Wishing Star, in June. While these books are also romances, their plots wrestle with more in-depth challenges than the Wildfire novels. One plot, for example, centers on a girl who spends time alternately with separated parents. Her mother treats her as an adult, her father treats her as daddy's little girl. In May, Scholastic plans a third series



Romance books for teens.

for teen-agers called Windwept, in which the plots will be contemporary romantic mysteries.

Each of the three publishers has adopted divergent marketing tactics to try to make their lines first in every teen-age girl's heart. Scholastic is basically relying on word-of-mouth to circulate its series. Silhouette plans heavy consumer advertising. Bantam has opted to hit girls over the head with an avalanche of publicity.

For example, Bantam showed up at teen-age fashion shows presented by Seventeen magazine and handed out several thousand Sweet Dreams books, as well as Sweet Dreams posters and Sweet Dreams night-shirts. Also, Bantam is starting a newsletter to circulate among devoted Sweet Dreams fans and is preparing a slumber party kit.

Still, Bantam's ad budget hovers around the low six figures. Silhouette has set aside a whopping \$1.4 million to tell the world about its First Love line. "We really have a com-

mitment to these books," said Mona Altman, Silhouette's marketing director. Included in its plans are color ads in the teen-age magazines, as well as five-second tag lines on television ads being run for Silhouette's adult romances.

What's more, it has taken the trouble to commission marketing research to guide its efforts. Last year, it polled 600 mothers at high-traffic shopping centers to find out whether they thought their daughters would take to a romance line of books. The answer was a resounding yes.

Accordingly, Silhouette's expectations are high. It has printed 190,000 copies of each of its titles, compared with 150,000 copies first printings at Bantam and 75,000 first printings at Scholastic.

The books are deliberately low-priced. The Bantam and Silhouette lines sell for \$1.25. Scholastic prices its lines at \$1.50, although it is contemplating a price increase next year.

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