



## Books

### From Bedroom to Boardroom

Romance novels court changing fancies and adorable profits

"I'm tired of being raped," complains Maria after twelve violations in 600 pages. "Don't I count as a person?" Indeed she does. Maria's adventure, *Wicked of Loving Lies*, has sold 3 million copies, and her fellow rapes, the heroines of paperback romances, were responsible for sales upwards of \$100 million in 1980—representing over one-fourth of mass-market softcover volumes. This year is expected to be even bigger. As gothics and antebellum adventures fade, the "contemporaries," as the trade labels them, are becoming the order of the day. Says Dell Vice President Ross Claiborne, "It's a license to print money." The license requires a plucky heroine up against heart-rending odds (job problems, the other woman). Object: the tycoon or professional of her choice (see box). Unlike TV soaps and racist novels, the romances always view the boudoir in soft focus, and all true love affairs lead to the altar.

In the nearly virginal Harlequin romances, passion never goes above a whisper. "She gasped with helplessness and fight and another subtle emotion that she could not understand." Masters and Johnson could furnish her with a working hypothesis, but even the more outrageous Richard Gallie Books line puns only a little louder. "Sweet streams of oneness curled within her." All this heavy breathing is as calculated as a publisher's earnings statement, according to industry surveys, readers want the sex wrapped in euphemisms and the future tied in pink ribbons.

romes may come and go, leading ladies obey the immutable laws of the genre. As Author Patty Matthews has it: "You get your heroine up a tree and then throw stones at her. In the end she gets the man, the money and the happiness." In *Rhapsody* (Pocket, \$2.75), a typical contemporary, Lane is afraid to tell the desirable pianist, Michael, that she is a talent agent. When he discovers her occupation, Michael mistakenly believes that she loves

him only for his signature on a contract. The intendant that loveliest musician goes off with a woman over 30—always evil—and Lane rebounds with Reggie, the opera singer, and Tom, "the sweetest guy in the world." After the requisite skirmishes and reconciliations, Michael is persuaded to play a concerto for two hearts, and the wedded Lane happily manages his life. Throughout her trials, she cooks not one meal and never worries about pregnancy or infidelity. Romance heroines are too busy tracking and trapping their honey-eyed executives.

"Women's fantasies have moved from the bedroom to the boardroom," observes Gallie's editor in chief, Judith Sullivan. "They're no longer dreaming of being kidnaped by pirates, they're thinking about the guy in the corner office. The core fantasy is wealth, power, clothes, travel and a glamorous career. But women still don't want to be responsible for their own pleasure."

Book publishers do. Pushing their products into hands of cosmetics, publishers offer rigid "lines" of fiction. The namesakes of the novels gives women confusion," says Karen Solem, editor in chief of Silhouette Romances. "They buy one line because they know they won't find something they don't want to see." Adds Bill Edwards, vice president of the 300-store B. Dalton Booksellers chain, where romances account for 30% of mass-market paperback sales: "The women know what days their new books arrive here. They buy four or six novels at a whack every month." The market is so hot that Avon has published the first homosexual romance, *Gaywick*. Dell has done a black contemporary, and Love plans a "Second Chance at Love" series. For divorcee starting over,

Love now name children after char-

acter (Shanna and Virginia are favorites). And they subscribe to several newsletters, among them *Barbara Crompton*, a monthly review by Barbara Wren, an Independence, Mo., bookseller. Sample appraisal: "Love or Live... Cute, short read, American gal, Greek guy, cruise ship... lightly entertaining."

Who is writing the 100-plus light entertainments that appear each month? "It's not Joyce Carol Oates under a pseudonym," says Gallie's Sullivan. Given the lurid prose style, that much, at least, is certain. Novice authors, in fact, tend to be housewives supplementing the family income, like PATTI AFFON BOOTH of Lawrenceville, Texas. Booth spends her day with five sons, ages one to 13, and plots her

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Judith Sullivan  
Dreaming of the guy in the corner office.

novels "after the diapers are rinsed." Cecelias BAZZAN, Vice President: "Richard said 'I have a fantasy that as the sun sets across the land, the typewriters come out and the ladies go to work.' When the Romance Writers of America convene in Houston this summer, those workers will also include Christina Savage and Shanna Carol aka Kerry Newcomb and Frank Schaefer, two male exiles who have gleaned atmosphere from old John Wayne movies. Although these romantics represent the new Grab Street, the income of some sponsors is more suitable for Rodeo Drive. The authors' earnings from a single volume can reach \$30,000, and novelties like Janet Dailey (10 million copies of 57 novels in print) produce eight books a year for a six-figure income. Experience is not necessary. Bestselling Writers Kathleen Woodstein (*The Flame and the Flower*) and Jude Deveraux (*The Tenth Muse*) were discovered in the "slush pile"—the trade term for unsolicited manuscripts.

Romance fiction has also attracted some uncommitted (and scholarly) criticism as well. Columbia University English Pro-

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essor Ann Douglas brands the genre "soft porn," "that corrupts feminist ideals by glorifying male dominance. But Author Beverly Sussman in *Women, Sex and Personality* takes a stand worthy of a romance heroine. In the right kind of contemporary, she argues, "men have acquired tenderness and girls have matured into strong, independent women." These examples may help readers across the minefield of a new sexual culture. But the central question posed by Sullivan remains unanswered: "Why do women need so much fantasy in their lives?"

Simon & Schuster President Richard Snyder takes a more pragmatic view: "At least they're reading. Some of them may graduate to *The World According to Garp*." Then again, that may be the most romantic fiction of them all. —By AD Reed

## Feelings

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP, AND OTHER EARLY WORKS  
by Jane Austen  
Harmony Books, 118 pages, \$4.95

For all their current popularity and brioche, novel-romances are old, old stories. They began flooding the market in England during the last decades of the 18th century; they were part of the tide that engulfed the certainties of the Enlightenment. Unlike the newly invented gothic tale, which stressed the pleasures of terror, the sentimental romances emphasized the happy sensation of a good cry. They also quickly debased the emerging philosophical notion that feelings were the most reliable guide to truth. If so, reasoned the romancers, then the person with the most flamboyantly acute sensitivities must be better than less hysterical mortals. The novels that followed from this conclusion all had one thing in common: they portrayed selfish neurotics as paragons of virtue.

At least one good girl was not raised by these books, although she must have read a lot of them to mock so well. Before her 15th birthday in 1790, Jane Austen had written *Love and Friendship*, erotic spellings and all, into a notebook. There it remained until after her death in 1817; it has appeared infrequently ever since. You had. Had this impeccable satire been published at once, a number of sentimental novelists might have found themselves legitimately in tears.

*Love and Friendship* is short (some 30 printed pages) and hilariously to the point. It consists of a series of letters from Laura to the daughter of a childhood "friend." Laura pours out the story of her unhappy past and makes herself ridiculous with nearly every rapid word she utters. She complains: "A sensibility too tremulously alive to every affliction of my friends; my Acquaintance; and particularly to every affliction of my own, was my only fault, if a fault it could be called."

She is, like so many romance heroines, too good for this world, and horrid beyond measure.

Austen rapidly trots Laura through a standard romance plot. She marries a handsome stranger named Edward, moments after he appears at her parents' house. Edward is running away from his father, who wants him to marry a certain Lady Dorothea. He tells the adoring Laura how he refused "Lady Dorothea is lovely and engaging; I prefer no woman to her; but know Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes. Nor never shall it be said that I obliged my Father." Edward and Laura set off to pamper their emotions and sponge off relatives and friends. "The affectionate en-



Jane Austen  
Mocking the happy sensation of a good cry.

trances of Augustus and Sophia that we would be ever consider their House as our Home, easily provided on us to depart never more to leave them." Lavenderpopp follows, as do miraculous recoveries, grand larceny, imprisonment, overturned carriages and the untimely deaths of nearly everyone except Laura.

Austen exaggerates nothing given her target the scarily had to. But she brings to this item of juvenile the mark of an accomplished satirist: she sets foreshadowing against an implied moral world. Near the end of her narrative, Laura recalls meeting a plain girl named Bridget. "She could not be supposed to possess either exalted Ideas, Delicate Feelings or refined Sensibilities—She was nothing more than a mere good-tempered, civil & obliging Young Woman...." To her last glory, Jane Austen was to make a lasting place in English fiction for such plain creatures. The other short pieces in this convenient collection betray an apprentice, if decidedly precocious writer. But *Love and Friendship* is a miracle of maturity, and one of the wisest seedlings of wit in the English language. —By Paul Giles