

"I'm hungry. But not for food."

More women are working harder and their fantasies are taking on new dimensions, making romance novel publishing hotter than ever.

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Love

0700

Delight tingled down every nerve in her body. Surrender was only a moment away. Looping her arms around his neck, she returned his flaming kiss full measure. "I missed you, too," she whispered when they finally ended the kiss.

"Do you still want to go to dinner?" he asked hoarsely, nuzzling at her throat.

"I'm hungry," Francesca answered softly. "But not for food."

This tasty morsel comes from Bobbi Smith's *Kiss Me Forever*, one of the so-called romance novels on the paperback racks. Great literature it isn't, but romance novels are stoking the cash registers. Last year thousands of such steamy books accounted for a stunning 46% of all mass market paperbacks sold in the U.S.

Romance novels are easy to spot by their covers, many of which feature two passionate lovers wrapped in a torrid embrace. Their clothing is often partially torn; flames may be blazing in the background.

All in all, spending on the romance market came to an estimated \$750 million last year. Most of that was book sales, but the figure also includes related products and services like romance magazines, cruises for romance book lovers and a 1-900 telephone number set up by a male romance cover model.

Who reads this stuff and buys the associated products? Women, mostly, but an awful lot of women. Waldenbooks, the nation's second-largest bookstore chain with 1,100 stores, reports that romance sales were up 27% last year and projects a 37% increase for this year. Waldenbooks' aggregate book sales are growing a mere 4% a year, barely keeping pace with inflation.

There's no customer like a romance novel customer. Some 60% of U.S. households didn't buy a single book last year, but at Barnes & Noble, Inc., the country's number one chain, the average romance customer spent an extraordinary \$1,200 last year, according to the chain's romance buyer, Denise Little. That's hard to bury in

the grocery budget.

Is that possible—240 paperbacks at \$4.99 apiece per year per customer? Figures from Toronto-based Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., the leading romance novel publisher, tend to confirm Barnes & Noble's experience. According to Harlequin, over half its customers buy an average of 30 novels a month. And Harlequin is finding a new, hungry market for its novels in Eastern Europe. Average number of Harlequin romances sold per day in Hungary (pop. 10 million) last year: 17,800.



Romance conventioneer and loot

As addictive as cocaine.

"You'll find people, you know, snuffing this like cocaine," says New York literary agent Richard Curtis. "Both nostrils. There doesn't seem to be a saturation point, emotionally or financially."

For many publishers, the romance segment is providing much-needed cash in an otherwise moribund market. "Every single publisher is making money out of romances," says Damaris Rowland, Dell Publishing Co.'s head of romance publishing. Last year Harlequin provided its parent, publicly owned Torstar Corp., owner of the *Toronto Star* and other media properties, with 58% of its cash flow—on 40% of revenues.

Some writers are profiting enormously from the boom, too. Danielle Steel and Sandra Brown are millionaires a few times over. In May British-born Barbara Taylor Bradford, who

writes high-end romance novels (their plots are somewhat more complex), snared a \$20 million advance for her next three hardcover books, one of the highest advances ever in the publishing world.

So what are these romance novels like? How much do they resemble their supposed literary antecedents, such classics as *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*?

Not much. In Harlequin Presents, the company's most popular series, every book is exactly 192 pages. The plot follows a loose formula. Usually, the heroine starts off spurning the hero, only to discover later that Mr. Wrong is actually Mr. Right. This discovery always comes before page 100.

In most romance novels, Mr. Right has a rugged, manly name—Morgan, Rhyder and Rolt are popular—while the heroine goes by something feminine or evocative, such as Sacha, Shannon or Storm.

The prose is heavily suggestive, of course, but it steers clear of pornography:

He touched her long after he knew she was ready for him, caressed her more than she could bear. He stirred lust in her until she would have begged him to take her,

*but all she could do was take what he gave, a new knowledge of her own body, a knowledge of her weakness of spirit as well as flesh. (From *Prisoner of My Desire* by Johanna Lindsey, Avon Books.)*

There's often violence against women, but strict moral guidelines apply. "If the heroine is going to be sullied by a man other than the hero, she must be married to the sullier," explains Lydia Annunziata, a Miami lawyer who advises aspiring romance authors. And there's always a happy ending.

By all accounts, romance readers are Everywoman. Average age: 39 years. Forty-five percent are college-educated. Over 50% work outside the home. Average household income: \$40,000. (Are there any men who read romances? "Few who've admitted it," replies Harlequin President



Living the fantasy
She was wrapped in a silken cocoon of euphoria as his powerful, well-muscled body moved with easy grace.

Brian Hickey.)

Harvey Greenberg, a New York psychiatrist who studies popular culture, shares a widespread view of why the romance market is booming. Recalling recent studies that show more women are working while still performing most of the household tasks, he says: "The perfect hunk who'll sweep you off your feet and pour shekels into your bodice at the same time speaks not just to women's rescue fantasy but to feminine exhaustion right now."

Perhaps so. Romance novels surfaced at this spring's meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. Several therapists said that they use romance novels to treat couples suffering from "diminished desire." Perhaps they'd seen *Psychology Today's* report of a 1985 study showing that romance readers do differ from the average American woman in one way. "Women who read romance novels make love with their partners 74% more often than do nonreaders," the researchers concluded.

Whatever their reason, some 3,000 romance readers—many dressed in bright sweatsuits or pink dresses and wearing heavy pancake makeup—gathered in Savannah in May to attend the tenth annual *Romantic Times* Booklovers Convention. *Romantic Times*, a sort of Soap Opera

Digest of the romance world, offers 60,000 paid subscribers over 150 book reviews per monthly issue, in addition to chatty discussions of the goings-on of celebrity romance writers. (Annual subscription: \$36.)

Adoring fans waited in line for an hour to pay \$7.50 admission and then mobbed their favorite authors, who were sitting two to a table behind name tags with their names and pseudonyms ("Marilyn Campbell a.k.a. Marina Palmieri").

After shoving books in front of the authors for signing, readers dashed on to get photographed with Fabio, the 31-year-old male model who, with his Arnold Schwarzenegger-like body and shoulder-length blond hair, is the one ripping the bodice off breathless females on hundreds of romance book covers (see box, opposite).

One attendee was Harriet Klausner, 40, an Atlanta bookstore saleswoman with a master's in library science. Klausner estimates she reads 100 to 120 romances a month, and rents a climate-controlled storage space for her collection of close to 4,000 Harlequin novels. "Could I survive without romance novels? Probably," she says, tentatively.

"Romance reading is sort of a subculture," explains *Romantic Times* publisher Kathryn Falk. "These women make lists, keep notebooks; their

husbands build special rooms for them [to store their books]."

No company is profiting more from the romance binge than Torstar's Harlequin, which has an 80% share of the market of so-called series romances, the largest segment of the genre. Harlequin developed the concept of series romances in the 1970s, when Lawrence Heisey, a former Procter & Gamble soap marketer, was president. Heisey decided that with thousands of titles coming out each year, books might sell more easily if they had recognizable brand names, like detergents—and like such earlier publishing successes as the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew books.

Thus, although Harlequin comes out with some 60 new titles in 12 series every month, the books within each series all look alike. The Harlequin Presents books, for example, all have the same white cover, the same prominent script logo and the same cover design with a circular inset showing a loving couple. And they're usually displayed in specially marked racks in bookstores, supermarkets, drugstores and other retail outlets. Last year Harlequin supported its brand name by spending \$8 million on advertising and promotion. By contrast, competitor Dell spent one-fifteenth as much promoting its single-title romances.

Does not include reviews

"In general, book publishing is not a particularly profitable business," says David Galloway, co-chief executive of Torstar. "But publishing the way Harlequin does it is quite a profitable business." Last year Harlequin reported operating profits of \$44 million on revenues of \$300 million.

Harlequin is the industry's low-cost producer. Why is every book in the Harlequin Presents series (1,471 to date) 192 pages long? Because one page less or more would create paper waste in purchasing and require extra setup time in printing. Shipping containers are the same size every month and are packed according to distributors' standing monthly orders. Most publishers, of course, receive orders on a title by title basis. Harlequin's first-time authors, meanwhile, are paid as little as \$2,500 as an advance.

Retailed at \$2.95 and up, Harlequin romances are cheaper than many women's magazines and are sold somewhat like magazines. Half of the books are sold in advance to the 400,000 members of Harlequin's book club, who sign up for at least four books a month in their favorite series. Torstar's Hickey figures that Harlequin's production efficiencies as a whole provide a 20% cost advantage over competitors—who charge almost twice as much for their books.

Harlequin hasn't always had the road to itself. In the early 1980s Simon & Schuster entered the romance series business with its Silhouette brand and quickly captured 35% of the market, to Harlequin's 44%, according to *Publishers Weekly*. So in 1984 the Canadians swallowed up their competitor. Harlequin's lawyers calmed the Department of Justice's antitrust concerns by arguing that Harlequin's effective share of market is much lower than it appears, because its series romances compete against all other mass-market paperbacks.

For all its market share and profitability, Harlequin must remain agile. The market is changing. For the last few years, series romance sales in North America have been gradually declining, while single-title romances—with their longer and more complex plots—have picked up readers from both series and mainstream women's fiction.

Harlequin's solution: In April it

Pinup boy

WHO'S THE fairest of them all to romance readers? Fabio. Sigh.

Fabio, with his bulging pecs and long, flowing blond hair, is the preeminent cover boy of romance novels. You've seen him on the crowded paperback racks: He's one of those handsome hunks clutching a breathless beauty to his chest. "It's kind of hard to miss him when you're pushing the shopping cart down the aisle," coos



Fabio plies his trade
Get the smelling salts.

Colleen Quinn, a reader from Phoenix, Ariz.

Fabio modeled for over 100 romance covers last year, earning about \$200,000. "Women—zey are ze biggest market, as far as money," muses Italian-born Fabio, 31, while sipping cranberry juice in a hotel bar, his low-cut tank top exposing his famous, freshly shaved, tanned chest.

Fabio Lanzoni, an engineer's son, was a 21-year-old, 6-foot-4 body build-

er and model when he came to the U.S. to join Ford Models' roster. Ford sent him on his first romance cover job in 1987. Love letters poured in from readers, and more covers followed. Fabio's blond tresses and rippling biceps increase book sales by up to 40%—at least according to his aggressive promoter Peter Paul.

Aware they've tapped into something potentially lucrative, Fabio and Paul hope to transform Fabio from just another pretty face into a miniconglomerate. Three months ago they launched the Fabio Hotline, a 1-900 phone line that allows lovestruck Fabio fans to hear his "innermost" views on romance. (Example: "What I prefer is ze inside beauty, not ze outside beauty.") At \$1.99 a minute, the 1-900 number brought in \$25,000 from 8,000 calls in its first two months. Paul boasts that revenues will increase twentyfold with two new lines and more advertising.

Soon there will be Fabio T shirts and Fabio books—he recently signed a three-book deal with Avon to write his own romance novels. He's getting an advance of over \$100,000—some 20 times what a typical first-time romance writer gets—although established authors snipe that Fabio's books undoubtedly will be ghostwritten.

Fabio is also negotiating for a role in a \$25 million action movie. If everything falls into place, predicts manager Paul, Fabio's income will approach \$4 million next year.

—D.W.L. and M.R.

No room on the rack

LITERARY SNOBS may not take romance novels seriously, but the Justice Department does. Economists there are now examining whether to allow Toronto's Harlequin to purchase New York's Zebra Books. By some calculations, the combination would give the Canadians an estimated 85% share of the romance series market.

The economists should look into how Harlequin treats its authors. With few exceptions, Harlequin authors are required to write under a pseudonym. If they switch to another publishing house, Harlequin contends, they must leave their pseudonym—and their following—behind.

No other publisher regularly follows this practice, which surprises David Galloway, chief executive of Torstar Corp., owner of Harlequin. "You spend an awful lot of money building an author, and then she goes," says Galloway. "Fine, let her write for another house—



Harlequin (left) and Zebra: affianced
Will the Justice Department allow this union?

and let them spend the money to develop her name."

Now that more romance authors are breaking into the mainstream fiction market, the rights to an author's name and creations have new economic significance. Once an author makes it into hardcover, some publishers may be willing to pay a lot for her backlist. Most publishing houses allow a book's rights to revert to its author after it has been out of print for several months. But Harlequin

makes its writers wait seven years.

Why do authors put up with all this? "There's no alternative," says a Harlequin author and official of Novelists Inc., a group of about 400 writers.

Sources say Justice Department economists are working hard to pin down Harlequin's future market share. Torstar's annual report says: "Harlequin and Silhouette titles continue to enjoy . . . a combined market share of more than 80%." Distancing himself from that

claim, Harlequin President Brian Hickey says the "relevant market" isn't just romance series but all mass market paperbacks, where Harlequin's share is 13%.

What are the chances of Harlequin's using its distribution power to raise prices? Probably pretty good. The biggest hurdle for new entrants into romance publishing is competition for rack space in retail outlets. Over 500 new mass market titles every month vie for 200 pockets in the large supermarket racks. If Harlequin's purchase of Zebra goes through, Harlequin's competitors say it will be harder than ever to win rack space for their books.

There may yet be a happy ending à la Harlequin novel. As Harlequin's guidelines for writers say: "The plot's momentum should be generated by the conflicts, yearnings, doubts, and possible alternative paths that confront the protagonists during their growing relationship."

—D.W.L. and M.R. ■

announced its intention to buy small (revenues, \$40 million) Zebra Books of New York. Zebra has only about 5% of the overall romance market, but in addition to series romances, it publishes single-title romances and hardcovers, making it the fastest-growing publisher of romances. Its principal owner is Walter Zacharius, 68, who says his experience in "sophisticated men's magazines" (*Swank*, *Gallery* and other skin mags he has published) helped Zebra achieve wide distribution through a wholesale and retail network that magazines and mass market paperbacks share.

Harlequin and other publishers agree that the future of the romance

market lies with single titles. They've watched authors like Danielle Steel develop enough of a name and a large enough audience to break from supermarket paperbacks into mainstream hardcovers. Steel's novels now have paperback print runs of 2.5 million to 3.5 million copies, as against 100,000 to 200,000 for series romances. Janet Dailey started with Harlequin in 1978 and moved on to writing single titles for Pocket Books. Now she writes hardcover romances for Little, Brown, but they are on the *New York Times* bestseller list and command \$2 million apiece.

If Harlequin consummates its takeover of Zebra, only a dozen other

romance publishers will remain—among them, Avon, Dell and Berkley Publishing Group—each with a small piece of the remaining romance biz. Will its market power enable Harlequin to jack up book prices without depressing demand, as some people fear (see box above)?

To judge by hard-core romance addicts like Harriet Klausner, a mere price increase wouldn't be enough to cool off romance readers. "You can't go by the price, because the personal satisfaction is too great," Klausner explains patiently. "When I started buying romances, we were making \$15,000 a year. I didn't buy clothes, but I bought romance novels." ■