The Contemporary Anglophone Romance Genre

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Summary

The romance genre is geared financially to a female readership worldwide: a genre written and consumed overwhelmingly by women, and with a male readership of around 14 percent. Since the 21st century, romance novels have generated over $1.3 billion dollars in sales per annum in the United States, where one out of four books sold and one out of two mass-market books sold are romance novels. According to romance publishing behemoth Harlequin Mills & Boon, the company publishes 120 new titles each month, drawing from a stable of 200 authors within the UK and a further 1,300 worldwide. A Mills & Boon volume is sold every four seconds in more than one hundred countries, translated into twenty-six languages. But the romance genre consists of more than Harlequin Mills & Boon novels. According to industry definitions in the United States and Australia, a romance novel consists of “a central love story” and “an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending” (Romance Writers of America website). As long as these two basic requirements are met, romance novels can have any tone or style (barring a mocking or derisive one) and be set in any time (past, present, or future) or place (in the real world or in a fantasyland). They may include varying degrees of sensuality, from the modest discretion of Christian “inspirationals” to highly explicit descriptions of sexual acts in romantic erotica. They may also overlap with any other genre, such as chick lit, historical, crime, suspense, or thriller. The roots of the romance novel can be traced back to Shakespearean comedies, with the celebratory betrothal of the romantic couple forming the happy ending of such plays as Much Ado About Nothing, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, or As You Like It. In prose fiction, Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740), Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813), and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) are considered literary forebears. The modern romance was shaped by British publishing firm Mills & Boon, which became a market leader in the genre by the 1930s with a distribution network in all British Commonwealth countries and colonies in the first half of the 20th century. During the 1950s, Mills & Boon novels began to be distributed in North America by Canadian firm Harlequin, and the two companies merged in 1971 to form the romance publishing powerhouse Harlequin Mills & Boon, which had its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s when it became the world’s largest publisher of romances, having 80 percent of the...
world’s market share of fiction. Over time, the genre changed its representations of gender and attitudes toward women’s work and domestic life. The 1970s and 1980s saw a gradual Americanization of the genre as New York firms muscled in on Harlequin Mills & Boon’s territory, publishing historical romances and diversifying contemporary romances to include American romantic protagonists, settings, and themes. The genre also became increasingly sexualized during this period through its depiction of sexual activity. The turn of the 21st century witnessed an increasing fragmentation of the genre as the rise of independent publishers afforded writers and readers the opportunity to explore niche markets: erotica, African American stories, paranormal romances featuring vampires, phoenixes, and werewolves, among other shapeshifting romantic protagonists, and many others.

Keywords: romance novel, romantic fiction, love, heroes, heroines, women, gender, sexuality, Harlequin Mills & Boon

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