

## PAPERBACK ROMANCE

by Rob Imes

Prior to April 2018, my knowledge of romance novels was next to nil. I'd never actually bought one before, unless you count a few Gothic romance novels from the 1960s that I got at a garage sale when I was in high school, hoping that they might be like the *Dark Shadows* TV show, but never actually read and later got rid of. During my near-weekly ritual of digging through the used books at local thrift stores and library sales, I ignored the romance novels. It's not that I was opposed to the genre, since I'd bought romance *comic books* before and wished that they were being done today. But at least the comics had the artwork to interest me; I assumed that the novels had little to offer, even as collectibles for the purpose of reselling. Romance novels are often dismissed as sappy, sub-literate fluff, including by many women at whom they are aimed. Some criticize the books from a feminist perspective as reinforcing unhealthy societal attitudes about relationships and gender roles. For social historians, they can be a window into the times in which they appeared. But for those who read and write them, romance novels are a moment of pure pleasure and escapist fun to be enjoyed.

A couple months ago, I noticed that a local thrift store had a lot of vintage romance novels, from the 1960s to early 1980s, that appeared to have originally belonged to one owner. As often happens, an elderly person passes away and their book collection ends up being donated to Goodwill or Salvation Army. And usually the thrift store has no idea of the value or age of the thing and dumps it in a bin where the item which provided pleasure for so many decades gradually gets mangled to death. So I picked out around 200 of the Gothic romance paperbacks from this lot, but left all the Harlequin romances behind since I didn't know if they were actually worth anything or not, even if they were from the 1960s. (It turned out that one of them was from 1949, and was the 8<sup>th</sup> Harlequin novel ever published.) I hated to see so many of those books piled atop each other in the store's huge plastic dump bin, but knew it would be quite a job to try and dig them all out. Then there would be the cost of buying them and the problem of storing them until they could be sold. Two days later, after doing some research online, I went back to the store having decided to buy them all, to basically rescue this unknown person's collection. I'd brought several empty boxes with me to put the books in, thinking that the total might come to around 500 books. In the end, I bought **1,267** paperback books that day. I've already listed and sold several hundred of them on eBay and have made back the money I spent on acquiring the collection. The owner's name was in most of the books, so I was able to learn that she passed away two years ago. Apparently her daughter donated the books to a senior center last year, but somehow they ended up at the thrift store instead. (Presumably the senior center took the books but decided they didn't need them.) Having so many romance novels in my possession has given me a new appreciation of the genre as now I'm able to see it through another's eyes.

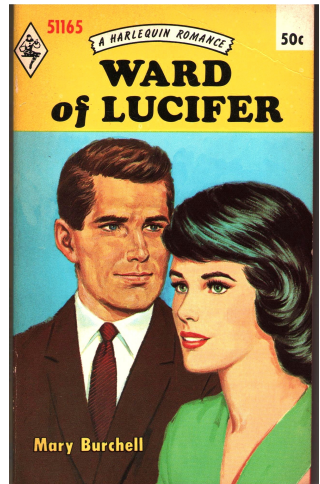
## A HISTORY OF HARLEQUIN

Harlequin Books, a Canadian company based in Toronto, began in Winnipeg in 1949 as a publisher of various genres, including romance. Eventually the romance books became their most popular releases, and so by the late 1950s most of the publisher's output was devoted to that genre with the others gradually phased out. Fortunately Harlequin's books were numbered from the beginning which makes sorting them easier (unless one prefers to shelve them according to author). By 1960, the 500<sup>th</sup> Harlequin book had been published; in 1966, book #1,000 was released. Until 1973, there was just this one Harlequin series to collect, which was known simply as *Harlequin Romance*.

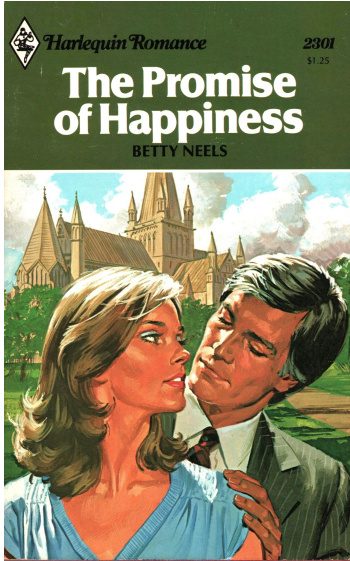
(A word on numbering: Sometimes you will see a Harlequin published between 1966 and 1972 that has a 5-digit serial number on the cover instead of a 4-digit number. These appear to be editions for the U.S. market, which were released a few months after their Canadian counterparts. The 5-digit number always begins with a 5, followed by the original 4-digit number. Thus, #51000 would actually be book #1000. Books below #1000 have a 5 and 2 in front of them in these 5-digit editions, so #999 is shown as #52999. In April 1972, beginning with #1577, Harlequin books were released simultaneously in the U.S. and Canada and the 5-digit variants were dropped.)

For most of the 1960s and 1970s, the romance books published by Harlequin were actually reprints of novels from a U.K. publisher called Mills & Boon. Harlequin became increasingly popular in the United States during this period despite their reliance on British writers whose locales, word usage and spelling may have been unfamiliar to the average American reader. Anne Mather was a popular writer whose first novel, *Caroline*, was published in 1965, but not printed in the U.S. until 1972 (by Pocket Books, as it happens, not Harlequin). On the first page, our two main characters enter “the lift” [elevator] and a few pages later another character mentions, “You've only been here a fortnight” – terms normally not used in the States.

While the text inside reflected its U.K. origin, Harlequin (and other publishers) offered original cover illustrations for the North American editions. The *Harlequin Romance* books retained the same cover format throughout the 1960s until 1977, with the title separated from the cover art in a block of color, and a little arch that read “A Harlequin Romance” perched above the book's title. Usually the focus was on a woman's face with a man in the background. The artwork has a charmingly old-fashioned style, which may have seemed out-of-date even then, with the men often shown wearing a suit and tie. (The sexy cowboy had not yet become a trend, perhaps due to the dominance of British authors at this time.) While minorities were becoming more visible in other media during the 1960s and 1970s, the same cannot be said for Harlequin romance novels, which remained uniformly white. The man in “The Man from Rhodesia”



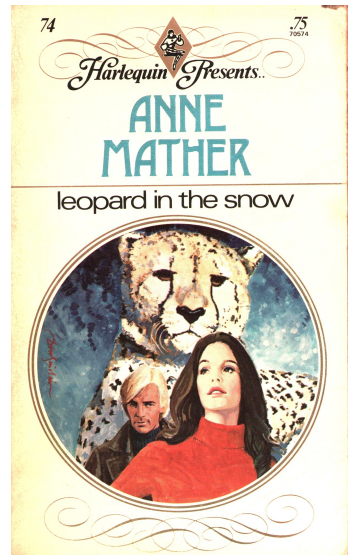
[#1063 from 1966], for example, is white. (At that time, whites were the ruling minority of that African nation, later known as Zimbabwe.)



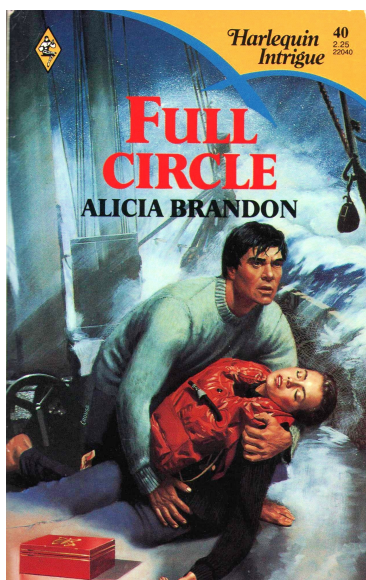
1977 ones (although now dated in their own way, looking more *Dynasty*).

In 1973, Harlequin began a second series of romance books titled *Harlequin Presents* that was intended to focus on their more popular writers like Anne Mather as well as being more contemporary and sexier, even though they were still all reprints of Mills & Boon books at this point. The *Harlequin Presents* cover layout, which it retains to this day, has the artwork in a circle surrounded by white. The art also had a more contemporary look, with the man and woman appearing more fashionable and hip. The 1974 book shown here, *Leopard in the Snow*, was made into a movie starring Keir Dullea in 1978 and plugged in the Harlequin books at the time as a Harlequin film. An American writer named Janet Dailey, whose first novel *No Quarter Asked* had been published by Mills & Boon in August 1974, regularly appeared in the *Harlequin Presents* series after that novel was reprinted in #124 (Jan. 1976). Soon each of Dailey's novels would be set in a different state in the Union, until she had written a novel taking place in each one, something no British romance writer would have attempted to do. Eventually more and more American writers would begin appearing in Harlequin books, reflecting the interests of their American readers.

As the 1970s wore on, male hair length gradually grew longer, though usually without mustaches or beards. Slightly longish feathered hair was the limit to which the romantic hero was willing to reflect the times in his appearance. In 1977, around book #2050, Harlequin's cover layout got an overhaul, dispensing with the little arch over the title and now simply labeled "Harlequin Romance" to make them look a little more contemporary. In late 1981, the cover format was altered to show the action inside a frame, and then in 1983 altered yet again to have the title within the cover illustration (not separated from it as before) and the Harlequin brand in a color strip at the top. As a result of these changes, the *Harlequin Romance* covers of the 1980s look less like a *Rex Morgan MD* comic strip than the pre-



Not all romance writers attempted to be more contemporary and modern in their approach. One of the most popular of the past few decades was Betty Neels, whose novels appeared in the *Harlequin Romance* series beginning with *Sister Peters in Amsterdam* (#1361) in 1970. Neels was known for the tamedness of her romances, with plain Janes falling for nice Dutch doctors. After her death in 2001, Harlequin reprinted most of her novels (sometimes more than once) in a paperback series titled *The Best of Betty Neels* that remains popular. In these later books, it's the author's name and not the cover art that is the main attraction, which signifies the importance of the writer in selling a book to the public. (This provides a clue as to why romance comics may have died out in the 1970s – along with the similar lack of success that westerns and mystery have had in the comic book medium. Such comics were often written anonymously and therefore their publishers were unable to build a fan following for them the way that, say, Harlequin was able to use popular writers like Anne Mather, Janet Dailey and Betty Neels to sell books.)



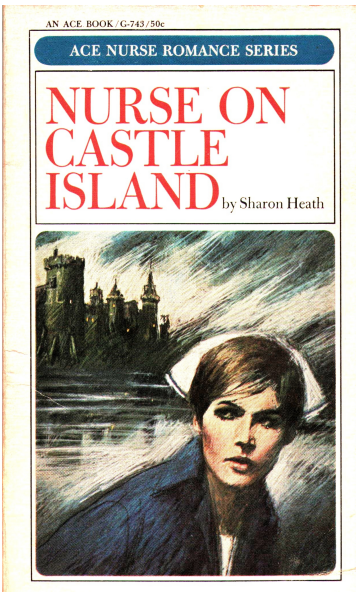
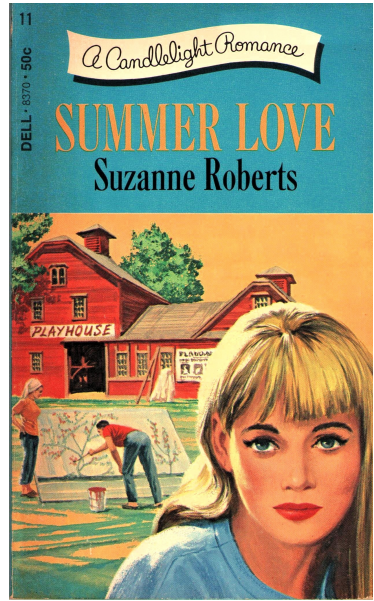
A *Harlequin's Collection* series was added to the lineup in 1976 that reprinted their earlier books (although with new numbering and new cover art). *Harlequin Mystique* (for “romantic suspense” novels by French authors) and *Harlequin Historical* (later retitled *Masquerade* with book #16) both debuted in 1977. Both *Masquerade* and *Mystique* ended in 1982, with book #90 and #164 respectively. A second short-lived *Harlequin Historical* series was attempted in 1986 but was canceled the following year. In 1988 a third series of *Harlequin Historical* began that is still being published, nearing the #1400 mark. In 1984 the romantic suspense series *Harlequin Intrigue* was introduced, which is also still published and will reach book #1800 before 2018 is over. *Harlequin Temptation* also debuted in 1984, ending with #1028 in 2005. In 1980, the *Harlequin Superromance* series started its run; these novels had more pages than the average Harlequin, allowing for more complexity (and a higher cover price). In 2018, Harlequin canceled five of their series, including the aforementioned *Harlequin Superromance* as well as *Harlequin Nocturne* (about paranormal romance) and *Kimani Romance* (a series for African-Americans that was the result of an acquisition of BET Books' romance lines in 2005). Gold Eagle Books, a division of Harlequin that published “men's adventure” series like *Mack Bolan*, closed down in 2015. Currently Harlequin publishes a wide range of series that include various sub-genres of “category romance” titles (as these various numbered series are called), including the Christian-based *Love Inspired* series which has its own sub-categories (like *Love Inspired Suspense*).



## ACE TO ZEBRA

Although Harlequin was (and is) the most successful romance publisher in North America, their competitors got in the game as well, publishers for whom romance was just another line of books among the various genres that they published. In 1967, Dell started their own “category romance” line called **Candlelight** that even looked like Harlequins, with the titles separated from the cover art in a block of color at the top of the book, and the words “A Candlelight Romance” floating in a banner above the title. (Historical romance novels had “A Candlelight Regency” banner instead.) The books were numbered simply in the corner, so you could collect them, too, just like Harlequins. While the page edges of Harlequins were red (until 1982), the Candlelight page edges were green. Since Harlequin had an arrangement with U.K. publisher Mills & Boon (and bought the company in 1971), Dell reprinted novels by U.K. publishers like Robert Hale, as well as the work of American writers like Arlene Hale (no relation). In 1980, Dell added a racier *Candlelight Ecstasy* series to compete with *Harlequin Presents*. (*Candlelight Ecstasy Supreme* was their *Harlequin Superromance*.)

Arlene Hale was also published by **Ace Books**, a publisher well-known to science fiction fans for their “Ace doubles” (two-in-one books) of the 1950s-60s. Less remembered is that Ace had a romance line, including an “Ace Nurse Romance Series” (as it was billed above the title of the books). Ace, like Dell, Belmont, Paperback Library and many other publishers, got in on the **Gothic Romance** trend in the mid-1960s – although evidently Ace believed themselves to be ahead of the trend as their later Gothics had a banner above the titles saying “Ace - First in Gothics.” Often the Gothic story involved a young woman being led to a remote mansion or castle where she would be alternately romantically involved or terrorized by a sinister/possibly murderous man. The covers of these tomes were remarkably similar, depicting a woman outside at night with a scary-looking house in the background, and one light in the window to show that she’s not alone. In some cases it was a nurse who



was called to these Gothic locations, to care for some eccentric/possibly insane homeowner. Based on the cover, *Nurse on Castle Island* (one of the Ace Nurse Romance Series) could just as easily have been an “Ace – First in Gothic” instead. The Gothic style cover could be placed on any type of story involving a frightened woman whether it had been written as a romance or not. *Doors to Death* by Lee Crosby, billed as “A Romantic Suspense Novel” when published by Belmont Books in 1965 with the typical Gothic lady-and-castle cover, had originally been published in 1941 as *Too Many Doors*, a murder mystery.

Lee Crosby, incidentally, was actually a woman named Ware Torrey Budlong, whose name appears on the copyright notice inside the book. Pseudonyms are rife in these novels. Anne Mather, for example, was a pen-name for Mildred Grieveson. The *Dark Shadows* novels were written by Marilyn Ross, who was actually a man named W. E. D. Ross; he also wrote Gothic romance novels under the names Dan Ross and Clarissa Ross, among others. (My copy of *Secret of Mallet Castle* is credited to Dan Ross on the front cover but to Clarissa Ross on the title page. I guess it's easy to get mixed up with so many aliases!)

**Lancer Books** was a name known to me since I was a child because they had published the first paperback book reprints of Marvel comics in 1966. Many fans also know Lancer for their 1960s Conan paperbacks. Less known is that they also published romance novels, particularly Gothics by writers like Phyllis A. Whitney. Many Lancers are easy to identify by the “Easy Eye” symbol on their covers indicating a larger typeface than normal for easier reading. In 1973, Lancer went out of business, replaced in 1975 by **Zebra Books**, an imprint of Kensington Publishing. Romance was Zebra's most successful genre and its main focus to this day.

The **Regency** subgenre of romance was popularized by Georgette Heyer (1902-1974) whose novels took place in England during the early 1800s. In the 1960s-70s, her novels were published in paperback by Bantam, Berkley Medallion and Fawcett Crest, among others. Signet Books had a long-running series titled *Signet Regency Romance* that ran from the 1970s until 2006.

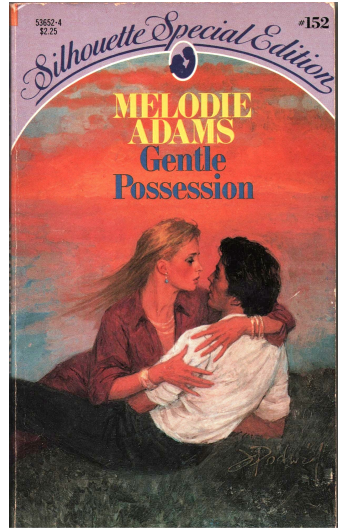
**Inspirational romance** novels had been around since the days of Grace Livingston Hill (1865-1947) and her novels were still being reprinted decades after her death. Christian writer Janette Oke's first novel, *Love Comes Softly*, was published by Bethany House in 1979. The growing popularity of this subgenre prompted Christian publisher Zondervan to begin the *Serenade Romance* line in 1984 to appeal to this untapped audience of religious romance readers.

Some publishers had romance lines built around a prolific author, in the same way that a writer like Louis L'Amour dominates westerns or Agatha Christie dominates mystery. Each author's books would be designed by their publishers to have similar covers, so that if you bought one you'd want to get the rest to complete the set (such as Bantam's *Barbara Cartland Library* series). Bantam also published paperbacks by Elizabeth Cadell, Grace Livingston Hill and Emilie Loring. Cartland was also published by Pyramid Books, who published Denise Robins. Fawcett Crest published Victoria Holt among others. Signet published Glenna Finley. Beagle Books published so many novels by Australian writer Lucy Walker that they started putting numbers on the covers. Unlike the Harlequin or Candlelight “category romance,” here the writer's name was the

selling-point to the public, eventually leading to novelists who became “brands” like Danielle Steel, Judith Krantz and Johanna Lindsey.

Nora Roberts' first novel was published in 1981 by **Silhouette Books**, a division of Simon & Schuster that began the year before in direct competition with Harlequin's romance line. Unlike Harlequin, Silhouette published many American writers (including Roberts, whose submissions to Harlequin had been rejected) and were so successful that Harlequin acquired Silhouette in 1984. The Silhouette titles were eventually absorbed into the Harlequin line; for example, the *Silhouette Special Edition* series that began in 1982 was renamed *Harlequin Special Edition* in April 2011, continuing the previous series' numbering and are still being published every month by Harlequin.

The 1980s saw the advent of so many publishers entering the field that it became known as “the romance wars.” *Loveswept* was Bantam's numbered romance series that began in 1983, producing over 900 books in the series until its demise in 1999. The *Loveswept* books, known for their quirky plots, had an editorial page at the end of each book, where the editor communicated directly to the readers about the line. Writers like Janet Evanovich wrote *Loveswept* novels before becoming well-known.



## COLLECTING ROMANCE NOVELS

For such a popular genre, information about vintage romance novels is sketchy on the net. For example, the above-mentioned Silhouette Books doesn't even have a Wikipedia page. There is a brief page for it at [www.romancewiki.com](http://www.romancewiki.com) but even that user-generated site specializing in romance novels is vastly incomplete. The literature index site [www.fictiondb.com](http://www.fictiondb.com) has lists of romance books which is useful when trying to get a handle on how many titles were published in a given series. (This site has the only index of the Dell *Candlelight Romance* series that I've seen.) The [bookscans.com](http://bookscans.com) website shows the front covers of many paperback books prior to 1980. Longtime comics dealer Doug Sulipa's webpage at <http://dougcomicworld.com/inventory/INVENTORY-HarlequinPaperbacksSite.html> provides some good info for the beginner, listing the titles and authors of *Harlequin Romance* #1 to #2000 (1949 to 1976). Clearly a romance novel equivalent of the Grand Comics Database would fill a void for collectors of this genre.

If you decide to collect romance novels, the good news is that most of them aren't expensive to obtain. I'm not exactly a romance collector myself, despite having acquired this instant collection of them. (All the scans in this article are taken from my own copies.) But I'm glad to have found a new appreciation for a genre that I previously ignored and hope that I've helped to share some of that knowledge here.