

PAPERBACK ROMANCE

by Rob Imes

Before last month, 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, even by many women at whom they are aimed. Others 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 fun to be enjoyed.

A couple weeks 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 8th Harlequin novel ever published.) I hated to see so many of those books dumped in the store's dump bin of books, 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 a few 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.

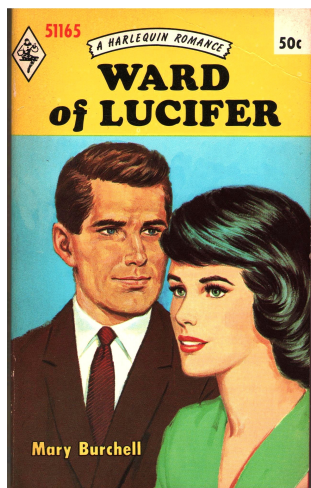
A HISTORY OF HARLEQUIN

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 500th 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*.

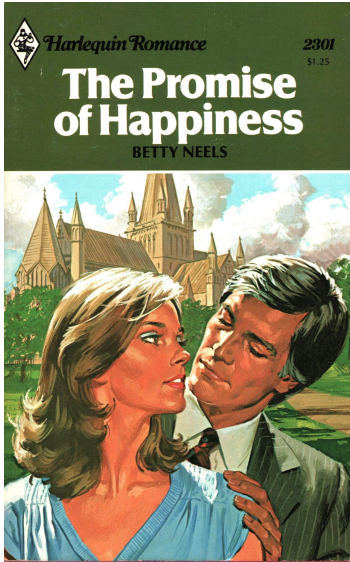
(A word on numbering: Sometimes you will see a Harlequin published between 1966 and 1972 that has a 5-digit serial number on the cover instead of a 4-digit number. These appear to be editions for the U.S. market, which were released a few months after their Canadian counterparts. The 5-digit number always 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, U.S. publishers offered original cover illustrations for the 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”



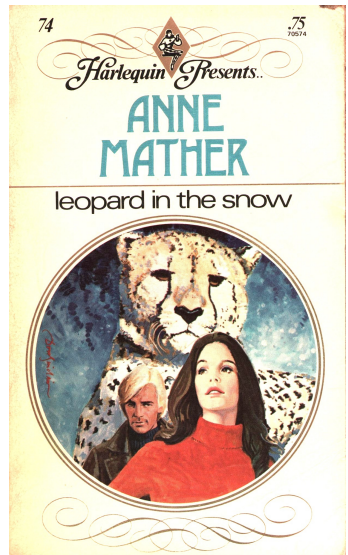
[#1063 from 1966], for example, is white -- a member of the ruling minority of that African nation later known as Zimbabwe.



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* panel than the pre-1977

ones (although now dated in their own way, looking more *Knots Landing*).

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.

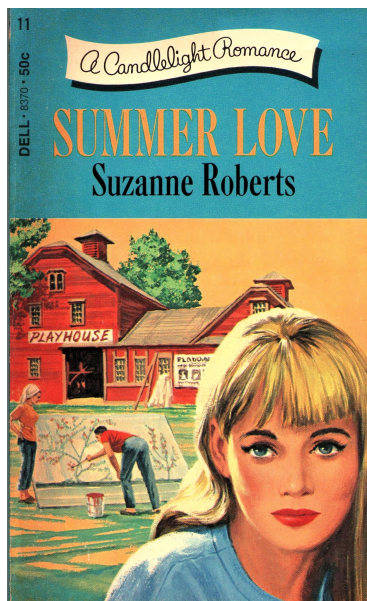


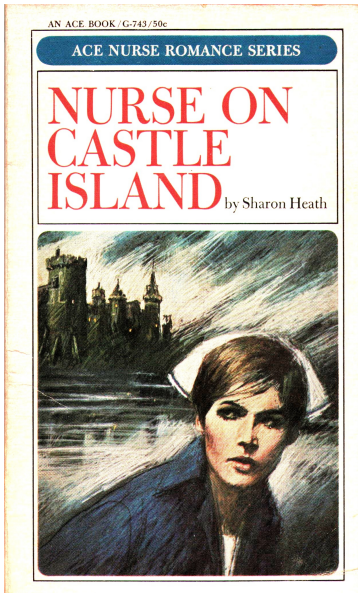
Not all romance writers attempted to be more contemporary and modern in their approach. One of the most popular of the past few decades was Betty Neels, whose novels appeared in the *Harlequin Romance* series beginning with *Sister Peters in Amsterdam* (#1361) in 1970. Neels was known for the tamedness 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, science fiction 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.)

By the late 1970s, in addition to the *Harlequin Romance* and *Harlequin Presents* series, Harlequin began a *Harlequin's Collection* series in 1976 which reprinted their earlier books (but confusingly this series contains its own numbering), *Harlequin Mystique* (for “romantic suspense” novels) and *Harlequin Historical* (later called *Masquerade*), both debuting in 1977. Currently Harlequin publishes a wide range of series that include various sub-genres within the general romance category.

ACE TO ZEBRA

Although Harlequin was 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 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*.





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.” Basically the Gothic 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

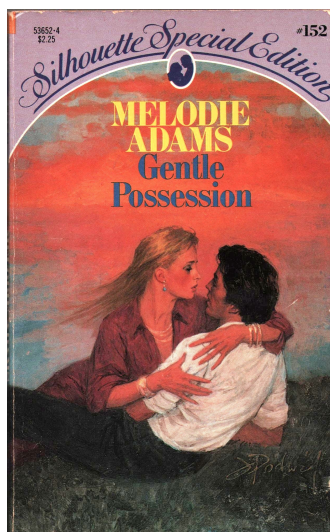
scary-looking house in the background, often with one light in the window to show that she's not alone. In some cases it was a nurse who was called to these Gothic locations, to care for some eccentric/possibly insane homeowner. Based on the cover, *Nurse on Castle Island* (one of the Ace Nurse Romance 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 Woman Afraid whether it had been written as a romance or not. For example, *Doors to Death* by Lee Crosby (a woman whose real name was Ware Torrey Budlong), billed as “A Romantic Suspense Novel” when published by Belmont in 1965, and having the typical Gothic lady-and-castle cover, had originally been published in 1941 as *Too Many Doors*, a murder mystery.

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, publishing popular authors such as Janet Dailey.

Some publishers had romance lines built around a particular prolific author, in the same way that a writer like Louis L'Amour dominates westerns or Agatha Christie dominates mystery. 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. Bantam also published paperbacks by Elizabeth Cadell, Barbara Cartland, Grace Livingston

Hill and Emilie Loring. Cartland was also published by Pyramid Books, who also published Denise Robins. Fawcett Crest published Victoria Holt among others. Signet published Glenna Finley and other writers. Beagle Books published so many novels by Australian writer Lucy Walker that they started putting numbers on the covers. 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. As with other genres, the writer's name became the selling point to the public, eventually leading to best-selling novelists like Danielle Steel, Judith Krantz and Nora Roberts.

Nora Roberts' first novel was published in 1981 by **Silhouette Books**, a division of Simon & Schuster that began the year before in direct competition to 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's parent company 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 published regularly today.



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 but even that user-generated site specializing in romance novels is vastly incomplete. The literature index site 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.) Surprisingly 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 do 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.) I'm going to sell off most of these books on eBay in the coming weeks, but I think I will keep a few of them that look interesting. I'm glad to have a new appreciation for a genre that I previously ignored and hope that I've helped to share some of that knowledge here.