

Musings from a convicted Harlequin addict

By Samantha Brennan
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Enter the world of Harlequin Romances.

Welcome to a world of travel, love and adventure, where young orphaned women meet strong capable men. Girls meets boy. Girl hates boy. Girl loves boy and finally boy loves girl. It's a world of fantasy and, right or wrong, it's an escape many women need.

For Susan, a 20 year old Dalhousie University student, Harlequins are a much needed break from a stream of essays, tests and papers. She's living far away from home and in need of emotional support. On Sunday afternoons she often picks up her room-mate's most recent Harlequin (she says she'd never buy one) and relaxes for an hour in mindless adventure.

Susan is not alone. Thousands of women read Harlequin Romances. But the negative and stereotypical portrayal of women in Harlequins has feminists asking why women read them at all. The inadequacy of existing research on this subject has some feminist academics giving Harlequins a fresh look.

Angela Miles a sociology professor at St. Francis Xavier university in Nova Scotia, says recently "came out" as a Harlequin reader and is touring the lecture circuit to talk about her experiences and ideas.

She says understanding why women need and read romance is essential to an understanding of women's lives. Miles believes the deeply emotional experience of Harlequin reading is about love, not sex; nurturing, not seducing; and mother love rather than male hero worship.

Miles says that her interests in Harlequins made her look for other feminist work on the issue. When she found it,

she says it was disappointing. "Feminists just haven't applied the feminist principle of using your own experience when dealing with Harlequin romances."

Instead she found essays that talked about how horrible Harlequins were without asking why women read them. Miles says the feminists who actually did talk to Harlequin readers still treated them as an other, an alien species.

"We all recognize the faint echo of the myth of knight in shining armour riding off on the white horse. What is it about this myth that attracts women?"

When speaking in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia her lecture, "Confessions of a Harlequin Reader" attracted a crowd about as unusual as the lecture topic itself. Sitting in a semi-circle around Miles were feminist academics, women Harlequin readers and one male aspiring Harlequin writer anxious to meet his readers.

"You don't have to do a lot of research to find out that Harlequin's message is that your life has no meaning without a man."

She admits it's no surprise feminists are upset with Harlequins and the myths of women's powerlessness they perpetuate. But Miles says we must take the question further and ask what it is about the Harlequin romance that is so attractive to women.

"I have been "out" as a Harlequin reader for awhile now," says Miles. She says she realized she was addicted to the Harlequin experience when, in the middle of her PhD thesis, she wanted to go home and read a Harlequin romance. She says the turning point came when she actually considered buying one.

Miles said as a feminist she realized the personal is political and couldn't accept making Harlequins an

unquestioned area of her life.

She says this led to her asking the question — "If they are so bad, why am I reading them; and if they're not, why can't I tell my friends?" This is when I knew I had to "come out" as a Harlequin reader, said

what was so attractive to women, including herself. She says she found that the male hero in Harlequin romances, the knight in shining armour, is a mother image. The male hero may be arrogant but he's also self-sufficient, strong and nur-

the male hero as someone who washes the heroine's feet, tucks her in bed and buttons up her coat. The woman is childlike and submissive. Miles says it's significant that the heroine in Harlequins is usually an orphan living in the home of the male hero.

Miles says you can pick up any Harlequin Romance to find examples of these characters. She's right. "The Turn of the Tide", a Harlequin Romance by Samantha Day tells the tale of Stefanie Hart, a woman who recently left her job and is vacationing in Nanaimo, B.C. Stefanie is an orphan without family or friends and she's getting away from a shattered romance.

Enter Jesse Stuart — the older man. He mistakes Stefanie for a teenage girl and this is the basis for their romance. She plays the part of the young impetuous girl anxious to learn and he is only too willing to teach her:

"She sat quietly, an embarrassed flush staining her cheeks. After last night she was all too aware that she deserved the censure she could hear in his voice. To her surprise, he reached across the table and touched her clenched hand with gentle fingers ... 'Just make sure your don't do it again,' he said severely, then flashed her a wide smile."

Only later when she falls in love with Jess does Stefanie realize that it's essential she tell Jess her real age. The book chronicles Jess' many attempts to care for Stefanie — he's saved her from drowning, given her tours of the beach and even cooked meals for her. Fantasy.

This is the key to the Harlequin experience — fantasy and emotion.

"She's on an emotional roller coaster ride created by the writers," says Miles.

She says the heroine moves from resistance to love to rejection and then to recon-

ciliation.

Both Harlequin romances and mother-child relationships contain this mix of nurturing and dominance, Miles says.

Miles is quick to reject the theory that women have a psychological need to reconcile conflict with their mother. Instead she says Harlequins can act as a psychological "lever" to ease pressure in difficult times.

Claire Harrison is a writer of Harlequin Romances. While Harrison also says emotion is the key to the Harlequin, she says the genre has changed considerably since feminists began attacking it for its portrayal of women as helpless and unsuccessful without a man.

Harrison says the Harlequin heroine is now older, sophisticated, smart and well able to support herself. But she admits that the details of the heroine's life aren't that important to the overall book.

"What's important is that the emotional terrain between the two has to be mapped out precisely ... Who cares what the heroine's career is, what the hero's career is?" Harrison says.

On the last page of "The Turn of the Tide", Jess turns to Stefanie as they lie in bed. "Marry me soon, love," he murmurs. "Very soon." The fantasy is complete, for Harlequins rarely tell what happens after the kiss and inevitable proposal.

They're nice books about nice people leading nice lives. Says Harrison, "It has to be a nice world. The readers don't want to read about a world where there is cancer and the threat of nuclear war or inflation."

And although readers, writers, and analysts all agree Harlequins are an escapist fantasy, as Miles says, they're better than other routes women use to escape like valium or alcohol.

with files from the Charlatan



Miles.

"I didn't send out cards," she says. "But I dropped it into the conversation whenever I could." She says she watched herself finding ways to defend her habit.

"I asked them (my friends) what is wrong with women fantasizing about finding love, never doing housework and seeing exotic places?" But still these reasons failed to satisfy her questions.

Miles says she began to look at the dialogue and plot of Harlequins to find out

turing, says Miles.

"One thing Harlequins are about is not having to mother men, which is something married women know lots about. If you're looking for mothering you turn to Harlequins."

She says Harlequins are able to provide women with emotional rewards society fails to provide them — love, affection and nurturing. These are things we associate with our mother, says Miles.

Using dozens of quotes from Harlequin, Miles shows

WUSC Referendum

By Michael Zineck

At last Tuesday night's Council meeting the local WUSC committee made a presentation to Student Council to have a referendum question put on next week's election ballots.

Joe Byrne backed up his request for a referendum on the issue of levying an additional \$2.00 per student fee, which will be used to support two refugee students staying at UPEI, by presenting a petition signed by 350 students supporting the issue.

After some discussion on the wording of the actual referendum question, it was passed by a near unanimous vote.

However, Councillor Steve Zakem abstained on the grounds that he did not want to start a precedent of groups coming to the student council and asking for referendum questions to be placed on election ballots.

However the other councillors disagreed with coun-

cillor Zakem, as they had done moments before when he had tried to move the discussion on the referendum question to an in-camera session.

Dr. Ralph Hazleton, who is the WUSC local committee faculty advisor, said after the vote "I hope that this trend will continue at other

I am in favour of instituting an annual \$2 fee per student, to be collected by the UPEI Student Union. The additional fee will be used to establish a permanent fund to support United Nations refugees attending UPEI. The fund will be administered by the WUSC local committee.

Yes _____ No _____

Canadian universities."

If the referendum should pass, UPEI will be the second

university in Canada to have a refugee fund. Recently the University of British Columbia

passed a similar referendum which will raise almost \$15,000 a year for their fund.

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