

Bringing the romance novel home

The small red paper heart looked incongruous on the brick exterior wall of Toronto's First Unitarian Church. It was the first of a trail of hearts leading to the church basement. There, chattering women unstacked chairs and set out cookies and coffee. The scene looked like a ladies' social—but it was in fact a meeting of the six-month-old Ontario chapter of the Romance Writers of America (RWA), the first Canadian offshoot of the Texas-based organization. Its emergence signals the growing Canadian presence in a lucrative \$250-million international industry that churns out formula paperback tales of star-crossed love. Last month 23 Canadian delegates attended the RWA convention in Minneapolis, Minn. And their ranks are increasing, as more Canadians try—in best romance novel tradition—to turn their fantasies into something lasting and real.

In 1975 Halifax writer Jill MacLean published *To Trust My Love* with the Toronto-based Harlequin Books Ltd., thereby breaking into a list dominated by English authors and becoming the first North American to place a title with the giant of romance fiction publishing. Now, the two largest publishers of the form are Harlequin and New York City's Silhouette Books, which Harlequin bought in 1984. Both are owned by Torstar Corp. and count 35 Canadian romance writers on their book lists—including six members of the Ontario chapter of the RWA. Meanwhile, hundreds of would-be chroniclers of heartbreak and happy endings are plugging into a coast-to-coast network of romance writers' workshops and even college courses. Said Karen Solem, editorial director of Silhouette Books: "We have 12 Canadian writers and we are getting many more Canadian submissions."

Canada's successful romance novelists are now exporting their works to many of the 98 countries where Harlequins and the like are sold. And they are helping to change dramatically the face of what was once a genteel British craft. Until MacLean's book appeared as a Harlequin, the company was basically a reprint house for British publisher Mills & Boon, whose star writers

were a handful of somewhat prudish Englishwomen. Their works typically featured 18-year-old virginal governesses pursued by handsome, middle-aged millionaires through exotic locales. Then, in 1980, mindful of North America's growing appetite for novels that more accurately reflected society after the sexual revolution, New York City's powerful publishing house Simon & Schuster Inc. decided to launch Silhouette. Harlequin swiftly followed with its own

older, career-oriented heroines, sensitive, vulnerable heroes, explicit sex, North American settings and plots, whose fast pace owed more to television than to stately gothic novels.

While many romance writers continue to set their novels in such places as Greece or the Amazon jungle, others have discovered that North American locales can seem exotic to readers who have never been there. In *Risk Factor*, by Naomi Horton—a pseudonym for Toronto writer Susan Horton—a deserted Cape Breton Island beach is the scene for an exchange of searing kisses between financial adviser Jarrett Ames and artist Robyn St. Claire.

The cover of *Out of Wedlock* by Sandra Field—a pseudonym for MacLean—shows blond, beautiful Ashley MacCulloch embracing handsome landowner Michael Gault against a background of sheep-dotted Nova Scotia hills. And Ottawa author Claire Harrison has set *Diplomatic Affair* in the Canadian Embassy in Washington, involving the hero, ambitious diplomat Chris Blake, and the heroine, Dr. Rachel Sims, in torrid romance amid free trade talks.

Currently, the market is failing to expand as fast as the ranks of Canadian writers seeking to penetrate it. Some of the publishers who began five years ago have since gone bankrupt or been discontinued, while survivors concentrate on publishing the authors they know. Silhouette receives 400 queries from writers each month. But last year out of 312 books it published, only 40 were by new writers. Still, editors at both Harlequin and Silhouette say that they continue to seek more Canadian authors.

That encourages hopefuls to keep pouring their fantasies onto paper. Caroline Jantz, who works as a secretary/receptionist in a Vancouver law office, is the author of *Separate Lives*, to be published by Harlequin in October. She is currently at work on a new manuscript. Said Jantz: "If this can happen to me, it can happen to others. You just need a dream and a lot of perseverance." Even outside the magic realm of romance fiction, it seems, happy endings are sometimes possible.

—CYNTHIA BROUSE in Toronto



Out of Wedlock cover: explicit sex

North American-oriented publishing lines.

A score of imitators sprang up, and the writer's market burgeoned. Said Harlequin public relations director Katherine Orr: "Suddenly, here was this incredible cottage industry for women. One author called it 'the most money I can make outside of selling myself in bed.'" The lust to join the new profession ran high. In fact, in June, 1981, at the first convention of the newly formed Romance Writers of America in Houston, Tex., some literary agents and editors complained of being harassed in their hotel rooms and even in public washrooms by manuscript-waving delegates. Still, many such enthusiasts got published. And they began to introduce radical elements to their chosen literary form: