

The Mag

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Harlequin fantasies degrade women

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Each year American women buy an estimated 100 million Harlequin Romance novels. This works out to about two Harlequins a year for every adult woman in the country, excluding all the used copies picked up at garage sales and second-hand bookstores or copies passed from one friend to another.

Although the average reader is a 35-year-old woman, it is not uncommon to see the romances, usually in paperback form, in the hands of almost any person who can read.

A closer study of the formula and characters of these novels shows a frightening disregard for the image of women in society. The novels solidify and stagnate negative images of male-female relationships and sexuality, especially by creating distorted images of how these relationships should function.

REVIEW B!O!O!K

Harlequins have been called pornography for women. Critics say the books exploit female sexuality. Scenes that can be described as nothing short of rape are common in the romances. This domineering, hulking, lustful portrayal of men is harmful enough, but the books go even further by implying that women have no sexuality of their own except that brought out by lustful men.

"Castles Of Sand," of the Harlequin Presents series, written by Anne Mather, follows the typical formula for the romances. Like most other Harlequins, the book vividly portrays relationships between the hero and heroine that are derogatory toward women and their sexuality.

In this novel Ashley, the heroine, is portrayed as a woman unsure of her emotions, constantly questioning her feelings for Alain, the hero. She is young, good-looking and intelligent. A big problem for her is her desire for happiness with Alain, yet a strong desire for virtue and respect.

Alain is older than Ashley, strong virile, very successful in a man's world, yet violent, angry and seemingly with little control of his emotions where Ashley is concerned.

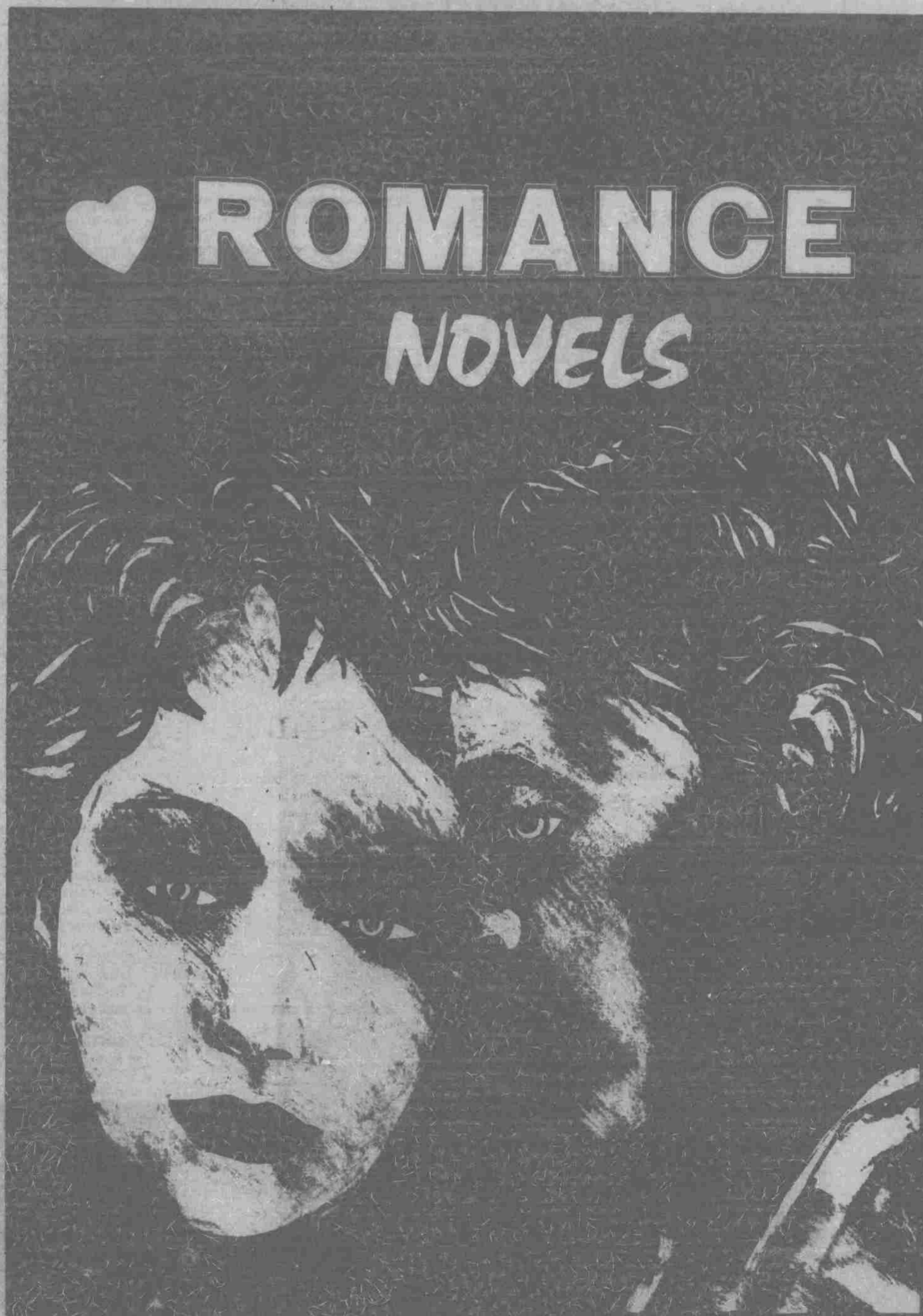
"You try my patience too far," he muttered, his hands curving about her shoulders, as if he would like to take hold of her and squeeze her until she cried for mercy. But he didn't. His hands balled into fists at his sides as he fought the urge to touch her . . ." (pages 84 and 85).

It is frightening to note that in most of the heated confrontations between Ashley and Alain, he uses physical violence in some form, whether it is grabbing her or inflicting pain in some way.

" . . . his hand reaching out almost against his will, and twining compulsively in her hair," (page 145).

In this one he actually bites her, " . . . as his teeth fastened on the tender lobe of her ear, and he bit it. She winced . . . as she added unevenly: 'Do you enjoy inflicting pain?'" (page 33).

Each of the above scenes are clearly acts of violence against Ashley, yet the author and Ashley treat them as a matter of course. They seem to be reinforcing these acts as proper ways for a man and woman to function toward one another.



Mike Lawlor/Daily Nebraskan

The proponents of the Harlequins say the books are popular because they act as counter valuation. In our society, men have all the power, or at least the vast majority of it. Men are dominant in politics, economics, physical strength and most areas of life.

Women have family, sensitivity and sexuality in their stereotyped corner. These romance fantasies make the weaker side stronger. Sexuality is more important than economics. This, proponents say, is satisfying to women and good for them.

Even if that point is conceded, must the Harlequins do so at the expense of a woman's control over her own sexuality? The romances give power to women, but while doing so, they reinforce socially acceptable brutal sex acts against women. They even go so far as to seemingly condone rape because it's what the woman wants anyway. "Castles . . ." exemplifies this when an actual disguised rape occurs: "Then he jerked her against him, her slim naked body against him . . ." (page 150).

Then, for a couple of pages, she questions, in

her mind, how she feels about him. Also, she admits to herself that she wants him, at least physically, but she is scared to give in lest he spurn her later. Hence, the formulaic principle of not giving in until she has "captured" her man.

Still later, the actual sex act in which she is "swept away:" . . . and what began as a bitter assault changed eagerly to a mutual supplication." (page 159).

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