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Harlequin . . .

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This is obviously a rape scene. The frightening thing is that Ashley is portrayed as almost wanting "it." This is an awful image to put into the minds of America's women. Where is the power for women that proponents of Harlequins speak of?

The image is that the poor woman succumbed to superior physical strength, but it was OK to do so as long as she got the guy in the end.

Too often in the real world, away from this fantasy, the woman might succumb expecting returned love and then not get it. Moreover, she is forced by society to then feel guilty for her act.

Even women that have been brutally raped by complete strangers sometimes feel a sense of guilt. This guilt may be formed from a society that deep inside feels she might have "asked for it." Why? Because she is a woman? These romances seem to reinforce that whole sick attitude.

It would be unfair to lambast these romances without mentioning such writers as Barbara Bretton.

Bretton is a novelist for Harlequin's American series, which allows more realism.

In a telephone interview from New York she said, "I don't care for that kind of work," referring to the violence against women in many Harlequins.

Bretton, who has written for the New York Times, Seventeen Magazine and The Christian Science Monitor, said that if it weren't for Harlequin American she probably wouldn't be writing for Harlequin Enterprises.

She said the American series allows for a "heavier story."

Harlequin Books divide their romances into several series, with the basic Harlequin Romance being the most prevalent. The romance series shuns explicit sex scenes, but they still are derogatory toward women because the women heroines seldom are given high-level careers or ambitions. Romance is their main aim.

A double standard is created when the formula guidelines given to Har-



Phil Tsai/Daily Nebraskan

lequin writers ask for a young, fairly naive and inexperienced heroine, whereas the hero should be "unlike the heroine, quite sexually experienced and this fact may be implied."

Other series include the Harlequin Presents and the Harlequin Temptations in which "the reader has come to expect a high degree of sensuality."

The Harlequin Gothics, according to the guidelines, should have no sexual activity. The same goes for the Regency series. But in this series, the heroine should have a strong desire for marriage whereas the man constantly tries to avoid it for one reason or another.

The Harlequin American series strives for more realism.

Bretton has written novels dealing with incest and its emotional impact and now is working on a novel dealing with sterility, she said.

Whereas the usual heroine in a Harlequin is in a dead end job, such as a nurse or teacher, or at least not interested in the world outside her romance, Bretton said, she has had a heroine that was business oriented, and in fact owned half of a computer firm.

She said she once had a Harlequin editor who objected to a heroine who drove a black Corvette, because of what the car symbolized.

"To me it symbolized middle-class upward mobility," Bretton said. "She (the editor) said it symbolized penis envy."

Bretton said she won that battle. The Corvette stayed, but she had to remove a scene where a woman was breast feeding her baby because it might upset some of the older readers.

As far as the violence against women in her novels, Bretton said, "I try to stay as far away from that as possible. I reject that. I've found that quite relative in English authors."

Bretton said she doesn't understand the attraction to this type of "fantasy" in women.

"I asked a woman I know why she read these type of Harlequins and she said that she was dealing with power structures all day and having to compete with men, and that it was a relief sinking into this fantasy of being dominated. It makes me a little uncomfortable," Bretton said.

As mentioned Harlequins are formulaic, but, Bretton said, the American series isn't that restrictive.

The guidelines given, she said, are that the heroine has to be over 26, (for the target market) but the man can be

any age, that she has to be gainfully employed and independent, that she must engage in real situations and that the novel must take place in the United States.

Many of the regular Harlequins take place in exotic climes.

And, Bretton said, the novel is to have a resolution. But, she added, the book does not have to end at the altar, as is common in many of the romances.

One major restriction is the length. Bretton said she is limited in the American series to 75,000 words. Many of the regular romances have a limit of 50,000 words, she said. This is an average of about 120 pages.

Unfortunately, Bretton said, she does not think the newer trend (showing women in a better light) will last.

"I would have said so two years ago," she said. "But I'm beginning to see a switch toward the fantasy again."

She said the American series has only been around a couple of years, whereas the Harlequin romances have been published for 30 years.

"That image of being swept away, of depending on a man for your existence still seems to be popular," Bretton said.

She said some fine work is being done in some of the newer Harlequins, but because they are being seen in a block, as part of a series, with a number on the spine, the writers are not getting the respect they might get if the book were published in another form.

She said more traditional romances still thrive, although she and some other writers strive for more realistic story lines.

Many young girls are avid readers of the romance "fantasies." These girls may only be 12 or 13 years old, on the verge of sexual awakening. This is one of the many distorted images they may receive about male-female-relationships.

The Harlequins reinforce negative images and the mothers pass them on to their children. Women aren't the only ones, men accept these images, too.

Most women, while settling back with a Coke and a smile, and reading a romance novel, may only be enjoying the heroine's power and the ability to escape into this fantasy world created by the authors.

But without knowing it, many readers of the Harlequins help reinforce the stereotypes that both men and women, are trying to change.

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