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Research Article

MILLS & BOON ROMANCES: THE ENIGMA BEHIND ITS SUCCESS STORY

Saptorshi Das*

KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

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ABSTRACT

We, women, are suckers for romance. And we love Mills & Boon romances. We love reading the same Mills & Boon novel with the dashing and jaw-droppingly handsome hero who has women falling at his feet, who never cracks a smile and underneath the austere and hard shell who is a true softie inside, again and again. And again and again we feel with the beautiful heroine who is oh so ignorant of her own charms, who is chaste and virginal, who has a heart of gold and who is as soft-spoken as the breeze and shy as a newborn lamb. We get entranced by their first chance encounter which paves way for one after another coincidental meetings with each falling for the other and not expressing it till the end, after a plot full of adversities and heartache. Why do we fall for it again and again? Ever wondered? If you have, then read on.....

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INTRODUCTION

“A proposal from the enigmatic earl. Plain, lame Ellie Lytton isn’t destined for marriage. She’s perfectly content being her step-brother’s housekeeper... Until the high-handed Earl of Hainford arrives with shocking news-her step-brother has been killed!

Ellie believes the Earl responsible for her plight and that he is duty-bound to escort her on the journey to her new home. But soon Blake’s fighting an unwanted attraction to his argumentative companion... And when she needs protection, he determines he’ll keep her safe-by making Ellie his Countess!”

This is the preview of the latest Mills & Boon novel coming up in August, 2017 and I can’t wait to get my hands on it. The name of the title is itself one of my strongest weaknesses.... *Marrying His Cinderella Countess* by Louis Allen. I am a total sucker for the rich-guy-meeting-and-falling-in-love-with-the-poor-girl hackneyed, ages-old, done to death narrative plot. And I am not ashamed to admit, I am an ardent and avid lover of Mills and Boon novels. I mean, I am a professor of English. I teach Shakespeare and Milton, Whitman and Arthur Miller, literary theories and critical terms, and every complicated and sometimes decidedly monotonous nuances of English Language and Literature, yet I just can’t get enough of the same clichéd, run-of-the-mill boy-meets-girl-with-unfortunate-circumstances-forcing-them-apart-and-finally-coming-together-

amidst-steamy-attractions-and-sensual-encounters-and-living-happily-ever-after storyline.

I know I’m not the only one. Mills & Boon publishes 720 romantic novels a year that feature the kind of gut-wrenchingly handsome heroes female readers sigh and swoon over and they outsell by the widest of margins true crime, science fiction and God at the bookstores. There are millions of women across the globe who forget time and place once they sink into the mushy ups and downs in the plots of these novels. The labyrinthine web of love and pain, proximity and distance, desire and disappointment draws the reader in and compels the latter to lose way in the maze right till the end when everything finally falls into place. As Aristotle had once professed, “Calm of mind... All passion spent.”

Right now, it’s lunch time in my college. And as I hurriedly gobble up yet another recent release in the Mills & Boon series, I take a break and wonder again, as I always do when I am immersed in these books, what makes them so appealing? Why do we succumb to the charms of these romances which have hardly changed since they came into being, apart from gaining in its sensual quotient? And finally today I am taking some time out to actually brood over this and pen down my thoughts. Little did the two ambitious young entrepreneurs - Gerald Mills and Charles Boon – know when they launched the company in 1908 with just a modest £1,000, that it would go on to be such a phenomenal success. Since the very first year itself, millions of women across the globe have been captivated by their

*Corresponding author: Saptorshi Das

KIIT School of Management, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

books, with that all-consuming craving to be transported, if only for a few hours, into a fantasy world of intrigue, danger, passion and romance.

However, what has been unknown to most of us so far is that Mills & Boon wasn't all about lust and passion and love at first. When the company first came into being, it published general fiction, covering a myriad range of themes, from travel to craft. Nonetheless, the first book it ever published was prophetically a romance book - *Arrows From The Dark*, by Sophie Cole – received amidst great acclaim and accolades by critics and by 1914, 1,394 women had bought a copy of the same. During 1909, the firm's first year, 123 contracts were signed with big names. Remarkable indeed! Moreover, the firm also encouraged budding talents to write and started to bill themselves as the 'Promised Land' for new authors and budding writers across the land. Charles Boon also saw that the future of the company was dependent on catering to the wishes of the fairer sex. This trend initiated especially during the Second World War when women longed to 'escape' from the harsh realities and atrocities of the war into a world far, far away from the same. With a sack-load of rules and restrictions imposed on them, curling up with a novel and floating into a world of romance was the greatest distraction.

Soon enough, Mills & Boon started promoting its titles across the boundaries of Europe, and became a raging hit with women not getting enough of the broodingly handsome and charismatic English heroes. One of the most notable developments occurred in the 1950s when Mills & Boon caught the attention of the Canadian firm, Harlequin Books and in 1957, they published their first Mills & Boon - Anne Vinton's medical romance, *The Hospital In Buwambo*. In 1958, Harlequin published 16 Mills & Boon titles, all Doctor-Nurse romances and all bestsellers. The novels gave an entirely new dimension to the erstwhile image of doctors as boring and monotonous and nurses as dull and drab. In 1959, of 54 books Harlequin published, 34 were Mills & Boon titles - which leapt off the shelves in Canada.

With time, the books started representing the changing times, trends and progressive attitude, especially towards sex. As society was progressively moving with the times, and simultaneously were attitudes to family, love, sex and marriage, Mills & Boon's authors started to reflect these developments in their writing. In 1971, the companies merged paving the way to unprecedented expansion and profit, with their overseas acquisitions and partnerships taking the company's brand of love stories to The Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden, Italy, Greece and as far a field as Japan. Another major breakthrough occurred with doorstep deliveries of the books to readers, along with special gifts and reader questionnaires. Such was their global rule and all-encompassing success that by the mid 1980s Harlequin Mills & Boon were selling in the region of 250 million books worldwide. And such was the brand power that in 1982, a Mills & Boon book was added to a time capsule in the grounds of Castle Howard, Yorkshire, to mark the 60th anniversary of the BBC. Also, in 1997 the Oxford English Dictionary added 'Mills & Boon' to its esteemed canon - meaning, 'romantic story books' ... an absolutely brilliant achievement!

Today Mills & Boon maintain the title of the world's leading publisher of romance fiction with 120 new titles being published every month, with manuscripts from 200 authors living in the UK and a further 1,300 worldwide. What is the most remarkable thing is that every five seconds there is a new Mills & Boon novel sold within the UK.

That is the mystery of its success story. But then, the question still remains. What makes Mills & Boon romances such a great read? Why the craze? Why the ardent fan following? Let's talk about it.

Romances catering to differing tastes... One of the primary reasons for the enduring appeal of Mills & Boon romances. At present, there are currently different Mills & Boon series, with something for everyone. They are as follows:

Blaze: Very sexual novels featuring couples in contemporary romantic relationships.

By Request: Reissues of novels from the *Modern* or *Romance* series.

Cherish: Warm and emotional novels that focus on capturing the feeling of falling in love.

Desire: Sexual novels featuring couples in a contemporary setting with dramatic plots.

Historical: Romance mixed with historical fiction.

Intrigue: Romantic thrillers.

Modern: Novels focus on glamorous and 'sophisticated' passionate romance in international locations. Featuring intense relationships, often very sexual, often reflecting shared feelings and desires.

Medical Romance: Contemporary romances set against the background of the medical profession.

Nocturne: Paranormal romance.

Modern Tempted: Novels aimed at younger readers.

Special Releases: Includes seasonal collections and reissue anthologies.

Spice: Erotic fiction imprint, featuring casual sex and bondage. The most explicit imprint published by Mills & Boon.

Vintage: Backlist titles from the *Modern*, *Desire* and *Historical* imprints published in e-book format.

American Romance: Themed around classically American heroes such as cowboys, published as e-book only.

Historical Undone: Shorter length historical editorial of greater sensuality in general than the *Historical* series, published as e-book only.

Kimani: African-American romances, published as e-book only.

Love Inspired: Inspirational romance, published as e-book only.

Love Inspired Suspense: Inspirational romance containing themes of intrigue or thriller titles, published as e-book only.

Love Inspired Historical: Inspirational romance containing historical themes and settings, published as e-book only.

Nocturne Cravings: shorter length titles dealing with darker and paranormal themes, published as e-book only.

And it doesn't stop there. Mills & Boon are always developing fresh, exciting series that will appeal to new and current readers alike, hailing from all the different age groups.

So what are the other possible reasons why we love these mush tales so much? They're like our favourite comfort food, always providing solace. In our love-starved world, both men and women are always on a lookout for a connection with someone. Deep down, we are relational creatures, always yearning for a deep and lasting bond with other human beings. We may not show it but we always look for that someone we can implicitly trust, even with the grossest skeletons in our cupboard, someone we can find solace in, in our scariest moments, someone who has the strongest of presence in our darkest, most wicked fantasies, someone who loves us as we want to be loved. And if that is not a possibility in real life, we search for such a world in fiction. Specifically, women read romance because they are almost always starved of it. Women crave romance the same way men crave sex. Love and sex, the two are very different for a woman, and reading romance provides them with a welcome escapade into what they are missing in their own life. Maybe their relationships aren't happy enough in real life. Maybe the man they are with is an anathema to romance. Maybe they haven't been on a date in a long time. Maybe physical satisfaction is what they crave. The reason is the same: what they are really looking for is a little romance. Women read romance secretly hoping that one day their very own Prince Charming will come sweep them off their feet, declare their eternal love and ravish them like they have always fantasised about.

But every woman knows that it is a little more than that. Every woman longs for someone who wants her, with all her good, bad and ugly, just like the hero in romance novels always wants his heroine, with no terms or conditions attached. Every woman wants a man who is honest, sensitive, caring.... One who looks past the messy hair, shiny skin or no makeup, and sees in her the most gorgeous woman he has laid his eyes on. What every woman *really* wants, is the same thing that she wanted when she was a little girl: the fairy tale ending to a great love story.

Nor are men any different. Even they want to sweep a princess off her feet. They want to be the "Prince." We are all basically seeking the same thing: a happy ever after. What everyone really wants is happily ever after. We live pretty mundane monotonous lives. We are steeped in our hunger for money and power. Romance is like a rare species. Endangered. Yet somewhere deep inside we miss that instant attraction, that spark of love spark, that flush of desire. Some of us are fortunate enough to encounter them in life. Some of us are not. Yet we wait. And until that happens it is the authors of these romances who create moving characters that seduce us to fall in love right along with them, again and again. As long as we have a heart that beats, this will always be there. Irrefutably. Unchangingly.

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