

# Marketing Love: Romance Publishers Mills & Boon and Harlequin Enterprises, 1930–1990

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When Harlequin Enterprises acquired British publisher Mills & Boon in 1972, the merged firm became the world's dominant publisher of popular romance novels. Little is known, however, about the role that innovative marketing strategies played in the growth of these two romance publishing companies, especially their use of product sampling, direct mail, product standardization, and what was known at Mills & Boon as the “personal touch.” Through research in the Mills & Boon company archive at the University of Reading, the Grescoe Archive at the University of Calgary, as well as an analysis of company histories, trade publications, interviews, and marketing techniques, this study reveals how Harlequin and Mills & Boon took a different approach to product promotion than traditional publishers. Their innovation was to incorporate consumer goods marketing strategies, familiar to other industries, that disrupted and redefined standard practices of book publishers.

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*Wherever women are, we are.*

—Malle Vallik, director, digital content and interactivity, Harlequin<sup>1</sup>

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB),<sup>2</sup> a Canadian publishing company, identified an opportunity to reach new markets. The company gave away more than 700,000 Harlequin romance novels to East German women crossing into Berlin and enjoying their new freedom to travel across the border. The practice of giving away free products is known as “product sampling” in consumer goods marketing. An East German woman who received one of the romance novels wrote to HMB: “I would like to thank you and your staff who stood at the border crossing, regardless of the cold, in order to prepare pleasure for us. Although I am already 46 years old, I still let myself be carried off into the world of romance.”<sup>3</sup> Within four months, HMB romance novels were on newsstands throughout eastern Germany. Over the course of just two years, HMB gained market share in Poland, sold six-and-a-half million romance novels in Hungary, and achieved \$10 million in sales in the Czech Republic.<sup>4</sup> HMB’s expansion into Eastern Europe and its acquisition of Mills & Boon in 1972 are characteristic of what Geoffrey Jones calls the second wave of globalization, which began during the 1950s and intensified after 1979.<sup>5</sup> The use of product sampling to introduce new markets to Harlequin romance novels was based on years of innovative strategies developed by HMB, which was, at the time, the international leader in romance publishing.<sup>6</sup>

The British Mills & Boon (M&B) and Canadian Harlequin Enterprises disrupted and redefined standard publishing practices to reach romance novel readers in their domestic markets and around the world,

1. Skodzinski, Noelle. “Publishing Innovator of the Year: Harlequin,” *Book Business*, May 1, 2009. <http://www.bookbusinessmag.com/article/a-look-deliberate-strategy-drives-harlequin-enterprises-success-406818/all/>.”

2. In 1972, Harlequin Enterprises acquired Mills & Boon, becoming Harlequin Mills & Boon. I will refer to “Mills & Boon” and “Harlequin” by these names prior to 1972. The company name after 1972 will appear as Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB).

3. Hubbard, Jaimie. “Harlequin an International Affair: Eastern Europe Welcomes Romance Novels with Open Arms,” *Financial Post* (Toronto), September 17, 1990, Sec 1, p. 2.

4. Margolis, Judy. “Romancing the East” Report on Business Magazine in the *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), December, 1992.; Harlequin, “A Global Success Story.”

5. Jones, G., *Multinationals and Global Capitalism*.

6. In 1989, HMB had revenues of C\$327 million and an operating profit of C\$56 million, a significant portion of parent company Torstar’s C\$149 million operating profit. Most of the sales—191 million books in all—occurred outside Canada: The books were distributed in more than one hundred countries and translated into nineteen languages. The following year, HMB’s operating profit rose to C\$64.4 million. HarperCollins, “The Growth of Harlequin Romance.”

and they built powerful brands that became synonymous with the romance novel. Both companies built international brands through their use of product sampling, direct mail, and product standardization, none of which were commonplace in the traditional publishing industry at the time. In addition, the instance of Harlequin staff personally handing out romance novels at the border in Berlin illustrates one example of a “personal touch” that is apparent in much of M&B’s and Harlequin’s marketing efforts. Examining some of these innovative marketing techniques that M&B and Harlequin employed to build relationships with, and community among, their readers provides insight into how these practices emerged and under what conditions they propelled these publishing companies to success. This study spans the years from 1930 to 1990: M&B began to focus exclusively on publishing romance novels in 1930; Harlequin was founded in 1949 and acquired M&B in 1972, becoming Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB). HMB experienced tremendous growth during the 1970s and 1980s, achieving unparalleled success in domestic and overseas markets despite increased competition from other publishers who also started romance imprints.

A number of sources and approaches were used in researching this topic. Archival research was undertaken at the M&B company archive at the University of Reading in England and the Paul Grescoe Archive at the University of Calgary in Canada. Interviews with former HMB executives and analyses of company histories, newspaper and trade publication articles, and marketing techniques also proved valuable. A consideration of this variety of sources helps explain how Harlequin and M&B achieved global dominance through innovative branding and consumer goods marketing practices. Although comparing the differences between marketing strategies in the publishing and consumer goods industries is relatively straightforward, there are inherent challenges in mining company archives and interviewing former HMB employees: Personal stories and archival material chosen or omitted each present their own interpretation of events that can sometimes reveal more about individual motivation than company practices. Acknowledging these challenges, this study attempts a careful reflection and interpretation process to understand the developments being examined.<sup>7</sup>

Studies on the development of book and print culture reveal the interdisciplinary nature of this field. This is apparent in Howsam’s *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* and Eliot and Rose’s *A Companion to the History of the Book*, both of which show how people

7. Alvesson and Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology*; Kipping, Wadhvani, Bucheli, “Analyzing and Interpreting Historical Sources: A Basic Methodology.”

have given material form to knowledge and stories for centuries. These studies also include a look at the methods and approaches to the study of book history, as does Finkelstein and McCleery in *An Introduction to Book History*. As part of these histories, the authors identify the many agents involved in the process of book and print culture production, including, as Finkelstein and McCleery say, “the role cultural agents have played in supporting and shaping print culture production, from literary agents and publishers’ readers to intangibly linked but influential literary networks.”<sup>8</sup> Howsam, in describing book culture, says, “Those who make, sell, and save books—the scribes, printers, editors, publishers and retailers, the librarians and collectors—are essential figures in what is sometimes called a book culture.”<sup>9</sup> In hopes of expanding these lists of essential contributing agents, this study emphasizes the role and influence of marketers and marketing strategies in the dynamic world of book and print culture.

In *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*, Claire Squires identifies a particular challenge in publishing, relevant to this study, in her claim that “publishing is, arguably, still struggling to accomplish the shift from a product-led market to a market-led industry.”<sup>10</sup> This tension between marketing and sales and an editorially led tradition is also described by Michael Lane in *Books and Publishers*. Mills & Boon and Harlequin finessed this shift quite early on by emphasizing marketing as opposed to editorial primacy—or the decisions made by “highly civilized men with large private incomes,” as Jeremy Lewis described editors in his memoir about working in the British publishing firm Chatto & Windus.<sup>11</sup> However, Mills & Boon and Harlequin did not entirely dismiss the importance of editorial input, for it was necessary for the consistency and quality of their popular romance novels. The collection of essays in Nicola Wilson’s *The Book World: Selling and Distributing British Literature, 1900–1940* have contributed to a further examination of how British publishers conceived of their specific markets and how they sought to appeal to them through advertising, design, and various professional networks. Analyses of the marketing strategies of a creative enterprise, as Squires and Wilson indicate, further illuminate the cultural influences exerted by the publishing industry.

Placing this analysis within the context of the cultural and creative industries will show how particular organizational practices can animate a field, in this case, the ways that Harlequin and M&B applied

8. Finkelstein and McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History*, 6.

9. Howsam, *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, 1.

10. Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 41.

11. Lewis, *Kindred Spirits*, 3.

marketing techniques traditionally used for conventional household goods to a cultural product (books). An analysis of how a segment of one industry—the field of romance publishing—can successfully implement knowledge and practices from a completely different industry—consumer goods—provides insight into the process of innovation in the cultural and creative industries.<sup>12</sup> HMB is a part of what is commonly known as the cultural and creative industries—a category that includes printing, publishing and multimedia, audiovisual, and phonographic and cinematographic productions as well as crafts and design.<sup>13</sup> These industries are increasingly recognized as important means of economic development and contribute to cultural globalization. The concept of the “culture industry” has its origins in the 1940s work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who claimed that capitalist mass culture (including mass-produced books) diluted the value of culture through artificial reproduction and wide distribution.<sup>14</sup> The concept of creative industries, on the other hand, is relatively new, emerging in the early 1990s as part of new cultural and economic policies mainly in response to digital media.<sup>15</sup> Although the marketing of books as consumer goods is not without precedent in the wider books market,<sup>16</sup> HMB’s innovative approach draws on resources that are not incorporated in other consumer goods book marketing efforts such as the American mail-order Book-of-the-Month Club, founded in 1926 by Harry Scherman.

Organizational innovation is sometimes described as a two-step process: the creative idea itself and the implementation of the idea, which can manifest as “new and improved products, services, or ways of doing things.”<sup>17</sup> Other researchers also consider new markets, new business models, and new organizational forms as potentially innovative.<sup>18</sup> In this study, innovation is simply defined as the recombination of existing resources and their commercialization.<sup>19</sup> Although Harlequin and M&B did not create a new product, they contributed to the creation of the popular romance genre. They reconceptualized the popular romance novel as a standardized product by shifting the focus from author to product brand, borrowing existing resources from the consumer goods industries. Fundamental to their marketing efforts, however, was the ability of these firms to identify and connect with

12. Granados, Bernardo, and Pareja, “How Do Creative Industries Innovate?”

13. Moore, “Cultural and Creative Industries,” 744.

14. Adorno and Horkheimer, “Culture Industry.”

15. Moore, “Cultural and Creative Industries.”

16. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*; Raff, “The Book-of-the-Month Club as a New Enterprise.”

17. Baer, “Putting Creativity to Work,” 1102.

18. Bergendahl and Magnusson, “Creating Ideas for Innovation.”

19. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

the women for whom their product offered “pleasure” as well as the experience of being “carried off into the world of romance,” no matter age or nationality, as expressed in the letter to Harlequin from the East German woman who received a free romance novel when she crossed into Berlin in 1989.

Broadly speaking, literature is brought to the commercial world through marketing. As Squires argues, marketing often symbolizes and actualizes the shifting relationship of art to business. Marketing, however, goes beyond the process of pricing, promotion, and distribution of goods, services, and ideas. In *Marketing*, Pride and Ferrell point out that facilitating satisfying exchange relationships as well as developing and maintaining favorable relationships with stakeholders are central to effective marketing. These activities are complex and extend beyond the marketing department, and they can only result from an assessment of a target market’s perceived needs and desires. Philip Kotler emphasizes, in *Marketing Management*, that marketing is not only advertising and public relations but that it also defines the marketplace through a reactive and proactive process that links an industry to society’s needs—echoing Pride and Ferrell. Another way to understand marketing, and in line with what this study proposes, is expressed succinctly by management expert Peter Drucker, who says that “marketing is not a function, it is the whole business from the customer’s point of view,”<sup>20</sup> a sentiment with which Charles Boon at Mills & Boon would agree. Boon’s marketing approach was not a separate function from the act of publishing, and the firm’s dedication to a “personal touch”—understanding the customer’s point of view—was at the core of its success. Drucker’s seemingly simple definition of marketing is sophisticated in its suggestion of interpretive possibilities and supports Squires’s and Kotler’s definition of marketing as “a process of representation.”<sup>21</sup> Through marketing—not as a function but as the whole business—M&B and Harlequin identified, assessed, interpreted, represented, and addressed the needs and desires of its readers. In doing so, these publishing firms contributed to the creation of a specific and unique literary marketplace.

Understanding *both* the commercial and cultural functions of the publishing industry is critical to any analysis of the growth of Harlequin Enterprises and Mills & Boon, as the two companies adopted different approaches to selling books than traditional publishers. The Book-of-the-Month Club, a business that offered members carefully selected works of literary merit each month, is an example of a publishing enterprise that was successful in blending commerce and culture.

20. Drucker, *The Practice of Management*, 38–39.

21. Squires, *Marketing Literature*, 51.

The same could be said of both M&B and Harlequin, with a few important distinctions. Janice Radway shows that the Book-of-the-Month Club was “a middlebrow operation” with a book list that offered readers the opportunity “to look appropriately cultured.”<sup>22</sup> Mills & Boon and Harlequin, however, had a different vision. Both firms understood women’s desire to see their emotional experiences reflected in the novels they read, enabling M&B and Harlequin to provide that perspective in entertaining and uplifting stories to their readers. Popular romance readers, unlike Book-of-the-Month readers, were not interested in appearing appropriately cultured. As a result of this approach, and while derided by the more “cultured” or various members of the middle- and highbrow reading population, the popular romance novel continues to outsell most all other book categories because the books consistently satisfy readers’ expectations.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lowbrow status of the popular romance genre is that these books are, for the most part, written by women and read by women. The popular romance novel is written from the woman’s point of view and focuses on the emotional world of relationships. This bias exists generally in the world of art and benefits certain art over others based on gender associations. For example, decorative and domestic arts, such as quilting, are related to the domestic sphere and, therefore, tend to be perceived as more feminine. It is women’s work, not “high” art. This is also true of the hierarchy of genres in publishing, with the romance genre defined and devalued as women’s work focused on the emotions of relationships.<sup>24</sup> However, with a clear understanding of their readership, M&B and Harlequin capitalized on these factors and sold their romance novels in supermarkets and drugstores—places where women were already shopping for groceries and other consumer goods products on a regular basis.

### Marketing Approaches in Publishing and Consumer Goods

Consumer goods cover a range of products, from toothpaste and toilet paper, to food and clothes.<sup>25</sup> Many of these products are considered necessities and are markedly different in terms of production from

22. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 1.

23. Nielson Bookscan, “A Profitable Affair.”

24. See Russ and Crispin, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*; Showalter, “Women Writers”; and Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*. In the wider art world, see Lippard, *From the Center*; Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*; Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*; Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*; and Jones, A., *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*.

25. Pride and Ferrell, *Marketing*.

discretionary cultural products such as books. Consumer goods conglomerates invest heavily in market research to better identify their target markets and determine what motivates consumers to buy their products.<sup>26</sup> One important strategy they use is to focus on marketing directly to the consumer—the “business-to-consumer” model in marketing.

By contrast, the traditional structure of the publishing industry is a “business-to-business” model, which means that publishers have focused on marketing to “middlemen” such as retailers and/or distributors who then sell the books to consumers. This is different from the consumer goods industry. For instance, publishers do not create their own goods—book publishers compete in the market for both content (i.e., they must find books to buy and negotiate with book authors/agents) and customers (i.e., they have to identify appropriate book-sellers/distributors). With the exception of more recent publishing practices that have been disrupted by e-commerce, traditional publishers have sold directly to the trade because their goal has been to sell large quantities in a single sale.<sup>27</sup>

Although some publishers have greater brand recognition than others, it is usually a relatively small number of books that dominate sales for publishers, with the specific author brand working as a significant draw.<sup>28</sup> In *The Book Publishing Industry*, Albert Greco points out that in publishing “a small number of books (perhaps 20%) dominate sales (accounting for perhaps 80% of all sales), resulting in the so-called ‘power law’ (known to economists as the ‘Pareto Distribution’). This means that unit book sales and revenues do not follow a normal bell curve, market shares change constantly, and success in the past is no guarantee of success in the future.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, every single book is a new product. This describes the environment of the traditional publishing industry during the period covered by this study.

The traditional publishing industry only fairly recently acknowledged the need to adjust their business-to-business model to include a fully developed business-to-consumer approach.<sup>30</sup> This recognition coincided with the introduction of the Internet, digital media, and online booksellers, which began in the 1990s. While Harlequin and M&B sold their popular romance fiction through booksellers, they also consistently used consumer goods marketing strategies to better understand and build relationships directly with women readers.

26. Palacio, Xavier. “ESOMAR’s latest Global Market Research report values global research and data industry market at US \$80 billion,” *Research World*, September, 2019.

27. Woll, *Publishing for Profit*, 11; Clark and Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing*, 170.

28. Greco, Milliot, and Wharton, *Book Publishing Industry*, 4.

29. *Ibid.*, 4. This is not the case with Harlequin and Mills & Boon.

30. Sutton, *Contemporary Publishers*.



Furthermore, there is a clear connection between the genre of popular romance, the female reader, and the opportunity to co-opt consumer goods marketing strategies for that particular consumer segment because, as early as the eighteenth century, there was an understanding of women as the primary household consumer.

The tension that exists between culture and commerce is especially characteristic of the book publishing industry. For instance, Margaret Jensen claims that “instead of being classified as simply a book publishing firm, Harlequin is more appropriately defined as a marketing company.”<sup>31</sup> Coser, Kadushin, and Powell call mass-produced books such as the popular Time-Life Books series and Harlequin romances or other books produced by Meredith, American Heritage, and Reader’s Digest, “nonbooks.”<sup>32</sup> David Galloway, president of HMB from 1983 to 1988, might have agreed with Jensen and Coser et al. with an important distinction: “When one asks what business Harlequin is in, the natural response is publishing. Perhaps the better response is direct marketing and we happen to sell a publishing product. It’s important for us to think about, as publishing could back us into the mass paperback business (a low margin business). Direct marketing could lead us in an entirely different direction.”<sup>33</sup> Galloway makes a distinction between HMB’s mass-produced romance novels and mass paperback business. The more profitable direct marketing approach at HMB was one of the things that differentiated it from the traditional publishers; this marketing strategy, in part, kept HMB financially stable and enabled the company to expand internationally.

Ignoring the relevance of the popular romance novel as a cultural artifact, however, is a mistake. A wealth of scholarly analysis has focused on the content produced by the industry: the popular romance novel itself. Some of those studies include a close reading of a selection of novels and/or a study of the readers and/or editors of romance novels.<sup>34</sup> However, with the exception of Paul Grescoe’s history of Harlequin and Joseph McAleer’s history of Mills & Boon, little about the development of marketing strategies exists.<sup>35</sup> In studies of the broader publishing

31. Jensen, *Love’s Sweet Return*, 42.

32. Coser, Kadushin, and Powell, *Books*, 260–264.

33. Galloway, David, Speech from Harlequin Mills & Boon President to University of Toronto, Faculty of Management Studies Alumni Association, November 22, 1983, Box 4, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

34. Radway, *Reading the Romance*; Regis, *A Natural History*; Krentz, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*; Thurston, *Romance Revolution*; Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation*; Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*; Douglas, Ann. “Soft Porn Culture,” *New Republic*, August 20, 1980, 25–29.

35. Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*; McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*; Jensen, *Love’s Sweet Return*; Markert, *Publishing Romance*; Wirten, “Global Infatuation.”

industry, Harlequin and M&B are only occasionally mentioned. When they are, it is usually in terms of their ability to build relationships and a sense of community with their readers through their business-to-consumer marketing efforts, including the “personal touch.”<sup>36</sup>

Although publishing companies such as Time-Life Books or Reader’s Digest Books became well known for the popularity of particular lines of books and for mass marketing, none have matched Harlequin and Mills & Boon’s success in developing brand recognition on an international scale. Also, no publisher’s name has become synonymous with a generic product in the way that Harlequin and Mills & Boon have come to mean “romance novel” and replaced that term, for instance, in the way that a reader of romance might say, “I’m reading a Harlequin” or “I’m reading a Mills & Boon.”<sup>37</sup> Clare Somerville, a former executive at HMB, claims that “in terms of brand marketing, Harlequin was ahead of its time.”<sup>38</sup> And this reputation for branding success prompted Daisy Maryles, editor of the trade publication *Bookselling & Marketing*, to write in 1979: “Brand-name (or imprint) advertising—commonplace in most industries—has thus far only been attempted and mastered on a major scale in publishing by Harlequin Books.”<sup>39</sup>

### Mills & Boon History

Mills & Boon was founded in 1908 by Gerald Mills and Charles Boon who met when they worked together at the British publishing firm Methuen. Boon’s father was a struggling farmer who moved his family to London during an agricultural depression in the 1880s. When his father died, twelve-year-old Boon dropped out of school and worked a series of jobs before landing at Methuen, when he was sixteen years old. Described as having a charming personality and limitless energy, Boon went from a warehouse clerk to sales manager and then general manager at Methuen. By contrast, Mills’s background was one of privilege. His mother was the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, and his father was a partner in various successful glassworks factories. When Boon was working as a warehouse clerk at Methuen, Mills was studying at

36. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture*; Greco, Milliot, and Wharton, *Book Publishing Industry*; Coser, “Publishers as Gatekeepers of Ideas”; Coser, Kadushin, and Powell, *Books*.

37. The closest in this regard may be the Book-of-the-Month Club, founded in 1926 by Harry Scherman. See Raff, “Book-of-the-Month Club as a New Enterprise”; Radway, *A Feeling for Books*.

38. Somerville, Interview, February 11, 2020. Somerville was the sales and marketing director HMB UK 2005–2010, Mumbai office 2010–2012.

39. Maryles, “Fawcett Launches Romance Imprint,” 69.

Cambridge University. Mills has been described as a refined intellectual who had a “tactful kindness” and a “genial and quiet personality.”<sup>40</sup> Although they had different personalities and backgrounds, Mills and Boon were both ambitious and wanted to establish their own publishing firm. They each contributed critical elements to the firm they created as partners: Mills brought the capital and an interest in nonfiction books and book production; Boon brought his experience with publishing sales and advertising, an interest in fiction, and a knack for attracting authors.<sup>41</sup>

In the early years, M&B published educational and nonfiction titles as well as general fiction by authors such as Hugh Walpole, P. G. Wodehouse, and Jack London. In 1916, Jack London died, and Gerald Mills and Charles Boon were called into war service. With the loss of a major author and the leadership of the two cofounders during World War I, the firm struggled in a competitive publishing market. The combination of these factors led to the decision to focus on publishing romance novels, a segment of their business that had always done well. By 1930, M&B focused exclusively on publishing romance novels, at which point the founders began to craft the M&B brand using various innovative consumer goods marketing strategies.<sup>42</sup> In his history of the firm, McAleer identifies the unique M&B approach: research distinct readership; nurture the demand; develop clever public relations; and change with the times in terms of the general editorial policy and the heroine’s evolution.<sup>43</sup> Other marketing strategies included M&B’s international expansion into British territories through the development of their “Colonial Library” list and a collaborative relationship with women’s magazines.

Charles Boon approached marketing from the customer’s point of view, which captures the essence of M&B’s “personal touch.” The editorial guidelines that Boon set for M&B authors would prove critical to the firm’s marketing success and exemplify the “personal touch.” One of the most important guidelines was what M&B referred to as “Lubbock’s Law” after the English literary critic Percy Lubbock. In his book *The Craft of Fiction*, Lubbock claimed that Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* was successful because it was written from the heroine’s point of view. Boon demanded that all M&B romance novels be written from the heroine’s point of view—reader identification with the book’s heroine was a key element to connecting with the reader, still a guideline

40. McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, 13.

41. *Ibid.*, 12–15.

42. *Ibid.*, 37–38.

43. *Ibid.*, 4.

today in HMB category romance novels.<sup>44</sup> Although Boon was right about the importance of Lubbock's Law, his other guideline, referred to as the "Alphaman," did not stand the test of time. The Alphaman guideline relied on the notion of the "law of nature" or the idea that the female of any species is always drawn to the strongest male of the species. With changing ideas about gender roles throughout the twentieth century, the Alphaman concept eventually faded, and the depiction of more emotionally complex men in contemporary romance novels became the norm. Boon stressed the importance of presenting a woman's point of view in M&B romance novels to draw in their readers, the impact of which should not be underestimated when a woman's point of view is generally undervalued. In addition, M&B's editorial flexibility regarding changing notions of gender roles, sexuality, and women's rights illustrates a deep understanding of their audience, which is core to all effective marketing efforts.

In the early twentieth century, M&B had more than 70 percent of the romance fiction market in the United Kingdom, and three million women regularly read their books.<sup>45</sup> With a large readership, M&B had to constantly cultivate new writers and rely on their group of experienced writers to keep up with customer demand. Each M&B reader could easily read at least one romance novel per week, and the expectation was that there would be a fresh supply of new M&B romance novels every month. Fortunately, one of Charles Boon's strengths was building strong relationships with M&B authors and identifying new authors, a practice critical to maintaining a steady supply of manuscripts. Boon and his son, Alan, were known for taking M&B authors to lunch at the Ritz in London, sending flowers, calling with praise or congratulations, and showing sensitivity in the way they communicated criticism. Violet Winspear, one of the most well-known M&B authors, first published in 1960, said of Alan Boon, "This man is marvelous. Without him, Mills and Boon wouldn't be. His authors adore him. He nurses us along and keeps our confidence up."<sup>46</sup> Boon's reputation brought a few authors to M&B from other publishing firms, and other authors submitted romance novel manuscripts after achieving some success writing for women's magazines. In addition, while some M&B authors had agent representation, M&B accepted manuscripts from writers without agent representation, which offered a foothold into the publishing world for aspiring authors. Because of the

44. Cooper, Glenda. "Mills & Boon: These days, girls want a wizard lover..." *The Telegraph*, February 13, 2008.

45. Clark and Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing*, 41.

46. Gerus, Claire. "Love for Sale: How Harlequin cornered the market on romantic fiction," *The Financial Post Magazine*, February, 1979,54.

demand for M&B romance novels, the firm would eventually follow a monthly publishing and distribution cycle, similar to that of a monthly magazine. Every month M&B offered a number of new titles just as monthly magazines provide new content each month.

During the Great Depression and into World War II, M&B sold serial rights for upcoming romance titles to editors at popular women's magazines such as *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, and *Woman's Weekly*. They also did a robust business with commercial lending libraries, which were private, fee-paying libraries operated by businesses, in part, to capitalize on the popularity of fiction.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the popularity of M&B romance novels spread across Europe and throughout the British Commonwealth, including Canada, where Mary Bonnycastle, the de facto editor in chief of Harlequin, took notice. Harlequin, established in 1949 by Mary's husband, Richard H. G. Bonnycastle, followed a similar trajectory to M&B in the realization that higher profits were tied to romance novels. Mary Bonnycastle brokered a deal that gave Harlequin the exclusive distribution rights to M&B romances in North America. While not holding an official title in the company, Mary Bonnycastle worked closely with her husband's secretary, Ruth Palmour, and in 1957 Mary purchased the rights for Harlequin to reprint an M&B medical (doctor/nurse love affair) romance.<sup>48</sup> The following year, Harlequin published sixteen additional M&B titles—all medical romances.<sup>49</sup> Harlequin bought M&B in 1972, and in 1975, Torstar, the Canadian media company, acquired a majority interest in Harlequin.

### Mills & Boon's Marketing Innovations

Even before they focused exclusively on romance novels as a specialized publishing house in 1930, M&B crafted creative marketing campaigns. For example, in the early years at M&B, Charles Boon devised a promotion that would offer to send a "souvenir chapter" of one of their books to anyone who wrote in with this request. An early example of product sampling, M&B would go on to develop this strategy further with women's magazines. It was also a strategy that Harlequin would

47. Wilson, "Boots Book-lovers' Library."

48. Palmer, Ruth to Mills & Boon ("Dear Sirs") Offer Letter, May 8, 1957, (photocopy), Box 3.3, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada. The May 8, 1957, offer letter was written and sent by Ruth Palmour. Alan Boon was quick to respond and sent Ruth a copy of a Mills & Boon medical romance. Boon, Alan to Ruth Palmour, "Dear Miss Palmour," response to letter asking for reprint rights, May 13, 1957, (photocopy), Box 3.3, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

49. Mills & Boon, "About Us."

later exploit through its own consumer goods marketing practices—practices not commonly used by traditional book publishers at the time. To display their books in store windows, M&B book covers were designed with eye-catching colors and romantic images of couples or the beautiful heroine, an innovative visual merchandising practice for this period.<sup>50</sup> This attention to detail in book cover design would be seen throughout the 1930s in print advertisements as well. W. H. Smith's<sup>51</sup> *Trade Circular* "Popular Fiction List" in 1936 showed a series of brightly illustrated book covers with the tagline "Jackets that Pull."<sup>52</sup> These ads, full of colorful and sometimes provocative book cover images, stood out among competing content and also served as a kind of trademark for the M&B brand. Well-designed packaging and production became standardized, and, in addition to "pulling" in customers, the book covers served to promote the publisher over the individual author.

Following the trend in publishing, M&B also looked overseas for growth. As early as 1924 (and perhaps even earlier), M&B promoted a Colonial Library list. It was fairly common for British publishers to create their own Colonial Library list, which were curated lists of books that they would offer to markets throughout the British Empire. In the early twentieth century, British publishers sold approximately 20 percent of their stock as colonial editions.<sup>53</sup> By 1930, when M&B began to focus exclusively on romance book publishing, they had already established relationships with agents in international markets.<sup>54</sup> Although they claimed to sell their books wherever the English language was spoken, M&B's English-language sales were prominent in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Singapore. This international expansion was accomplished by M&B and other smaller publishers through the use of licensed agents rather than the costlier system of establishing overseas branches.<sup>55</sup>

50. McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, 24. However, the eye-catching colors reference a longer history of vivid dust jackets and illustrations going back to Victorian Britain (around 1850) when "yellow jackets"—brightly colored, inexpensive books—sold in railway bookstalls such as W. H. Smith.

51. Founded in 1792, W. H. Smith is a British retailer that sold magazines, books, newspapers, stationery, and confectionary. They operated a commercial lending library from 1861 to 1961.

52. MB PUB/1/3, File: Adverts & Catalogues, 1935–1940, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collection, University of Reading, England. Ad in W. H. Smith, Spring/1936, Fiction List, "Jackets that Pull."

53. Wilson, *The Book World*, 20.

54. MB PUB/1/1, File: Adverts & Catalogues, 1924–1929, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collection, University of Reading, England.

55. For instance, M&B's agent in Cape Town, South Africa, was Heineman & Cassell S.A. Pty. Ltd. MB PUB/1/5, File: Adverts & Catalogues, 1957–1962, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collection, University of Reading, England. Agents in

With its Colonial Library, M&B was building upon decades of exportation of British literature to its colonies. Macmillan Publishers launched the first Colonial Library in 1886. The following year the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works<sup>56</sup> was ratified, which substantially decreased the potential loss of revenue from piracy for British authors and publishers. This marked a new phase in the production, distribution, and legal protection of books in an increasingly international publishing market.<sup>57</sup> According to Graeme Johanson, there was a huge demand in the colonial markets for imported British books, especially in Australia, which “was the largest market for British book exports continuously from at least 1889 until 1953.”<sup>58</sup> Although the colonial library was not necessarily a unique marketing innovation, its use aided the expansion of M&B’s business throughout the British colonies and established the publisher’s brand identity in a number of markets outside of Britain.

In an advertising brochure that M&B created for its Australian agents, they addressed “the Colonial Trade” and reinforced the M&B brand value of their popular romance novels with this guarantee:

Wherever the English language is spoken, this remarkable Series meets with extraordinary success. The reasons are not surprising, for the titles are carefully chosen, and none but tales with a big popular appeal are included, whether they be by well-known authors or new writers with a reputation to make. The production is excellent, large size, best quality paper, bound in cloth boards with picture wrappers. Thus, the books are eminently suitable for Circulating Libraries, just as much as for private individuals with Libraries of their own. Unlike most other Series, each title is a guarantee of good reading and first-rate Fiction. It is therefore not surprising that the volumes are selling in hundreds of thousands, and in increasing numbers all the year round.<sup>59</sup>

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New Zealand and Australia also identified in MB PUB/1/4, August 3, 1944, File: Adverts & Catalogues, 1940–1954, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collection, University of Reading, England.

56. “The Berne Convention, adopted in 1886, deals with the protection of works and the rights of their authors. It provides creators such as authors, musicians, poets, painters, etc. with the means to control how their works are used, by whom and on what terms. It is based on three basic principles and contains a series of provisions determining the minimum protection to be granted, as well as special provisions available to developing countries that want to make use of them.” WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization). “Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (1886),” electronically archived summary of the convention found at: <https://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/berne/>.

57. Towheed, “Negotiating the List.”

58. Johanson, *Colonial Editions*.

59. MB JM/5, n.d. (between 1929–1936), Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Ad in Australian trade magazine, “Mills &

In this advertising copy, M&B reinforces its brand's value and sets the firm apart from other publishers by promoting itself as the leader in "first-rate" romance fiction read by "hundreds of thousands." The physical aspects of the book are described as being suitable for circulating libraries, which means that it was sturdy enough to withstand multiple readings. This brochure, written for local distributors, was a clever way for M&B to instruct distributors on how to advertise their books.

During World War II, M&B placed ads that promised Commonwealth booksellers a steady flow of books to keep up with customer demand: "Mills & Boon plans to publish 2–4 books each fortnight steadily throughout the year. Each book is well-written and well-produced. It is the quality of consistency which means you can safely go to your wholesaler and PLACE A STANDING ORDER."<sup>60</sup> Placing a "standing order" would ensure that booksellers would automatically receive their copies of M&B romance novels on a regular basis despite shortages or other challenges to business at this time. This advertising copy was meant to portray a sense of stability and reliability in a period dominated by war. At the same time, the choice of language also created a sense of urgency by suggesting that there was a limited supply of romance novels for those who did not have that standing order. The development of the M&B brand and the firm's ability to produce large numbers of books to keep up with the reader demand was instrumental in its expansion. Additionally, a focus on the colonial library is critical to understanding how M&B built a strong brand identity that eventually enabled it to maintain its dominant position and reach new markets, even after British colonial rule ended.

On the home front, M&B gained new readers and built its brand by selling their books to commercial lending libraries. Their business with commercial libraries was extremely profitable, and the firm was, in part, defined by this relationship. M&B became informally known as a "library house" publisher of light fiction.<sup>61</sup> In a report for the Society of Bookmen in 1928, publishers estimated that between 25 and 65 percent of all the books they published went to four of the largest commercial libraries: Boots Book-lovers, W. H. Smith, Mudie's, and the *Times* Book Club.<sup>62</sup> Most of these libraries functioned on a layered yearly

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Boon's New Half-Crown Novels," (no date on the ad, but based on other materials in the folder, it appears after 1929 and before 1936).

60. MB PUB/1/4, 1940–1954, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Ad in W.H. Smith, "Place a Standing Order," August 3, 1944.

61. Wilson, "Boots Book-lovers' Library," 436.

62. *Ibid.*, 427.



subscription system, which allowed the members to borrow one book at a time, excluding the newest books. If customers were able to pay more, they would have access to the newest releases.<sup>63</sup>

M&B nurtured their relationships with commercial libraries and encouraged their authors to visit libraries that offered M&B novels and introduce themselves to the library staff—an example of M&B’s “personal touch” strategy. M&B also ran contests in which librarians could win books for their library and distributed leaflets that encouraged readers to contact them if their local library did not carry M&B romance novels.<sup>64</sup> Both M&B and Harlequin excelled in building relationships with their readers. By positioning the romance stories from a woman’s point of view, providing editorial flexibility regarding changing gender roles, connecting with women’s magazines, expanding to international markets, and selling to commercial libraries, M&B built their brand and established a tight-knit community of loyal readers. This relationship with a community of readers was referenced in a letter to John Boon from Dr. Peter H. Mann, a sociology professor at Sheffield University, who had conducted readership studies for M&B. Mann was responding to Boon’s question about whether M&B should advertise to wholesalers or directly to the readers. Mann cautions against a traditional advertising approach: “Mills and Boon have special features which should be carefully considered,” and “commercial advertising of the normal sort would not be as effective or even necessary at M&B.”<sup>65</sup> Mann’s advice to Boon was to create an outreach campaign that encouraged current readers to recommend M&B romance novels to their friends, an effective “personal touch.” As someone who had studied M&B’s readership, Mann realized this approach was possible because of the amount of reader information held by M&B from the firm’s direct mailing list. In their study of the publishing industry, Clark and Phillips specifically refer to HMB when stressing the importance of community building for successful marketing outcomes in publishing: “There are companies, notably Harlequin in the area of romance, which have built a direct relationship with their consumers.... The development of a community around content also encourages direct sales.”<sup>66</sup>

63. *Ibid.*, 430.

64. MB PUB/1/4, 1940–1954, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Ads in S. Dawson Trade Guide (1950), “First Prize, 25 Novels Free,” “Winning Entry—740 Times Out,” and “Happy Reading.”

65. MB ADM/4/1, File: Dr. Peter Mann, 1967–1972, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Letter from Peter Mann to John Boon, April 19, 1971.

66. Clark and Phillips, *Inside Book Publishing*, 252.

With the passing of the British Public Libraries and Museum Act in 1964,<sup>67</sup> which made public libraries a required service across the country, and the greater availability of inexpensive paperback books, commercial libraries started to close their doors. Although this represented the loss of a major source of revenue, by then M&B had developed relationships with the editors of several popular women's magazines. Well before 1964, M&B had been working with women's magazines, and by 1957 they were selling them the reprint rights to Harlequin romances. In fact, since the 1940s, M&B had been negotiating deals with editors at *Women's Weekly*, *Woman's Own*, *Woman's Illustrated*, and *Woman*, and they sold serial rights for upcoming titles. Serials would run for six or twelve weeks, depending on the magazine. The novel version would be put on the market a month or two after its multiweek run. These serial contracts with women's magazines provided a boost in publicity and sales for M&B.<sup>68</sup> However, editorial policy at the magazines was tested as authors pushed the boundaries of what was considered proper moral values (mostly by the magazine editors) as manifested in the romance novel story line in the magazines. Magazine editors insisted on "moral uplift"; drinking and sex were taboo.<sup>69</sup> However, this was not M&B's approach to storytelling.

Even before World War I, M&B romance authors wrote about social problems, including divorce, drug addiction, adultery, and rape. Story lines during the 1930s often dealt with problems associated with financial hardships, and some of the heroines were older than the hero in the story, shifting the power balance. During World War II, a Barbara Stanton romance novel told the story of an Auxiliary Air Force heroine in love with a Polish freedom fighter in *WAAF into Wife*. Post-World War II story lines included the realities of housing shortages and jobs for women.<sup>70</sup> M&B knew from previous sales experience that sensual stories were popular and they published them—even though women's magazine editors and Mary Bonnycastle at Harlequin balked at this approach. However, neither the editors nor Harlequin could hold this view for much longer, especially if they wanted to maintain their current readers and expand into new markets.

67. The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 governs public library services in England and Wales. It is the law that required local authorities to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" public library service. CILIP, "CILIP Briefing," 1. CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), "CILIP Briefing: The Public Libraries and Museums Act (1964)," CILIP Online Archives, December, 2015. [https://archive.cilip.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/public\\_libraries\\_and\\_museums\\_act\\_1964\\_cilip\\_briefing.pdf](https://archive.cilip.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/public_libraries_and_museums_act_1964_cilip_briefing.pdf)

68. McAleer, *Passion's Fortune*, 228.

69. Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, 50.

70. *Ibid.*, 46–48.

By the 1960s, M&B was forced to confront the intense competition from the low-price paperback market, which was exploding. Because they had relied on the commercial libraries, women's magazines, and their own direct mail-order service,<sup>71</sup> M&B had not developed a strong sales force and distribution system in England, which was needed to compete in the broader growing paperback market. Because M&B advertised their own products in every single M&B romance novel sold (sometimes with up to sixteen pages of titles in the back of the book), M&B spent relatively little on advertising.<sup>72</sup> This combination of factors made Harlequin's offer letter from Mary Bonnycastle to buy M&B reprint rights even more appealing when it came across John Boon's desk. This arrangement worked out well for Harlequin too. By 1964, Harlequin was offering M&B reprints exclusively. Only a few years later, Harlequin was making another offer to M&B—this time the offer was to buy the entire company, which they did in 1972.

Harlequin benefitted from the marketing strategies instituted at M&B and adopted many of them once they became HMB. For instance, M&B distinguished itself from the competition through their "personal touch" approach to reader relations led by Charles Boon and later by his son Alan. Through the creation of marketing content that encouraged connection and community, M&B provided an intimate aspect to the commercial transaction of buying a book, and the women who consumed M&B romance novels were made to feel a part of a community of readers. Just as M&B's Lubbock's Law guideline put the focus on the heroine's point of view, the firm also made sure that marketing efforts appealed, and were sensitive to, their readers. In this regard, M&B approached marketing not as a function but as a consideration of the "whole business from the customer's point of view."<sup>73</sup>

Harlequin and Mills & Boon came to dominate the romance publishing industry by being attuned to new markets as well as the changing tastes of those particular market segments. By identifying women who read the mass-produced and mass-consumed popular romance novels as a growing consumer market,<sup>74</sup> Harlequin and M&B successfully offered a wide variety of options in terms of romance novel content, with a variety of story lines, and availability—the novels could be found in drugstores and grocery stores and ordered by mail. In addition, they were able to support the production of the books by developing and

71. *Ibid.*, 45. M&B had a direct mail-order service since before World War I, which would be named Reader Service in the 1960s at M&B, and was a precursor to the Reader Service that Harlequin would later create.

72. Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, 45.

73. Drucker, *The Practice of Management*, 38–39.

74. See Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*; Buckland and Palmer, *A Return to the Common Reader*; Wilson, "Boots Book-lovers' Library."

utilizing a large network of women writers. It may appear that having a potential target market of women readers made it easier to create a marketing strategy based on gender alone. Initially, Harlequin and M&B were able to capture an audience of women for romance novels simply with formulaic appeals to the emotional world of love and the promise of happily ever after.<sup>75</sup> Over time, however, Harlequin and M&B would find out just how diverse the category of “woman” would be, which ultimately resulted in the need to adjust editorial policies regarding story lines and the need to create new “category lines”<sup>76</sup> to address the demands of all kinds of women readers.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, this approach to editorial policy centered on the readers helped HMB gain even greater market share.

### Lawrence Heisey Brings “Modern” Consumer Goods Marketing to Harlequin

It is easy to imagine Richard Bonnycastle, the founder of Harlequin, approving of the hire of marketing maverick Lawrence Heisey as president of Harlequin, some twenty-two years after the company started.<sup>78</sup> Born in 1903, Bonnycastle was trained as a lawyer but preferred the adventure of working for the Hudson Bay Company, which allowed him to travel to the remote wilderness areas of Western Canada.<sup>79</sup> He eventually settled down and took a job at Winnipeg’s Advocate Printers and started Harlequin as a way to take advantage of the burgeoning paperback book business. However, neither Bonnycastle nor Heisey were ever really interested in book publishing—Mary Bonnycastle and Ruth Palmour ran Harlequin and were the leaders of the company in the beginning. Richard Bonnycastle Jr., son of the founder,

75. It is interesting to note that Harlequin attempted a line of science fiction books called “Laser” targeted to men in 1975—the line was not successful. Craig, Sheri. “Harlequin Took a Page from P&G’s Marketing Book to Sell ‘Romance,’” *Marketing*, October 13, 1975, 14.

76. Series or “category” romances are issued under a common imprint/series name that are usually numbered sequentially and released at regular intervals, usually monthly. These books are most commonly published by Harlequin. RWA, “Resources.”

77. For more on advertising, marketing, and consumer history, see Blaszczyk, *Imaging Consumers*; Jones and Tedlow, *Rise and Fall*; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a Consumer Society*; Ohmann, *Selling Culture*; Stearns, *Consumerism in World History*; and Tadjewski and Jones, *History of Marketing Thought*.

78. Richard Bonnycastle died in 1968—before Heisey was hired at Harlequin.

79. The Hudson Bay Company was founded in 1670 as a fur trading company in Canada and developed into a major retail department store that is still in existence today.

eventually took on a leadership role, relocated Harlequin to Toronto in 1969, and, two years later, named Lawrence Heisey Harlequin's president.<sup>80</sup>

Heisey had worked at Procter & Gamble (P&G) and Standard Broadcasting; he brought modern consumer goods marketing to Harlequin and took the same approach to selling books as he took to selling Tide detergent for P&G. "I'm an old soap salesman," Heisey said.<sup>81</sup> Richard Bellringer and William Wilson were members of Heisey's management team: "None of us came from the publishing world," said Bellringer, "but we recognized we had a tiger by the tail."<sup>82</sup> Heisey had made it clear that publishing was not the problem—marketing was. He requested new market research so he could better understand Harlequin as a product. With Heisey's background and experience in marketing, it is clear that this was an *intentional* step in the direction of consumer goods marketing, the next major step in Harlequin's marketing evolution.<sup>83</sup>

Under Heisey's leadership, HMB put resources into television and print advertising, especially women's magazines. One of the more innovative strategies he put in place, however, was product sampling. When it came to this particular marketing technique, Heisey liked to quote Socrates: "If you have a great quantity of sweet nectar for sale, it may be prudent to give each person his first glass for no charge. If your wares are hemlock, be paid before any lips are wet."<sup>84</sup> Clearly, Heisey thought that sampling was a good promotional device, and in 1973 he introduced that concept at Harlequin in a way that had never been done at either M&B or Harlequin by placing the books in and with consumer goods products. Violet Winspear's romance novel *The Honey Is Bitter*, for instance, was packaged in 100,000 boxes of Kotex feminine napkins. HMB also worked with Ajax cleanser and Bio-Ad pre-soak laundry detergent on sampling campaigns and offered free Harlequin romances through a mail-in offer with Colgate-Palmolive. On Mother's Day in 1977, HMB joined with sixty McDonald's fast-food restaurants across Canada to hand out free romance novels to customers. In the United States, HMB worked with direct-sales cosmetic giant Avon on a campaign that gave away 1.5 million romance novels. By the mid-1970s, HMB romance novels were in supermarkets and drugstores, making

80. Heisey, Lawrence, Interviews, December 1995/Summer 1995, Box 1, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

81. Berman, Phyllis. "They Call Us Illegitimate," *Forbes*, March 6, 1978, 37.

82. Craig, "Harlequin Took a Page," 14.

83. *Ibid.*, 14.

84. Heisey, Lawrence, Interviews, December 1995/Summer 1995, Box 1, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

them a convenient purchase for women readers<sup>85</sup>—and in alignment with a weekly household buying cycle.

HMB also had an interesting relationship with women's magazines, most notably the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*. Ads for Harlequin romance novels appeared in *Ladies Home Journal* and, in 1973, were coupled with a marketing program that offered a deep discount on the purchase price of HMB books in an attempt to gain new readers. As part of this campaign, book dealers received two million free books to sell at fifteen cents each—as opposed to the regular price of sixty cents. Reminiscent of M&B's earlier relationship with women's magazines in England, HMB also struck a deal with *Good Housekeeping*. In 1976 the magazine published a complete Harlequin romance novel in one issue that included a coupon for another free Harlequin book.<sup>86</sup> Bellinger said, "It seemed to us Harlequin fell into a category between magazines and paperbacks. Readers who become familiar with a certain magazine's style and content, who come to rely on that, feel the same way about Harlequin books."<sup>87</sup> This comparison between popular romance novels and magazines is made by others in the publishing industry.

Guy Hallowes, a former HMB executive, recalled that in 1971 HMB introduced "fresh books," a concept similar to the life cycle of a magazine: "Books are left on the shelf for a month and replaced by a fresh set of books, the old books are then returned to the distributor. Selling paperback books to chain stores and replacing them every month revolutionized the market and the business—the shelf was constantly moving."<sup>88</sup> Just as a reader could expect a fresh issue of their favorite magazine with new content every month, readers of HMB romance novels could expect fresh books every month. According to Hallowes, "Readers knew what days the books came in. Customers often were standing there waiting and ripped open boxes and grabbed books."<sup>89</sup> Similar to Bellinger, Hallowes describes the HMB romance novel as "more like a magazine than a book—at least in the *behavioral* sense,"<sup>90</sup> an insight that emphasizes the reading habits of romance novel readers. In addition, Dr. Peter Mann mentioned in a letter to John Boon that "it is clear that the romances sell to many people almost like magazines," and

85. Gerus, "Love for Sale."

86. Jensen, *Love's Sweet Return*, 40.

87. Craig, "Harlequin Took a Page," 14.

88. Hallowes, Interview, November 29, 2019. Guy Hallowes was the Executive Vice President Overseas HMB from 1989 to 2002, and Managing Director of HMB UK, 2005–2009.

89. Hallowes, Interview, November 29, 2019.

90. Hallowes, Interview, November 29, 2019. Clare Somerville, former HMB executive, also mentioned HMB's "magazine model" in February 11, 2020, interview.

in that same letter Mann encourages Boon to capitalize on this and communicate with readers through a “small-magazine type of publication and to encourage the readers to feel that they have a fairly personal contact with Mills and Boon.”<sup>91</sup>

Both M&B and Harlequin were, to a significant degree, also vertically integrated. Harlequin’s acquisition of M&B was a step toward greater vertical integration through owning the supplier of the product. HMB bypassed the traditional retailer-distributor relationship for a considerable portion of its business by selling directly to the consumer through a mail-order service called Reader Service. Many readers subscribed to a whole series of Harlequin novels (as opposed to individual authors) through this service, which contributed to a steadier and more uniform sales stream. The Reader Service direct-mail system eliminated distributor-retailer expenses, provided a steady and reliable source of income that most publishers did not have, and thereby offered HMB another dependable and profitable source of revenue. By 1986, for example, direct marketing was responsible for 50 percent of HMB’s profits.<sup>92</sup> “Book clubs are the magic of the business. Harlequin started the clubs as a reader service in the early 1970s, after readers complained that they couldn’t always find all titles in stores. Now, they can join a book club and subscribe to various lines of Harlequins each month, getting the first four free and a 10% discount on future choices,” said David Galloway, president of HMB from 1982 to 1988.<sup>93</sup> The Reader Service at HMB was likely modeled after M&B’s direct-mail service (by catalog), which was in place before World War I. Heisey may have been inspired when he visited M&B in 1970 and met with John Boon. Boon mentioned Heisey in a November 3, 1970, letter he wrote to Peter Mann in which he mentions that Heisey visited his London office and made a number of smart observations about marketing.<sup>94</sup> The acquisition of M&B by Harlequin took place a year later.

Brand recognition and customer loyalty also played a major role in lower book return rates for HMB. When traditional publishers use a retailer or distributor to sell books, they must factor in a return rate—the rate at which unsold books are returned from the retailer or distributor. A traditional publisher could expect a return rate of 35–40 percent;

91. MB ADM/4/1, File: Dr. Peter Mann, 1967–1972, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Letter from Peter H. Mann to John Boon, April 19, 1971.

92. Lerch, Renate. “Harlequin’s Own Happy Ending to Romance Wars,” *Financial Post* (Toronto), October 26, 1987.

93. *Ibid.*

94. MB ADM/3/3, File: J.A. Allen & Co. Ltd., 1972–1975, Mills & Boon Archive, Special Collections, University of Reading, England. Letter from John Boon to Peter H. Mann, November 3, 1970.

HMB reported a return rate of around 20 percent.<sup>95</sup> “Other companies print ten books to sell 6. We print 7.5 to sell 6,” said Heisey, in an interview with *Forbes*.<sup>96</sup> The lower return rate, of course, allowed HMB to keep book prices low, which was especially important considering the number of books the romance reader would potentially purchase.

Heisey and his team had ambitions for even greater international expansion, and once Torstar bought a controlling interest in HMB in 1975, the cash infusion fueled the desired growth. HMB stopped selling foreign rights (for the majority of its markets)<sup>97</sup> and set up separate publishing companies, often joint ventures with other firms, overseas to publish directly in indigenous languages in France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Greece, Spain, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Colombia, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>98</sup> In 1978, HMB entered Sweden, Norway, and Finland, giving away approximately 250,000 free books and breaking a Finnish distribution monopoly by introducing its own book racks in supermarkets.<sup>99</sup> HMB was the global leader in romance publishing by 1981, “with 80 percent of the world market, 18 language translations, and sales of 107 million copies in 98 countries,”<sup>100</sup> demonstrating its ability to manage distribution and translation around the world. In addition, with the introduction of new category lines, HMB continued the tradition of evolving editorial policies concerning story lines that reflected changing social values and captured new markets.<sup>101</sup>

By World War II, popular romance had become a genre; it was a distinct market recognized by the publishing industry and the media. In 1934, W. H. Smith (the newspaper/book shop and commercial lending library) published a survey called “Romance Authors and their Publishers”<sup>102</sup> that listed thirteen firms that published romance novels. M&B was the only firm on the list that exclusively published popular romance novels. Of all the firms, Collins Publishers represented M&B’s biggest competitor. However, M&B published twice as many romance

95. Berman, “They Call Us Illegitimate,” 37.

96. *Ibid.*, 37.

97. Harlequin had licensing deals with Brazil, Israel, and Turkey because of inflation and currency issues. Heisey, Interview, December 1995/Summer 1995, Paul Grescoe Archive.

98. Pullan, Diane. “Harlequin: A Corporate Romance,” *Quill & Quire*, August, 1979.

99. Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, 106–107.

100. *Ibid.*, 106–107.

101. The “Harlequin Presents” category offered more sensual story lines. Eventually, category romances would be marketed according to a “series” or “subgenre” line, which would indicate story line: medical, historical, contemporary, erotic, religious/spiritual, paranormal, suspense, western, young adult, and later on, even NASCAR. Harlequin, “Company Information.” Also see Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste*.

102. McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune*, 74.



novels as Collins each month. Focusing their energy and resources solely on publishing romance novels gave M&B an advantage, as did their “personal touch” approach to marketing.

Publishing generalists may have hesitated in becoming specialists in publishing popular romance novels because of the general lack of regard and the perceived lack of cultural impact of the romance genre. By the 1980s, however, other publishers recognized the potential profit to be made in romance novels, and HMB was confronted with a number of new imprints in North America that were hoping to gain some of HMB’s market share.<sup>103</sup> This period of competition in the 1980s was referred to as the “romance wars” at HMB.<sup>104</sup> Their biggest competitor was the American publisher Simon & Schuster’s Silhouette imprint. In 1982, David Galloway was brought in from Torstar to replace Heisey, and Galloway brokered the deal to acquire Silhouette.<sup>105</sup> As a result of this purchase, HMB sales “doubled from \$20 million annually to \$40 million.”<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

This study on Mills & Boon and Harlequin shows how innovation is implemented in one area of the publishing industry. In the case of HMB, there is evidence that romance publishing took a different approach to marketing and branding as well as author and reader relations compared to traditional publishers of the time. HMB discovered, cultivated, and understood new markets and developed unique ways of maintaining loyal readers. Nurturing romance writers was also critical to their success because the volume of production necessary to meet the demand was much greater than that of the generalist publishers who operated under the traditional publishing model. In addition to their unique branding and marketing practices, M&B extended their business network and a communications system that would be a major draw for Harlequin.

Innovative ideas and the implementation of specific knowledge and practices from the consumer goods industry ultimately enabled HMB to compete against giant generalist publishers such as Simon & Schuster.

103. Competitors included Bantam’s Red Rose Romances, Fawcett Books’ Coventry Books, Ballantine Books’ Love & Life, Berkley Publishing Group’s Second Chance at Love, Dell’s Ecstasy Romances, and Avon’s Finding. Heisey, Lawrence, Interviews, December 1995/Summer 1995, Box 1, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

104. Ross, Oakland. “It’s the Balance That Counts,” *Toronto Star*, April 28, 2002. <https://friends.ca/archive/torontostar020428-2.htm>

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.

David Galloway provides some insight into why many of the smaller romance imprints did not last: “Many publishers had nibbled at the market, including Bantam—the biggest paperback publishers in North America. Of some interest to me as a ‘new boy’ in the publishing game is that the large paperback houses who fight to get on the *New York Times* Best Seller list had such disdain for romance fiction; they felt it was all marketing technique rather than editorial that was the secret of Harlequin. As a result, they continually failed in their attempts to compete because of poor product. You wouldn’t think publishers would make that mistake.”<sup>107</sup> While focusing on marketing efforts set HMB apart from traditional publishers, they did not forget that the quality of their product was key to reader satisfaction. After Richard Bonnycastle Jr., the leaders of HMB had graduate degrees in business from Harvard and had careers at large consumer product companies such as Procter & Gamble and General Foods. They brought those experiences and practices to the publishing industry. However, even though they focused much of their attention on marketing, *they still demanded a good product*. It was understood at HMB that innovative marketing strategies were not a substitute for a good book, just as a strong marketing campaign for Tide detergent was no substitute for an effective stain remover.

M&B and Harlequin did not turn their back entirely on traditional marketing practices to sell romance novels. There is no doubt that they worked with distributors and retailers. In the case of M&B’s Colonial Library and commercial lending libraries, their relationships with distributors and retailers were critical to their international expansion. M&B laid the groundwork for much of what Harlequin would adopt for its own use once it acquired the British firm. Although HMB was particularly good at establishing itself outside North America, that expansion was, in part, built on M&B’s English-language Colonial Library network. As chairman of overseas business, it appears that John Boon continued to guide that expansion for HMB.<sup>108</sup>

Lawrence Heisey (HMB president from 1971 to 1982), David Galloway (HMB president from 1982 to 1988) and Brian Hickey (HMB president from 1988 to 2001—followed by Donna Hayes, the first woman president), excelled at consumer goods marketing, and this, combined with the acquisition of M&B, greatly expanded the company’s global reach. In addition, HMB focused on further developing its direct marketing operations, especially its reader subscription service, which was

107. Galloway, David, Speech from Harlequin Mills & Boon President to the University of Toronto, Faculty of Management Alumni Association, November 22, 1983, Box 4, Paul Grescoe Archive, Special Collections, University of Calgary, Canada.

108. Grescoe, *Merchants of Venus*, 118.

more profitable than retail sales.<sup>92</sup> The combination of these practices allowed for advantages that continued into the twenty-first century and ensured a strong position for HMB as the publishing industry entered the digital age.

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