

Innovations in Romance Novel Distribution at Harlequin, Sourcebooks, and Raincoast Books

**by
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Abstract

This project report delves into the intricate landscape of distributing, selling, marketing, and publicizing romance novels in Canada. It begins by peering into history and the role of Harlequin Enterprises (romance publisher); subsequently, it transitions to the contemporary, examining the sales, marketing, and publicity (SMP) efforts of Raincoast Books (Canadian distributor) and Sourcebooks (American publisher), drawn from practical insights acquired during employment at Raincoast. This report explores promoting romance titles in the media and identifying new event opportunities for Bloom Books, Sourcebook's innovative romance imprint, set against the expansive Canadian retail and distribution terrain. The historical strides taken by Harlequin are contrasted against the ongoing efforts of Raincoast and Sourcebooks. Ultimately, the project report endeavours to map out a path forward for the publishing industry, one that effectively supports romance authors and resonates with an ever-evolving romance fandom, attuned to shifting tastes and preferences.

Keywords: Romance Publishing; Harlequin; Raincoast Books; Sourcebooks; Publicity; Marketing

To my fourteen-year-old self who had no idea how much a summer of reading Jennifer L. Armentrout and Colleen Hoover would change the trajectory of her life.

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Introduction

The Romance Novel: Romancelandia, Subgenres, and Tropes

The romance novel, often dismissed as “your mother’s guilty pleasure” or considered a reading phase that young women eventually outgrow—stories often deemed unworthy of literary merit or close study—generates one billion dollars a year for the publishing industry.¹ Romance accounts for a quarter of all fiction sales and earns twice as much as mystery, its closest genre competitor.² The romance novel fuels the publishing industry.

What defines a romance novel? According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), it is a novel “containing a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.”³ Romance novels often adhere to the conventions of a particular subgenre, including contemporary, erotic, historical, paranormal, and suspense.⁴ Each of these subgenres is characterized by a distinct time period, plot structure, and level of sensuality.

Furthermore, romance novels can be categorized by their tropes, which are defined as “a common or overused theme or device.”⁵ In the world of romance, virtually every book can be identified by its tropes. For instance, Elsie Silver’s *Flawless* is a rancher, small-town romance featuring enemies-to-lovers, forced proximity, and falling for your boss’ daughter tropes. Other examples can be seen in the titles of this paper’s chapters and sections. Tropes are what sometimes lead non-romance readers to claim that romance

¹ Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 1.

² Rebecca Romney, *The Romance Novel in English: A Survey of Rare Books, 1769-1999* (Type Punch Matrix, 2021), 7.

³ Romance Writers of America, “About the Romance Genre,” accessed August 19, 2023, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.

⁴ Romance Writers of America, “About the Romance Genre.”

⁵ “Trope,” in *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “Trope,” August 9, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trope>.

novels lack “innovation” and are “indistinguishable from each other;”⁶ however, it is critical to recognize that while there are a limited number of tropes, there is a multitude of unique takes on each one. It is the discerning romance reader who appreciates the nuances in each writer’s interpretation of a particular trope, whether it is the journey from friends-to-lovers or the classic scenario of the enemies forced to share only one bed.

Romance novels have largely been written by women, about women, and for women. As the *Routledge Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* aptly puts it, “[romance] is still the most woman-centered form of popular culture in the Western world today.”⁷

Frequently, both readers and writers face ridicule from the wider public for the choice to read books that lack “intellectual merit” or “stylistic rigour.”⁸ Often romance is roped into the larger Women’s Fiction category— notice there is no Men’s Fiction category. As the author Meg Wolitzer says in her essay *The Second Shelf*, “any lumping together of disparate female writers by gender... separates the women from the men. And it subtly keeps female writers from finding a coed audience.”⁹ This follows a trend in condescending responses to media and culture made by and consumed by women. Even something as influential to the proliferation of reading as Oprah’s Book Club faced criticism when her picks were too “schmaltzy, and one-dimensional” as author Jonathan Franzen once expressed.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this external criticism has only strengthened the internal community of romance enthusiasts, fostering a strong camaraderie among readers, writers, and

⁶ Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, 2020, 1.

⁷ Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo, 1.

⁸ Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo, 1.

⁹ Meg Wolitzer, "The Second Shelf," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2021, accessed M December 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/books/meg-wolitzer-second-shelf.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁰ Ted Striphas, “A Dialectic With the Everyday: Communication and Cultural Politics on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 3 (2003): 295—316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180302773>.

reviewers. Romance readers and writers within the past decade branded the community as Romancelandia. The term refers to both the physical reader community and the world of online discussion. That is the essence of Romancelandia in all its glory: an online community that Canadian retailers and distributors need to find in real life.

Canadian Book Retail and Distribution Landscape

At its core, book distribution provides “fulfillment and warehousing services [for] a publisher for a fee;”¹¹ however, book distribution in Canada faces its share of challenges, primarily stemming from the expensive and time-consuming nature of shipping books across the vast expanse of the country. Moreover, in stark contrast to the high population and density of the United States, Canada represents a more modest market, characterized by a huge landmass with a small population.

The Canadian book retail market can be categorized into several channels including: bookstore chains, independent bookstores, wholesalers, mass-market retailers, grocery/drugstore outlets, specialty retailers, and the library market. In the current landscape, Indigo is Canada’s predominant bookstore chain. In the 1990s numerous other chains existed until Chapters merged with Coles and SmithBooks in 1994. Subsequently, in 2001, it was Chapters that underwent a buyout and merger with Indigo.¹² Independent bookstores constitute the remaining segment of the traditional book trade.

Non-traditional retailers encompass mass retailers such as Walmart and Toys R Us. Specialty retailers include a wide range of stores that one would not typically think of as a bookstore, such as Urban Outfitters, offering coffee table books and journals, or art

¹¹ Turner-Riggs, “Book Distribution in Canada’s English Language Market,” *Department of Canadian Heritage*, May 2008, 4.

¹² Turner-Riggs, “Economic Profile of the Canadian Book Publishing Industry: Technological, Legislative and Market Changes in Canada’s English-Language Book Industry, 2008–2020,” Heritage Canada, March 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/transparency/open-government/economic-profile-book-publishing-industry.html>.

gallery gift shops, featuring nonfiction titles. The library market, on the other hand, is dominated by library wholesalers.

Through my work at the award-winning Canadian distributor Raincoast, I have gained invaluable firsthand experience in the nuanced aspects of distributing, selling, marketing, and publicizing English-language romance titles in Canada. I began working at Raincoast in May 2023 as a publicist and am involved in a wide variety of tasks from booking interviews, sending review copies, and facilitating events.

As Sourcebooks' distributor, Raincoast has a front-row seat to the SMP tactics of Bloom Books, and directly supports reaching today's Canadian romance reader. Most of these tactics draw inspiration from the pioneering methods employed by Harlequin, the foremost name in romance publishing. Now it is Sourcebooks, the largest romance publisher in the United States that relies upon Raincoast to get the books into the hands of Canadians, just as Harlequin's distributor once did.

Chapter I delves into an exploration of the history of the most infamous romance publisher of the twentieth century: Harlequin Enterprises. By examining early strategies and innovations in marketing, publicity, and distribution, we gain insight into how Harlequin first cultivated a generation of romance readers.

Chapter II explores the current landscape of romance sales, marketing, and publicity (SMP) as informed by my hands-on experience of working as a publicist for one of Canada's leading distributors, Raincoast Books. This chapter grapples with the challenges associated with pitching romance titles to the media and identifies opportunities for new publicity strategies. Ultimately, Chapter II aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Raincoast's SMP team operates in the realm of romance in 2023. Furthermore, it sheds light on how the broader industry can lend support to romance titles.

Chapter III contrasts Harlequin's historical efforts from the 1950s to the 2000s with Raincoast's contemporary tactics. This section considers shifts in the retail landscape, evolving societal norms, the emergence of self-publishing, digital forms, and the rise of

social media. Its objective is to address how marketers, publicists, and sales representatives in the publishing industry can more effectively support romance authors in connecting with the avid fandom.

The conclusion follows in two parts, first a reflection on the insights gleaned from this research regarding the marketing, publicity, and distribution of romance titles in Canada. Then a concluding thought on the potential future of romance publishing.

Chapter I: Historical Romance: A History of Canada's First Romance Publisher

Section I: The Meet Cute: Harlequin's Beginnings

Harlequin's Early Business Structure

Harlequin was founded by Richard Bonnycastle in Winnipeg in 1949.¹³ What initially began as an idea to create a publishing company specializing in mass-market reprints¹⁴ and to serve as a fun hobby for Bonnycastle evolved into a romance empire spanning more than seventy-five years.

Interestingly, the origin of the name "Harlequin", remains a bit of a mystery. All that Bonnycastle's daughter Judy remembers is her mother and father sketching out the logo at the kitchen table.¹⁵ The inaugural Harlequin title, *The Manatee* by Nancy Bruff, was published in 1949¹⁶ and was squarely in the thriller genre.¹⁷ Unfortunately, Harlequin's first year was marred by a discouraging high return rate for most titles.

Richard Bonnycastle was never that interested in the publishing process,¹⁸ which led him to delegate most of the responsibilities to his business partner Jack Palmer. Tragically,

¹³ Paul Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance* (Raincoast Books, 1996), 15.

¹⁴ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 29.

¹⁵ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 29.

¹⁶ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 31.

¹⁷ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 48.

¹⁸ Denise Hardesty Sutton, "Marketing Love: Romance Publishers Mills and Boon," *Enterprise & Society* 23, no. 3 (2022): 699, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2020.76>.

Palmer died of a heart attack within the company's first year.¹⁹ Consequently, Bonnycastle turned to the capable women in his life to curate the list of titles and oversee operations. These women were Bonnycastle's personal secretary, Ruth Palmour, and his wife, Mary Bonnycastle.²⁰ Both of them would steer the direction of the company towards romance publishing.

Birth of the Harlequin Romance

The decision to venture into romance publishing was driven by several factors: romance titles had the fewest returns²¹ and the shift in editorial authority. Richard Bonnycastle appointed his wife, Mary Bonnycastle, as editor. He saw an avid reader who seemed a natural choice to fill the void left by Jack Palmer's passing. Mary Bonnycastle saw the selling power of romance, and after her husband crunched the numbers — specifically that the romance titles had the smallest return rate — Harlequin shifted its focus to reprinting romances. Reprinting meant that Harlequin would not publish an original manuscript, rather the Bonnycastles would pay for the right to publish an existing story into the North American market.

However, the question remained: where to acquire the source material? It was Ruth Palmour who introduced Mary Bonnycastle to Mills & Boon, an established English romance publisher that had been in operation since 1908.²² In 1957, Harlequin wrote to Mills & Boon about acquiring reprinting rights.²³ The partnership started as a trial run, with Harlequin printing only 1000 copies of each of their first two Mills & Boon reprints:

¹⁹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 33.

²⁰ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 36-37.

²¹ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 48.

²² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 15.

²³ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 51.

Anne Vinton's *The Hospital in Buwambo*²⁴ and Mary Burchell's *Hospital Corridors*.²⁵ This endeavour proved successful, prompting Harlequin to establish a schedule wherein they published four Mills & Boon reprints each month, with print runs totalling 7,500 copies.²⁶ This trial was a success, hugely in part due to Harlequin's distribution practices.

Harlequin's Distribution Strategies

Paperback publishing was not a novel concept, and neither was the mass-market format, which was initially popularized by Allen Lane's Penguin Books line.²⁷ In the late 1940s, a paperback revolution was in full swing, with bookshops and drugstores stocking titles from Avon, Dell, Signet, and Bantam, all priced at just a few pennies.²⁸ Harlequin seized this opportunity, recognizing that publishing in strippable, mass-market allowed them to maintain competitive prices. This complemented their efforts to further lower return rates; the practice of returning unsold stock was developed in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression and remains to this day. The success of Harlequin's paperbacks even persuaded Mills & Boon to abandon hardcovers for its domestic publishing program.²⁹

During its early years, Harlequin's distribution strategy focused on securing North America's best distributor, Curtis Circulating Company.³⁰ Known as Curtis Distributing in Canada, one of its employees, the infamous Lloyd Van Alstyne was a ruthless

²⁴ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 52.

²⁵ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 63.

²⁶ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 62.

²⁷ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 27.

²⁸ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 28.

²⁹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 53.

³⁰ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 28.

salesman. He earned the moniker, “the terror of the industry,” as newsstands had to keep Van Alstyne happy to keep receiving Curtis’ magazines. This meant agreeing to sell the items he pressured them to, including the increasingly popular Harlequin titles.³¹ These Harlequins were essentially imported Mills & Boon romances, with the huge caveat that they were severely edited.

Editorial Changes for the Canadian Market

Harlequin and Mills & Boon diverged significantly in their editorial approach. Mills & Boon faced criticism for their “sheer lack of editing” from Harlequin’s editorial staff.³² In contrast, Harlequin boasted an editorial team of Ruth Palmour, Mary Bonnycastle, and her daughter Judy Burgess, who joined the editorial team in the mid-1960s.³³ Guided by Mary Bonnycastle’s decency code, they adhered to stringent editorial standards. Her responses on manuscripts often comprised of a few standard shorthand remarks, “Ok,” “Will do,” and “No.”³⁴ That decency code often meant entire passages were removed, such as those that featured swearing and more controversially, explicit sexual content. Alan Boon once voiced his desire for Mills & Boon books to “be more realistic”, meaning a high level of sensuality while he complained that, “Mrs. Bonnycastle felt they shouldn’t bring a blush to the cheek.”³⁵

Due to these editorial differences, certain Mills & Boon titles were never re-printed by Harlequin, while others came much later. Works like Rachel Lindsay’s *Price of Love* and Margaret Rome’s *The Marriage of Caroline Lindsay* were deemed “too advanced,”

³¹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 57.

³² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 96.

³³ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 56.

³⁴ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 55.

³⁵ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 56.

primarily due to their depictions of sex scenes.³⁶ While Mills & Boon kept pace with evolving reader preferences, Harlequin lagged. Instead, Harlequin opted to enhance its brand by marketing its books as a product.³⁷ From the company's inception, books were treated no differently than any other consumer product. It was all about identifying the target audience and effectively marketing to them. This came in stark contrast to other publishers who saw books as cultural products, not consumer products. Publishers saw each book as a unique literary work; to outsiders, Harlequins were nothing more than a branded product.³⁸ This is positioning, an ever-present marketing term in publishing today, but it was Harlequin who first considered how their product was positioned, not just in stores, but in the minds of its readers. Ultimately, the marketing strategy worked. As demand for the romances grew, Harlequin eyed expansion and, more specifically, a merger.

Section II: Rivals-to-Lovers: Harlequin Expands

Acquisition of Mills & Boon

In 1972, Harlequin formally acquired Mills & Boon.³⁹ Mills & Boon never described this as a takeover, preferring to refer to it as a merger.⁴⁰ Although Harlequin began to make marketing decisions for Mills & Boon in the 1970s, they were still divided editorially. John Boon, in reflecting on Harlequin's role said, "Harlequin knew nothing about

³⁶ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 74.

³⁷ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 74.

³⁸ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 76.

³⁹ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 682.

⁴⁰ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 84.

publishing. They were marketers. They said that books could be sold like soap. But books aren't soap."⁴¹

Given their expertise in marketing, Harlequin advocated for paperback publishing and introduced the iconic red rose logo on Mills & Boon paperbacks in 1974.⁴² Editorial divisions, however, persisted. What was to be done with the Mills & Boon titles that did not align with Mary Bonnycastle's sweet editorial voice? The solution was to create the Harlequin Presents line, which had over fifty titles in the pipeline awaiting publication.⁴³ These ideas and many of Harlequin's innovations took root in the 1970s, spearheaded by a new company leader.

Larry Heiser's New Strategy: Sell Books Like Soap

Larry Heiser assumed the role of President at Harlequin Enterprises in the 1970s, drawing on his sales background at Procter & Gamble, which allowed him to view books as not different than other products. Sy Turk, the President of Simon & Schuster said of Heisey's approach, "he did not discuss anything about the content. That was brilliant. He was dealing with *product*."⁴⁴ Heisey who joined the company without having read a Harlequin,⁴⁵ rather recognized that his expertise in selling products to women would be valuable, because it made little difference whether the product was soap or books.

Heisey's innovative approach included sending hundreds of samplers to retailers for distribution as promotional material to customers. The kits featured taglines such as,

⁴¹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 95.

⁴² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 94.

⁴³ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 78.

⁴⁴ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 86. Emphasis is original.

⁴⁵ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 76.

“customers bought an average of four copies at a time.”⁴⁶ It was sales points like this that were designed to convince retailers to stock the entire line. Under Heisey’s leadership, Harlequin became the first publisher to use nationwide television advertising. The advertisements aired in 1974, marking Harlequin’s twenty-fifth year of operation, the ads aired on televisions in Calgary and ten American cities. In these markets, sales jumped by seventy-nine percent, in stark contrast to the twenty-seven percent growth seen elsewhere in North America.⁴⁷ The advertising push extended beyond television, as Harlequin took over expansive window displays at Eaton’s in Winnipeg and Simpson’s in Toronto.

Most ground breaking for the book retailer landscape was Harlequin’s entry into the places frequented by women, such as grocery and drug stores. The entirety of Harlequin’s marketing strategy revolved around where a woman would be. The television advertisements aired during soap operas and game shows⁴⁸ as they recognized that predominantly women watched daytime television. The strategy extended beyond viewing habits and shopping preferences; it harnessed the power of other consumer goods beloved by women.

Drawing upon his Procter & Gamble experience, Heisey incorporated product sampling strategies. This time, Harlequins became the samples, with books included in boxes of detergent and feminine hygiene products.⁴⁹ For a key title, *The Honey is Bitter*, which marked a significant editorial shift with its closed-door portrayal of sex, an extensive marketing campaign was imperative. The book was bundled in 100,000 boxes of Kotex feminine napkins as part of one of Harlequin’s first product sampling campaigns.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 87.

⁴⁷ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 87.

⁴⁸ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 87.

⁴⁹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 87-89.

⁵⁰ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 700.

Understanding the power of partnerships, Harlequin collaborated with the direct-sales cosmetic company Avon to give away 1.5 million titles in their orders.⁵¹ One of Heisey's most lucrative partnerships was with McDonalds' where the fast-food chain distributed Harlequins at sixty locations as a part of a Mother's Day campaign.⁵²

Harlequin also advertised in popular women's magazines⁵³ and employed a direct-mail system to sell directly to readers through book clubs, thus reducing distribution fees. By 1986, direct sales constituted 50% of profits.⁵⁴ The books rotated monthly, creating constant movement on the shelf and heightened reader expectations for fresh titles.⁵⁵ Heisey regarded the direct-mail side of the business as, "the largest segment of profitability to the company."⁵⁶

By the 1980s, Harlequin was selling 168 million units annually⁵⁷ and investing millions into consumer advertising.⁵⁸ They sent extensive PR kits to bookstores detailing how they could, "attract new female traffic to your store, resulting in increased sales in other areas!"⁵⁹ In these kits Harlequin boasted about its marketing strategy encompassing television advertising, product sampling, audience research, publicity campaigns, book

⁵¹ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 700.

⁵² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 89.

⁵³ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 701.

⁵⁴ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 702.

⁵⁵ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 701.

⁵⁶ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 92.

⁵⁷ Janice A Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 20.

⁵⁸ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 82.

⁵⁹ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 84.

stands, and backlist selling.⁶⁰ These new marketing innovations were coupled with the influx of more sensual titles having joined Harlequin's catalogue.

Section III: Forced Proximity: The Domination of Harlequin Romance

The Rise of Harlequin Presents

Harlequin introduced its Harlequin Presents line in 1973,⁶¹ a move prompted by the looming threat of American competition, particularly from Avon's more risqué publishing program. The catalyst for this shift was Avon's 1971 publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss' *The Flame and the Flower*, often recognized as the first "bodice ripper."⁶² Competitors were on the rise, with not just Avon but Dell's Candlelight Romances gaining prominence. If Harlequin was to compete, things had to change.

In response, Harlequin began to align with customer preferences, publishing more sensual works that catered to readers seeking such content. After waiting for several years Harlequin had amassed a backlist of sensual Mills & Boon titles that could populate the Presents line. Additionally, there was a keen audience that was waiting to read many of Mills & Boon's most popular authors, including Violet Winspear.

Harlequin's apparent lag behind Mills & Boon and its competitors may appear incongruous for such an innovative company; however, Harlequin was managed by marketers who focused on product sampling and television advertisements, often at the expense of promptly responding to customer feedback.⁶³ Consequently, when Harlequin Presents finally debuted, pent-up demand drove remarkable sales. It was the success of

⁶⁰ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 84.

⁶¹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 94.

⁶² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 93.

⁶³ Romney, *The Romance Novel in English*, 74.

this line that propelled Harlequin to its next chapter: a quest to dominate the global romance market.

Harlequin's Quest for Domination of the Global Romance Market

Under Larry Heisey's leadership, Harlequin set its sights beyond North America. The company's comptroller noted of Heisey, "the key was in [his] understanding that here was a product women in all cultures of the world would have an insatiable desire for—if we could only get it to them."⁶⁴ In 1975, Harlequin initiated its European expansion, beginning with Holland, followed by West Germany and France. Prior to the mid-70s, Harlequin licensed foreign language rights to local publishers.⁶⁵ Entering the French market was difficult, as French publishers had insisted that French women would not be interested. However, Heisey pushed to set up a French office, and within a few years, Harlequin controlled three-quarters of the French romance market.⁶⁶

With quick succession, Heisey captured markets reluctant to let Harlequin in. Harlequin expanded into Scandinavia in 1978,⁶⁷ Spain in 1979,⁶⁸ and Japan that same year. In the case of Japan, Harlequin had to adjust cover designs, as featuring a couple in an embrace on the cover was discouraged by the Japanese translation team. A book cover that featured such public displays of affection was deemed "unacceptable" in that market.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 105.

⁶⁵ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 106.

⁶⁶ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 111.

⁶⁷ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 113.

⁶⁸ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 114.

⁶⁹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 117.

While Harlequin expanded globally, it was fighting a war south of the border. Harlequin no longer comfortably dominated the US market, as it entered what became known as the “romance wars”⁷⁰ with Simon & Schuster and its Silhouette line. Paul Grescoe observed, “If Larry Heisey were to write a book about his career with Harlequin, he would end the story in 1980.”⁷¹ Harlequin’s lustre would diminish as it faced overwhelming American competition. Simon & Schuster’s Silhouette line featured ex-Harlequin writers and adopted a cover style that mimicked the Presents line to such an extent that Harlequin took legal action and won an injunction against Silhouette.⁷²

One of the most impactful foreign marketing campaigns orchestrated by the company was inspired by Heisey’s earlier success with product sampling. Harlequin was on the ground in East Germany in 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell. Staff distributed more than 700,000 Harlequins to East German women crossing into West Berlin.⁷³ Within a span of four months, Harlequin had proliferated throughout former East Germany, then the following two years saw Harlequin expansion into Polish, Hungarian, and Czech markets.⁷⁴ For the twentieth-century woman, Harlequin romances presented the chance to escape, which is not dissimilar to the desires of a 2023 Harlequin reader, as the desire to escape into a story is just as timeless as a love story.

⁷⁰ Sutton, *Marketing Love*, 708.

The term “romance wars” was used in-house at Harlequin to describe this period.

⁷¹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 153.

⁷² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 160.

⁷³ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 681.

⁷⁴ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 681.

Harlequin's Legacy

Harlequin is not just the most renowned name in romance publishing; it stands as one of the most recognized brands in the entire industry. Harlequin books promised the happily ever after that many generations of women craved. For the publishing industry they, “disrupted and redefined standard publishing practices to reach romance novel readers in their domestic markets and around the world, and they built powerful brands that became synonymous with the romance novel.”⁷⁵ It is important to note that Harlequin's impact extends far beyond the scope of the popular romance novel, encompassing ventures into young adult titles and literary fiction through imprints Inkyard and Canary Street Press respectively. With such successful brand recognition spanning decades, Harlequin not only persists but has further expanded.

Harlequin continues to retain its dedicated readership, but there is a notable shift in the median age of the typical romance reader from mid-forties in the 1990s⁷⁶ to mid-thirties in the 2010s⁷⁷. These shifts have been accompanied by evolving tastes. The accessibility of self-publishing has ushered in a new era of romance powerhouses. These younger readers are not purchasing an entire line of mass-market paperbacks, they find themselves inundated with online recommendations, creating a fierce competition to stand out in such a saturated market. Harlequin's innovative contributions to the industry serve as a testament to the need for a revival of that pioneering spirit to meet the evolving demands of romance readers. By closely examining the risks Harlequin once undertook, we can gain valuable insights into discerning which approaches remain effective and which may require adaptation in the modern context. Publishers like Sourcebooks are armed with extensive data and are ideally positioned to elevate trending authors. On the distribution front, Raincoast is well-prepared to tackle the challenge of distributing romance titles across Canada.

⁷⁵ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 681.

⁷⁶ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 227.

⁷⁷ Romance Writers of America, "About the Romance Genre."

Chapter II: Contemporary Romance: The State of Romance at Raincoast and Sourcebooks

Section I: Small-town Romance: Raincoast and Sourcebooks' Beginnings

Brief History of Raincoast

Raincoast Books was established in 1979 as a division of Raincoast Book Distribution Inc.⁷⁸ The contemporary company structure comprises three distinct divisions: Raincoast Books, Publisher's Group Canada (PGC), and BookExpress. PGC specializes in smaller independent publishers, while BookExpress functions as Raincoast's wholesale division. Raincoast signed its first distribution deal with Chronicle Books in 1988.

In 1995, Raincoast embarked on a publishing program which would last until 2008.⁷⁹ During this period, Raincoast Publishing won a Governor General award for the children's title, Allen Sapp's *The Song Within My Heart*;⁸⁰ however, this would not be Raincoast's most significant children's book, as they would acquire the rights to *Harry Potter* in the Canadian market. The opportunity arose when Allan MacDougall visited the Bloomsbury offices in London, England and heard about a manuscript floating around about a boy wizard. Initially, Bloomsbury did not have Canadian rights, so MacDougall thought the opportunity had passed. A few years later, during a conversation at the Frankfurt Book Fair, it became evident that Canadian rights were still available, prompting Raincoast to make a successful bid.⁸¹ The first Harry Potter book, *Harry*

⁷⁸ Raincoast Books, "About Raincoast Books," accessed June 14, 2023, <https://www.raincoast.com/about>.

⁷⁹ Raincoast Books, "About Raincoast Books."

⁸⁰ Governor General's Literary Awards, "Past Winners and Finalists," accessed August 8, 2023, <https://ggbooks.ca/past-winners-and-finalists>.

⁸¹ "Obituary: Allan MacDougall, Co-Founder of Raincoast Books," *As It Happens*, Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, February 21, 2019, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2728252263?parentSessionId=rlOlZiC8Te0SzjCAKTqhJPIIQDqOGfTJTEJKv%2FODOhI%3D&pq-origsite=primo&accountid=13800>.

Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, was published in Canada by Raincoast in 1998 and Raincoast would go on to have much success with the publication of the subsequent books in the series.

By 2003, with the publication of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Raincoast set a record for the largest domestic print run in Canadian publishing history. This record was subsequently surpassed with the publication of the final two *Harry Potter* books; however, in 2008, Raincoast Publishing ceased operations, citing cost-controlling measures as the primary reason for the decision.⁸² Raincoast now focuses on distributing some of the top Canadian and American publishers across Canada, including Sourcebooks.

Brief History of Sourcebooks

In 2011, Raincoast approached Sourcebooks to enter a distribution partnership, motivated by the remarkable growth Sourcebooks had achieved.⁸³ Fast forward to 2023, and Sourcebooks' growth has further accelerated. In 2021, they were the sixteenth largest publisher in Canada in terms of book sales, a position that surged to the tenth largest in 2022. As of August 2023, Sourcebooks has become the eighth largest publisher in Canada, now commanding 1% of the entire Canadian book market.

Sourcebooks had humble beginnings, starting out of the publisher and founder Dominique Raccah's bedroom in Naperville, Illinois in 1987. A decade later, *Publishers Weekly* listed Sourcebooks as the sixth fastest-growing smaller publisher in the United States. Fueled by the entrepreneurial vision of its founder, Sourcebooks' growth strategy in the 1990s and 2000s, revolved around acquiring smaller imprints. Raccah told the

⁸² Scott MacDonald, "Raincoast Drops Publishing Program, Plans Cuts across the Board," *Quill and Quire* (blog), January 7, 2008, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/raincoast-drops-publishing-program-plans-cuts-across-the-board>.

⁸³ Chelsea Murray, "Raincoast Picks up Sourcebooks, Settles into Larger Warehouse," *Quill and Quire* (blog), January 4, 2011, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/raincoast-picks-up-sourcebooks-settles-into-larger-warehouse>.

American Booksellers Association that Sourcebooks is, “America’s most female-forward publisher and certainly North America’s largest woman-owned publisher.”⁸⁴ It should come as no surprise that a company founded by a trailblazing female entrepreneur celebrates and uplifts authors who share a similar spirit.

In collaboration with E. L. James⁸⁵, the author of the infamous *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Sourcebooks established the Bloom Books imprint in 2021. Raccach described this imprint as one that will, “expand what publishing can be for women authors.”⁸⁶ Bloom Books operates on “a proprietary model that puts “the instant” in instant bestseller.”⁸⁷ This business model supports “entrepreneurial” authors, primarily the top performers in self-published romance. The imprint launched fifty-five titles in 2022,⁸⁸ challenging the traditional publishing timelines to align better with the swiftness of self-publishing. What drives Bloom’s acquisition process is “seeing yourself in Bloom”⁸⁹ or the belief in, “owning and taking control of your own narrative,”⁹⁰ mirroring their author’s determination to seize control of their publishing endeavours.

⁸⁴ The American Booksellers Association, "A Closer Look at Sourcebooks, Dominique Raccach's 'Female-Forward' Publishing Company," May 23, 2018, <https://www.bookweb.org/news/closer-look-sourcebooks-dominique-raccachs-female-forward-publishing-company-104553>.

⁸⁵ Jim Milliot, "Book Publishing, the Sourcebooks Way," *Publishers Weekly*, March 3, 2023, accessed June 19, 2023, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/91686-dominique-raccach-does-it-her-way.html>.

⁸⁶ Jim Milliot, "Sourcebooks Launches Women Voices Imprint with E. L. James as First Author." *Publishers Weekly*, March 1, 2023, accessed June 19, 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/85704-sourcebooks-launches-women-voices-imprint-with-e-l-james-as-first-author.html>.

⁸⁷ Sourcebooks, LLC, "About Sourcebooks - Book Publisher," accessed June 19, 2023, <https://read.sourcebooks.com/about-us.html>.

⁸⁸ Milliot, "Book Publishing, the Sourcebooks Way."

⁸⁹ Bloom Books, "Bloom Books Celebrates Stories with Trailblazing Authors," accessed June 19, 2023, <https://www.bloombooks.com/>.

⁹⁰ Bloom Books, "Trailblazing Authors."

In conversations with Bloom authors, it is apparent that they enjoy more control over the publishing process, ensuring a smoother transition from the self-publishing world. They have a greater say in cover treatments, publication dates, marketing materials, and events. By contrast, why would a self-published author opt to join Bloom? The allure lies in the unique feeling of seeing their books on the shelves of Barnes & Noble and Target, an accomplishment often unattainable on their own. Along with SMP, Sourcebooks manages American distribution, enabling these authors to penetrate previously inaccessible retail markets. In Canada, Raincoast takes on the responsibility of selling Bloom's authors into the Canadian market.

Raincoast Now

Raincoast's SMP team collaborates closely with the dedicated Sourcebooks international marketing team to promote and distribute books across Canada, catering to a diverse range of outlets from small independent bookstores to national accounts like Indigo, Costco, and Toys R US. To efficiently cover the vast Canadian landscape, Raincoast is represented by agency representatives from Ampersand Inc. and Hornblower Group. Ampersand representatives sell to independent bookstores, library wholesalers, and specialty retailers throughout Canada, with specific emphasis on Western Canada and Ontario, while the reps at Hornblower oversee the Quebec and Atlantic Canada regions.⁹¹

Raincoast distribution encompasses publishers from both Canada and the United States. Canadian publishers rely on Raincoast for comprehensive distribution and sales, and they can tap into Raincoast's expertise with marketing and publicity when needed. For American publishers like Sourcebooks, Raincoast serves as an extension of their operations in Canada. Raincoast goes beyond mere distribution, taking up the crucial roles of Canadian-specific sales, marketing, and distribution, effectively bridging the gap between publishers and the Canadian market.

⁹¹ "Updated Raincoast Staff Contact List_Oct2023.Pdf," accessed October 30, 2023, https://www.raincoast.com/images/uploads/Updated%20Raincoast%20Staff%20Contact%20List_Oct2023.pdf.

Speaking from my professional experience as Raincoast’s adult fiction and nonfiction publicist, the role revolves around media and events, serving as the essential link between the publisher and the media. Historically, securing media coverage has stood out as, “one of the most influential ways of promoting purchase.”⁹²

The publicity department at Raincoast is organized into three distinct segments: a publicist dedicated to adult fiction and nonfiction, another focused on children’s and teen titles, and an assistant who handles cookbook publicity. A Raincoast publicist effectively serves as a bridge between various facets of the publishing industry. When it comes to arranging interviews, the Raincoast publicist typically engages with the American publicist and, at times, the author to coordinate logistics, while simultaneously planning for the interview with their media contact. A substantial portion of a publicist’s responsibilities revolves around the critical concept of author care. This entails providing support to authors while keeping their preferences and comfort levels front of mind. For instance, if an author is hesitant about being interviewed, the publicist refrains from booking them. Conversely, when an author exhibits enthusiasm for engaging with fans and bookstores, the publicist actively proposes event opportunities and helps facilitate them. Events — while meaning the world to fans — rarely drive book sales the way a successful media hit can.

Section II: Marriage of Convenience: Pitching to “Traditional Media”

State of the Canadian Literary Media Landscape

In Canada, only a handful of key media outlets have the reach to significantly drive book sales. Securing media coverage is often viewed as an essential piece of author care, demonstrating to an author that a publicist is committed to getting their book the attention it deserves. The *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* hold significance as national papers of record and keepers of bestseller lists. Even for American publishers, achieving bestseller

⁹² Alison Baverstock and Susannah Bowen, *How to Market Books*, 6th ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

status in the *Toronto Star* and/or *Globe and Mail* is considered a noteworthy accomplishment. *CBC Books* is the pivotal player in book coverage offering not only online content, but also hosting reviews, interviews, and roundups on CBC Radio. According to the CBC 2022-2023 Annual Report, CBC and CBC Radio's digital reach is 21.4 million unique visitors.⁹³ Two CBC Radio shows are dedicated to books: *The Next Chapter* features author interviews, while *Writers & Co.* delves into discussions on literary fiction.

The Post family of news sites and newspapers, including the *National Post* and the *Vancouver Sun*, proves invaluable for niche coverage. The *National Post*, for example, excels in cookbook coverage, while the *Vancouver Sun* in addition to cross-posting that cookbook coverage also reviews books related to Vancouver or British Columbia. Various local newspapers, such as the *Winnipeg Free Press*, are also important targets for pitches. *Winnipeg Free Press* stands out for its willingness to review a wide range of genres and its impartiality towards Canadian and non-Canadian authors alike. They are also the last independently owned large-circulation newspaper in the country and prioritizes its connection with McNally Robinson one of Canada's biggest independent bookstores.

Several print media outlets feature book-related content, including *Zoomer* magazine, *Chatelaine*, *Quill and Quire*, and *Canadian Living*. These outlets, known as "long leads," have extended lead times for publication, as magazines are typically sent to print months in advance of their release. For instance, the Books editor at *Canadian Living* reached out in June 2023 for advance copies for inclusion in the September 2023 issue.

Television, particularly daytime shows, plays a role in cookbook promotion with cookbook authors conducting cooking demonstrations; however, securing coverage on television shows like CTV's *The Social*, along with the various media sources mentioned above, is far from guaranteed.

⁹³ CBC/Radio-Canada, *Annual Report 2022-2023* (Toronto: CBC/Radio-Canada, 2023), 18, <https://site-cbc.radio-canada.ca/documents/impact-and-accountability/finances/2023/2022-2023-Annual-Report.pdf>.

Successes (and failures) of Romance Pitches

Pitching any book can be challenging, and pitching a romance novel in Canada can be even more daunting. The Canadian media landscape operates in a way that places considerable influence on a select group of reviewers. It is the personal tastes of these key reviewers, rather than public demand, that largely determine which books receive media coverage. Publicists must navigate the unique tastes of these reviewers.

A key Sourcebooks title for this Spring/Summer 2023 season was E. L. James' *The Missus*, a follow-up to *The Mister* and her second book outside of the world of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Despite James' fame as an author, no Canadian media featured the book. After media copies were distributed with a pitch, a key Canadian reviewer deemed it "too commercial."

Furthermore, a publicist cannot control an author's media availability. Some authors, like E. L. James, may not need media coverage to sell their books because they have dedicated fan bases. In James' case, the media has often criticized her work, leading her to be cautious about granting access to them. As book marketing experts Alison Baverstock and Susannah Bowen note, "opportunities for media coverage go far wider than their traditional location on the book review pages of newspapers."⁹⁴ Raincoast recognizes this and so the publicity team cultivates relationships across the media landscape, not just in print. CBC Radio is an enormously important contact, especially for introducing romance to a new audience such as when *The Next Chapter* interviewed Canadian romance author Lily Chu.⁹⁵

While Bloom titles perform well both in the United States and Canada, many struggle to secure a spot on the bestseller list. In Canada, prominent bestseller lists typically exclude books that have been previously published, thereby keeping these Bloom re-releases off the charts. These books are also seen as lacking the novelty factor, as they have already

⁹⁴ Baverstock and Bowen, *How to Market Books*.

⁹⁵ "Lily Chu on How K-Pop Inspired Her Latest Romantic Comedy," *The Next Chapter*, CBC, August 19, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-67-the-next-chapter/clip/16004217-lily-chu-k-pop-inspired-latest-romantic-comedy>.

been read by numerous people. Baverstock and Bowen rightly point out that one of the best ways to secure a media hit is the prospect of “offering sole access.”⁹⁶ This becomes challenging when the books lack the aura of newness and have no history of charting on Canadian bestseller lists. Consequently, authors of such books may not be prime candidates for interviews in the eyes of media outlets. Thanks to their pre-existing fan bases, they are prime candidates for a different form of publicity, an event.

Section III: Only One Bed: Planning Romance Author Events

Organizing and Executing Book Signings

In romance publishing, staying relevant often requires maintaining a rapid pace of publication, hence many romance authors have been writing intensely for years. In my casual conversations with many authors, the rapid publication schedule can lead to various issues, ranging from physical problems like carpal tunnel to mental burnout; however, some authors genuinely enjoy the idea of meeting their fans, including Elsie Silver.

Elsie Silver is a TikTok sensation with her *Chestnut Springs* series. The remarkable popularity of her books propelled her from being a self-published one to a traditionally published author in just a few years. Her books are cowboy/rancher romance stories set in a small, fictionalized Alberta town.

Since Elsie is locally based near Raincoast, she was able to visit the Raincoast office in June 2023 to discuss publicity plans. Together, Raincoast devised a plan that included a local signing and one signing in Calgary. For the local signing, Black Bond Books was selected. Located in Surrey, this store had management that was very supportive of both Elsie and the romance genre.⁹⁷ The event was scheduled for two days after the on-sale date, primarily relying on online promotion. Elsie played a significant role in promoting

⁹⁶ Baverstock and Bowen, *How to Market Books*, 260.

⁹⁷ Book Warehouse, "Elsie Silver Book Signing and Meet & Greet @ Black Bond Central City," accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.bookwarehouse.ca/events/29204>.

the event by sharing the promotional graphic made by the Raincoast marketing team with her followers through her private Facebook group, newsletter, and Instagram.



Figure 1: Elsie Silver Black Bond Event Promotional Graphic. Image Credit Melissa Pellegrin.

Approximately fifty people attended the event on August 31, 2023. Elsie’s fans came with stacks of her backlist books in various covers but also purchased the new Bloom edition.



Figure 2: A Comprehensive Guide to Every Elsie Silver Edition. Image credit Gillian Pond. Image Accessed from The Elsie Silver Saloon Facebook Group.

Many fans expressed a desire to own each cover edition. These readers were not only enthusiastic about Elsie Silver, but many were excited by Black Bond's extensive romance collection. One fan purchased over \$200 worth of Raincoast titles, the majority being the most prominent Bloom Book titles. Throughout the evening many of us hand-sold books, with a simple "I loved that book."



Figure 3: Lineup at the start of Elsie Silver's Black Bond Signing. Image credit Christina Morden.

From small local bookstore signings to events at the national chain, one of the largest events planned for this fall was Lucy Score's signing at Indigo Metrotown on September 9, 2023.⁹⁸ Lucy Score is one of Bloom Books' top authors having sold over 55,500 copies of her books in Canada alone.⁹⁹ The event was ticketed and had over one hundred and thirty attendees.

⁹⁸ Ticketscene, "In Person: Lucy Score," accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.ticketscene.ca/events/45626/>.

⁹⁹ BNC SalesData, "Lucy Score Canadian Sales as of Sept 16-23," accessed September 16, 2023.



Figure 4: Crowd at Lucy Score's Indigo Metrotown Signing. Image Credit Abby Smeath.

Lucy Score's small-town romances are known for their witty banter and imaginative plot lines. This tour was dedicated to *Things We Left Behind*, the third book in the *Knockemout* series. The event began with a moderated question-and-answer session which got Lucy Score's audience excited and engaged. This event showcased the remarkable dedication of romance fans, as they drove hours to be there, and had inside jokes with Lucy. Many of them wanted pictures not only with Lucy but also with her husband, whom she affectionately refers to online as "Mr. Lucy." Lucy Score has what many would call an avid fan base; fans are so dedicated to her that a contingency of them only read books written by her. Lucy Score has not built an avid reader of romance; she has built a Lucy Score fandom. Events such as these are a costly endeavour generating a small number of sales, thus most book sales are not tied to a specific event, but instead are everyday purchases at bookstores.

Section IV: Friends-to-Lovers: Selling Romance at Raincoast

Altering Selling Strategies for Romance

The key to ensuring the success of a Bloom title at Raincoast is to have it consistently in stock. At Raincoast, the aim is for a minimum of 3,000 units of each Bloom title. For the more popular authors like Ana Huang, Lauren Asher, Lucy Score, and Elle Kennedy, Raincoast allocates even larger quantities.

Sourcebooks' approach, which does not adhere strictly to the industry's standard publication timeline, does present certain challenges. Raincoast and Ampersand sales representatives are currently presenting the Winter 2024 list during the Fall of 2023. When Bloom signs an author whose book is added to Raincoast's list after the sales conference where titles are initially presented, this book is considered a "drop-in." Handling drop-ins requires special attention, as many bookstores have already allocated their shelf space when the sales representative introduces this new title.

In conversations with the sales team at Raincoast and Ampersand, the concept of selling a book based on its tropes is relatively new. In the self-published romance space, marketing based on tropes has been a successful strategy for years. The list of tropes matters more to some readers than the book's synopsis or a blurb. Readers have their favourites; for instance, some may exclusively read hockey romance or mafia stories. Romance readers tend to consume more books than other fiction readers, with half of all romance readers reading at least one book a week. In contrast, the average American fiction reader reads twelve a year.¹⁰⁰ This makes a romance reader more willing to take a chance on a book with a trope they love, rather than needing persuasion from an author's blurb or a well-crafted synopsis. As mentioned, this approach might be somewhat unusual in the traditional publishing space, but it is a welcome change as self-published authors transition into traditional publishing and bring new selling tactics with them. Tactics that help to reach Bloom's most fervent supporter, Indigo.

Selling Romance to Indigo

Bloom Books has a significant presence at Indigo, surpassing the performance of the rest of the market. Through conversations in the industry, it is apparent that the national chain is forty to fifty percent of the book business in Canada, and for romance that market share is even higher. Indigo has been a strong supporter of Bloom Books, recognizing their

¹⁰⁰ Jessica Tripler, "Why Romance Readers Love Digital Books," BookRiot, last modified August 11, 2016, <https://bookriot.com/why-romance-readers-love-digital-books/#:~:text=All%20to%20old%2C%20about%20half%20of,of%20books%20read%20is%204>.

selling potential. One notable way in which Indigo demonstrates its support is by selling Indigo exclusive editions. For example, Ana Huang's *King of Pride* had an Indigo exclusive edition with a black cover, rather than the traditional white cover treatment and it included a bonus letter from the author herself.¹⁰¹ Indigo tends to favour these exclusive editions for titles they anticipate will be bestsellers, entering each selling season with the belief that numerous Bloom titles will achieve bestseller status.

Indigo support for Bloom titles goes beyond special editions. Indigo also runs a promotion in the fall featuring their "Most Anticipated Canadian Books" and they have named Elsie Silver's *Flawless* and *Heartless*, along with Elle Kennedy's hotly anticipated *The Graham Effect* to the list. Indigo supported *The Graham Effect* with a special edition as well, as Indigo throws massive support behind bestselling Canadian authors.

There is a fear of over-indexing on Bloom titles as Sourcebooks does break new authors into the traditional market at an alarming speed. An author like Sophie Lark has eight titles on Sourcebooks' fall list and the Raincoast national accounts manager had to sell all eight titles to Indigo before any of them were released, unaware of how well they would truly sell. Usually, titles would be sold based on an author's previous sales track, but for these self-published authors, Amazon does not report their eBook sales leaving their sales track virtually a mystery. Often, an author's TikTok statistics are used to demonstrate the existing audience. In Sophie Lark's case the hashtag, #SophieLark has 161 million views on TikTok¹⁰² and the specific series, #BrutalBirthright has 21.7 million views.¹⁰³ These metrics serve as proof that there is a potential to attract more readers into the existing fandom as the books become more readily available at Indigo locations across Canada.

¹⁰¹ Indigo, "King of Pride (Indigo Exclusive)," accessed September 16, 2023, https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/king-of-pride-indigo-exclusive/9781464217005.html?s_campaign=goo-SmartShop_Books_EN&gclid=CjwKCAjwpJWoBhA8EiwAHZFzfslLBiftDkm-9oEU7aByDMp2RDLI5InnKYeqYJYt-v_9pBpXPxmyEhoC3vsQAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

¹⁰² "#sophielark," TikTok hashtag, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/sophielark>.

¹⁰³ "#brutalbirthrightseries," TikTok hashtag, accessed September 16, 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/brutalbirthrightseries>.

Indigo shelves while not plentiful tend to be bigger than the shelf space at local independent bookstores, making any metric for selling success hugely important to share with indies.

Selling Romance to Indies

Independent bookstores have generally taken a cautious approach to the romance genre, often failing to cultivate dedicated romance sections despite the genre's popularity at larger retailers like Indigo. As most often an independent bookstore selection is curated by its staff, up until now many of whom were staunch literary readers rather than romance lovers. However, stores with dedicated romance readers on staff have successfully cultivated romance sections, attracting repeat customers. For instance, at the Black Bond Central City location, the store manager has been a long-time romance reader and has worked diligently for seven years to establish a prominent display shelf for romance novels at the store's entrance.

Many bookstores are willing to stock romance titles once they are proven bestsellers. Even Vancouver's Kidsbooks sold numerous copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the early 2010s. Independent bookstores were reluctant to stock many copies of E. L. James' *The Missus*, various conversations revealed that there was a fear that the buzz around her work had diminished drastically. An indie bookstore customer relies upon their local indie for recommendations and curated sections, which may not always include genre fiction like romance. This is where innovative retailers have their chance to shine.

As the popularity of romance reading continues to grow, specialized romance retailers have emerged. In the United States, The Ripped Bodice, founded by sisters Leah and Bea Koch in Los Angeles in 2016, gained attention after a successful Kickstarter campaign.¹⁰⁴ The Ripped Bodice has since expanded to a New York City location and countless other romance specialty retailers have entered the US indie market.

¹⁰⁴ The Ripped Bodice, "About The Ripped Bodice," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.therippedbodice.com/about>.

In Canada, Slow Burn Books is a remarkable success story. Like the Ripped Bodice, Slow Burn Books was co-founded by sisters. Nicola and Shannon McNaughton opened the store in May 2023. At just 200 square feet¹⁰⁵ this store is small but mighty. The store's mission is not to compete with the behemoth that is the Amazon Kindle Unlimited market, but to provide, "a haven for readers of romance novels who enjoy perusing titles in person."¹⁰⁶ Nicola's background in marketing, paired with her sister Shannon's experience in business, made them a dynamic duo in launching their bookstore in just a few months.

Slow Burn stocks titles from both self-published and traditionally published authors across various romance subgenres. They are strong supporters of Bloom as it is easier for the bookstore to bring in romance titles through Raincoast than sourcing stock of solely self-published titles. Slow Burn Books also hosted an Elsie Silver signing event on September 29, 2023, this time in celebration of the re-release of the second *Chestnut Springs* book, *Heartless*.

¹⁰⁵ Cassandra Drudi, "Shop Talk: Slow Burn Books," *Quill and Quire* (blog), July 19, 2023, <https://quillandquire.com/omni/shop-talk-slow-burn-books/>.

¹⁰⁶ Drudi, "Shop Talk."



Figure 5: Lineup at Elsie Silver's Slow Burn Event. Image Credit Nicola McNaughton. Image Accessed Slow Burn Books on Instagram.

Given the book's Calgary setting and Slow Burn's continual support of Elsie Silver, the event was a great success with all one hundred tickets claimed in just eight minutes.

Even before Slow Burn, there was Happily Ever After Books, Canada's first online exclusive romance bookstore¹⁰⁷ and they inspired other online retailers like dark romance bookstore Leather and Lace¹⁰⁸. It is not just online; in Saskatoon Pages of Passion, owner Jessica was inspired to open her store after seeing the McNaughton sisters' success in Calgary.¹⁰⁹ It is entrepreneurial women across Canada who defied the odds to open these

¹⁰⁷ Happily Ever After Books, "About," *Happily Ever After Books*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://happilyeverafterbooks.ca/pages/about>.

¹⁰⁸ Leather & Lace, "About," *Leather & Lace*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://leatherandlacebooks.ca/pages/about-us>.

¹⁰⁹ Pages of Passion, "Meet Jessica," *Pages of Passion*, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://www.pagesofpassion.ca/blank-1>.

stores, to stock titles from authors who took the plunge into publishing initially by themselves and then were picked up by a publisher started by a woman not unlike them, Dominique Raccach. Most often it is these indie bookstores who admire these publishing stories, the first event partner for Elsie Silver, Black Bond Books was started by a single mother and now the seven-store chain is run by a third-generation female bookseller.¹¹⁰ They have embraced the romance category, with the Black Bond Central City manager even bringing in a few self-published titles she loves, now Raincoast has the opportunity to grow the Black Bond romance section even more. Along with events and selling, Raincoast undertakes a wide array of marketing strategies from social media accounts to newsletters.

Section V: Second Chance Romance: Marketing Romance at Raincoast

Altering Marketing Strategies for Romance

Marketing romance books often involves highlighting their tropes, as readers frequently seek out books based on specific tropes they enjoy. Knowing the tropes of a book can be as enticing to readers as a cover reveal. For example, Ana Huang conducts dedicated trope reveals weeks before unveiling the cover to tease readers about the book's content.¹¹¹

In the world of romance marketing, influencer outreach plays a significant role. Collaborating with influencers on various platforms is a well-established practice in book marketing. Ensuring that a romance title gains visibility on Instagram and TikTok is crucial for its success. Many self-published authors juggled writing and self-promotion,

¹¹⁰ "This is BC: Black Bond Books Defies Odds as Independent Book Seller," *Global News*, posted November 2, 2023, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://globalnews.ca/video/10067984/this-is-bc-black-bond-books-defies-odds-as-independent-book-seller/>.

¹¹¹ Authoranahuang, "King of Greed Trope Reveal," Instagram, May 26, 2023. https://www.instagram.com/p/CsfTbWaL1zC/?img_index=1.

but as they built substantial social media followings, they often enlisted the help of public relations agencies or assistants to manage their online presence.

At Raincoast, influencer mailings are managed by both the marketing and publicity teams. Typically, the team member with connections in the specific genre will identify the most appropriate influencers to include in an influencer mailing. Building relationships with influencers is akin to cultivating relationships with media contacts, and understanding which books to pitch to them goes a long way in establishing successful working relationships. A way to build these relationships is to engage with these influencers directly on the platforms.

Raincoast’s Social Media Presence

A publishing entity operating in 2023 needs to be on social media, as Baverstock and Bowen say, “the benefits of social for business are enormous. Instant feedback, an immediate channel for customers to communicate with you; traffic for your website.”¹¹²

For Raincoast social media is used to promote titles and grow brand awareness.

Raincoast’s Instagram account boasts approximately 13,100 followers and currently serves as the marketing team’s primary social media platform. Additionally, Raincoast maintains a Twitter/X account with 15,500 followers, a Facebook account with 4,300 followers, and a newly created Threads account with just 1,500 followers.¹¹³ Instagram, however, is the key platform to connect with the “bookstagram” community, whose users are referred to as “bookstagrammers”.

On Instagram, Raincoast supports titles primarily through the act of sharing, either by re-posting feed posts from Raincoast’s publishing partners like Bloom Books or sharing influencer-generated posts in Instagram’s story feature. The influencers collaborating with Raincoast share a variety of content on Instagram, including unboxings, current

¹¹² Baverstock and Bowen, *How to Market Books*, 241.

¹¹³ Raincoast Books, “W24 Booksellers Kit,” (email attachment, September 7, 2023).

reads, monthly wrap-ups, and reviews. When an influencer has been sent either an advance reader copy (ARC) or a finished copy, they will typically post about it on their chosen platform. For example, Raincoast re-posted a post from @chelseyjreads to celebrate the re-release of Elsie Silver's *Flawless*.¹¹⁴



Figure 6: Raincoast's Instagram Re-Post from @chelseyjreads of Elsie Silver's *Flawless*. Image Accessed from @raincoastbooks on Instagram.

The cycle is such that a finished book is sent to an influencer, then most influencers tend to post about the books, and finally, the marketing department ensures it is shared on Raincoast's socials by sharing the posts of those who tag @raincoastbooks. This promotional tool works much better with Raincoast's influencers, but to better inform bookstore customers as to Raincoast's latest offerings many rely upon the newsletters.

Raincoast's Newsletters

The Raincoast marketing team regularly produces a weekly newsletter called the "Bookseller Bulletin." This newsletter features, "a weekly round-up of the biggest buzz

¹¹⁴ Raincoastbooks, "Repost of @chelseyjreads' picture of *Flawless*," Instagram, September 1, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CwqP7wzPMpo/>.

books, media news and titles to stock up on.”¹¹⁵ Impressively, the Bookseller Bulletin boasts a 36% open rate. In addition to this newsletter, Raincoast also produces a monthly Gift newsletter and a bi-monthly School & Library newsletter. It is the Bookseller Bulletin that will often feature big Bloom books. It is not just booksellers who subscribe but also influencers who want to find out straight from Raincoast about key titles coming up and industry news related to Raincoast titles.

This newsletter encompasses various essential sections, including recent cover reveals. Certain weeks, such as the newsletter dated August 17, 2023¹¹⁶, exclusively featured Bloom Books cover reveals, as these unveilings generated substantial interest and traction for the titles.

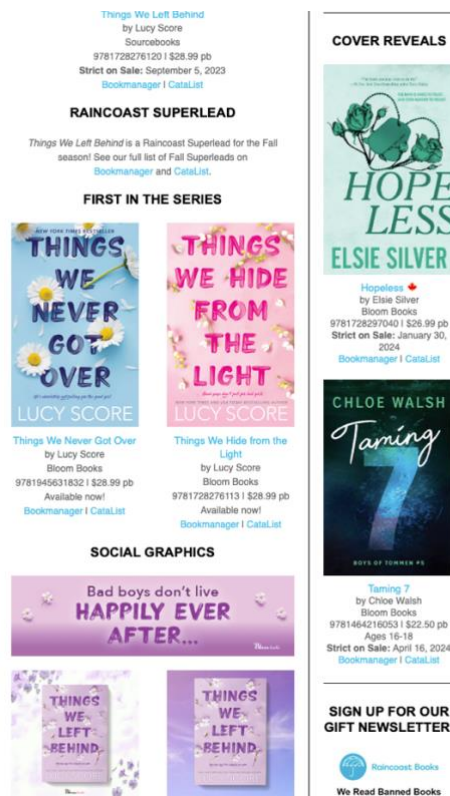


Figure 7: Screenshot of the cover reveal section of the Raincoast newsletter. Image Accessed from the August 17, 2023, issue of The Raincoast Bookseller Bulletin.

¹¹⁵ Raincoast Books, “W24 Booksellers Kit.”

¹¹⁶ Raincoast Books, “A new Lucy? Score!” (August 17, 2023).

Furthermore, the newsletter serves as a platform for Raincoast to supply booksellers and influencers with social media graphics empowering them to leverage this Raincoast promotional resource for their own marketing endeavors. When onboarding new influencers onto Raincoast's offerings, they are often encouraged to sign up for this newsletter to access social media graphics and stay informed about the most buzzworthy books. Many of Raincoast's current marketing efforts have evolved over time; the same can be said for the Canadian retail, distribution, media, and event landscapes.

Chapter III: Age Gap Romance: Harlequin’s Romance Reader of the Past vs. Raincoast’s Romance Reader of the Present

Section I: Hockey Romance: Shifts in the Canadian Retail and Distribution Landscape

Changes in the Canadian Book Retail Landscape

Harlequin prided itself on selling books “where women shop,”¹¹⁷ primarily targeting department stores and drugstores. While drugstores and grocery stores still carry books today, their book sections have become less prominent. For instance, some warehouse locations of retailers like Costco are shrinking their book sections and new locations may not allocate space for books at all. Presently, when romance readers shop in physical stores, their primary destinations are Indigo or specialty retailers. Indigo holds a dominant position in the Canadian romance market with its 87 large-format and 84 small-format stores¹¹⁸, reaching into many parts of the country. Independent bookstores tend not to carry a wide range of romance titles outside of the top bestsellers. As the acceptance and accessibility of romance reading continue to grow, retailers like Slow Burn Books are likely to gain prominence.

Paul Grescoe, the author of *Merchants of Venus*, a comprehensive history of Harlequin’s business structure observed, “for all its supremacy in the series romance field, Harlequin had never managed to make sense of the single-title business.”¹¹⁹ This means that Harlequin had not succeeded in publishing a blockbuster novel that would be on bestseller lists; instead, Harlequin's profits primarily came from dedicated readers who purchased books from their entire line. This approach is mirrored today in how Bloom

¹¹⁷ Sutton, "Marketing Love," 686.

¹¹⁸ Indigo, “Fast Facts,” accessed September 16, 2023. <https://www.indigo.ca/en-ca/our-company/fast-facts>.

¹¹⁹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 272.

Books is constructing a line of books designed to be devoured in its entirety. During the Elsie Silver book signing at Black Bond Books in August 2023, after readers had their stacks of books signed, many of them gravitated toward a display filled with Bloom Books and purchased numerous additional titles.

Changes in Canadian Distribution Landscape

Sourcebooks has emerged as the modern-day Harlequin, while Raincoast plays a role akin to that of Curtis which used to be Harlequin's distributor. It was Mills & Boon who weeded through the slush pile and selected the best writers. Harlequin was then able to select the few they thought could break out in the North American market after just a bit of editing to match the decency code. The model employed by Bloom Books bears certain resemblances to this historical approach. Instead, of another publisher curating titles, it is readers who assess hundreds of self-published works each year. Bloom now has a vast resource to identify the most popular titles online, acquire them, provide some refinement, and swiftly introduce them to the market. Raincoast's role in this ecosystem as the Canadian distributor is again like that of Harlequin's. There is no editorial staff at Raincoast; instead, Raincoast brings a Canadian SMP team that understands the Canadian market. Similar to Curtis in the past, Raincoast has cultivated a reputation as a distributor trusted by retailers throughout Canada, albeit with a somewhat less intimidating presence, but with the full confidence of these retailers. Raincoast needs to cultivate the same reputation with Canadian romance readers and to do that there needs to be an understanding not just of the romance reader of the present, but how that person came to be.

Section II: Forbidden Romance: Shifts in Societal Norms and Romance Readers

The Twentieth-Century Romance Reader

The first study on romance readership was conducted by Peter H. Mann among English readers in 1968, finding that romance readers came from all segments of the female population. Mann's findings indicate that nearly half of all romance readers were

between the ages of twenty-five to forty-four.¹²⁰ In 1973, Harlequin's data for North American readers stated that their average reader was around thirty-five, married with two children, and possessed a high school education.¹²¹ This is contrasted to the end of the 1990s, Harlequin reported that the average age was forty-two, with half having attended university and over half being employed.¹²²

The most comprehensive study of romance readership in the last century was conducted by American literary and cultural studies scholar, Janice A. Radway in the 1980s. Radway aimed to understand why the "Smithton women," her test group, vividly read romance novels. She concluded that for them reading romance, "can be conceived as an activity of protest and longing for reform necessitated by those institutions' failure to satisfy the emotional needs of women."¹²³ The institutions referenced are the patriarchy, heterosexuality, and monogamy. Radway's readers were reading romance as a "declaration of independence."¹²⁴ These readers relied on romance novels to fill an emotional void, as they were often emotionally drained from the responsibility of being the primary nurturer without receiving the nurturing, they needed themselves.

Radway specifically discovered that Smithton women preferred the hero strong, even initially aggressive hero who transformed over the course of the story into someone capable of caring for the heroine. A Smithton woman defined her ideal romance as a book that fits that character arc.¹²⁵ With the vast changes society has experienced one may think the desired romance story arc may have shifted, rather the opposite has

¹²⁰ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 226.

¹²¹ Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 227.

¹²² Grescoe, *The Merchants of Venus*, 227.

¹²³ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 14.

¹²⁴ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 17.

¹²⁵ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 120.

happened, and the twenty-first-century reader may not differ from their twentieth-century counterpart.

The Twenty-First Century Romance Reader

It is important to keep in mind that Radway conducted her study over thirty years ago, and since then, society has undergone significant changes, including technological ones. In the 1980s, romance fans struggled to feel connected to one another, as Radway described few had ever discussed romance novels with fellow readers.¹²⁶ With the advent of online book communities, readers no longer have to read in complete isolation.

To sell romance novels to the twenty-first-century romance reader, there needs to be an understanding of specifically how they may or may not differ from the romance readers of decades before. According to a 2017 study conducted by the RWA in conjunction with NPD formerly the National Purchase Diary Panel Inc., the typical romance reader is 82% female, 73% Caucasian, and 86% heterosexual.¹²⁷ The study also found that younger romance readers are more diverse in terms of sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity¹²⁸ compared to their older counterparts.

But who they are is only part of the picture; why they read romance is equally important. In 2016, a sociology scholar, Maleah Fekete conducted a study of what she called Bay Area (BA women) to explore their motivations.¹²⁹ Fekete found the most significant difference was sex. Compared to the Smithton women, readers studied in 2016 required,

¹²⁶ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 96.

¹²⁷ Romance Writers of America, "About the Romance Genre."

¹²⁸ Romance Writers of America, "About the Romance Genre."

¹²⁹ Maleah Fekete, "Confluent Love and the Evolution of Ideal Intimacy: Romance Reading in 1980 and 2016," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* Volume 11 (May 18, 2022): 1, <https://www.jprstudies.org/2022/05/confluent-love-and-the-evolution-of-ideal-intimacy-romance-reading-in-1980-and-2016/>.

“passionate sex [as] a necessary part of a gratifying romantic relationship narrative.”¹³⁰ This contrasts with the emotional focus of a relationship emphasized by Smithton women. When sex was depicted, it was to describe the “heroine’s sense of emotional fulfillment.”¹³¹ Notably, Smithton women’s favourite novels shied away from explicit language and extensive descriptions. For instance, Kathleen Woodiwiss’ *The Flame and the Flower* only contained a few sex scenes all of which were no longer than a single paragraph.¹³²

Today, the genre has witnessed two significant shifts: a move towards depicting “more sexually liberated and independent heroines” and an increase in sexual content overall.¹³³ The popularity of a book such as E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* with its numerous explicit scenes spanning multiple pages, illustrates this shift in reader preferences.

While much has changed in nearly four decades, such as women working outside the home, earning more, and sharing parenting responsibilities, the core definition of a romance novel has remained consistent. Whether it is 1968, 1980, 1990, or 2016, romance readers want to read about an “emotional connection between romantic partners.” Fekete’s contemporary study is the most comprehensive on not just who is reading, but why they are reading.¹³⁴ As she finds that, contemporary readers also desire a balance between emotional depth and sexual content. This phenomenon is referred to as the “romance-quest” by Fekete, who notes that the “character types and plot points from the 1970s and 1980s remain popular today.”¹³⁵ In comparing the plot lines of popular

¹³⁰ Fekete, “Confluent Love,” 1.

¹³¹ Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 180.

¹³² Fekete, “Confluent Love,” 11.

¹³³ Fekete, “Confluent Love,” 10.

¹³⁴ Fekete, “Confluent Love,” 4.

¹³⁵ Fekete, “Confluent Love,” 9.

romance novels in 2016 to those of the 1980s a similar structure emerges: the heroine seeks out an emotionally unavailable man, and over the course of the story, he undergoes a transformation, becoming capable of caring for the heroine. Interestingly, this archetype remains prevalent despite today's more accepting attitudes towards male emotionality. Readers continue to be drawn to stories featuring powerful men, whether physically or socially.¹³⁶ The same could be said for the 2023 reader, as Ana Huang's titles have seen the greatest success this year, and they are all about emotionally unavailable and powerful billionaires.

Both in the 1980s and in 2016, women reported reading romance as a form of escapism and a powerful emotional experience. These motivations for reading continue to hold true today. In both time periods, romance readers chose to read romance over other forms of entertainment, despite any associated societal stigma. The biggest shift of all is that the 1980s reader did not have access to romance recommendations just a swipe of their thumb away.

¹³⁶ Fekete, "Confluent Love," 10.

Section III: Accidental Pregnancy: Shifts in Romance Marketing and Publicity

Shifts in the Traditional Media Landscape

Today's media landscape has undergone significant transformations compared to the past century, particularly with the transition to digital formats. This shift has brought about changes in the role of journalists. Newsrooms have either closed or downsized which leads to gaps in news coverage¹³⁷, leading to a situation where Canada's leading national newspapers may have just one or two writers dedicated to the books section or even the entire arts and culture section. In the past, Harlequin used traditional advertising in women's magazines and on television, but these methods have become prohibitively expensive for publishers today, making them financially impractical. The only author in the modern era who has had success with television advertising is James Patterson. What Patterson and Harlequin have in common is twofold: there is continually new product, and it is coming from a recognizable brand. As Patterson put it, "when my ad came on the television, I'd want to see how many heads looked up and did they stay up."¹³⁸ It was about acquiring the most impressions and building the trust that when you pick up a Patterson book you know exactly what you are getting. Bloom now has an opportunity to build that brand awareness but does not need to rely on costly television advertising, there is no better place for impressions than social media.

However, one aspect has not changed, and it is the media's perception of romance novels. Nothing speaks better to this than how many key traditional media outlets have dedicated reviewers for genres like science fiction or mystery but lack a dedicated reviewer for

¹³⁷ Clara Pasioka, "Mass Journalism Layoffs Don't Just Mean a Gap in News Coverage. Experts Worry They'll hurt Democracy Too," *CBC News*, September 30, 2023, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/loss-of-local-journalism-through-metroland-layoffs-bad-for-democracy-1.6970406>.

¹³⁸ John A. Deighton, "Marketing James Patterson" *Harvard Business School Case 505-029*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, August 2004), <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=31392>.

romance. Although CBC's *The Next Chapter* did host a romance reviewer panel¹³⁹, such traditional media coverage does not necessarily impact sales the way a viral TikTok or aesthetic Instagram post can. One such example is *If He Had Been With Me*, a young adult romance from the Sourcebooks Fire imprint, which was first published in 2013. The author Laura Nowlin cites TikTok as the reason for the success, as she started to receive countless messages that readers had found out about her book on TikTok.¹⁴⁰ SalesData shows a significant spike around February 5, 2023, when *If He Had Been With Me* went from selling around three copies a week to over one hundred, and by July more than a thousand copies were sold every week in Canada throughout the rest of the summer.¹⁴¹ That is the power of TikTok virality. In today's media landscape, the repetition of a book title across social media platforms can often have a more significant influence on readers and potential buyers.

Rise of Bookstagram

When it comes to crafting a social media strategy, Baverstock and Bowen emphasize the significance of Instagram noting that it is, “enormously popular with teenagers and under 30s, so if this is your target demographic, you can't leave out ‘Insta.’ A very visual channel—think covers and graphics with commentary.”¹⁴² Visual content takes precedence on Instagram, where a picture is often more impactful than words. The

¹³⁹ “Romance Reads That’ll Spice Up Summer,” *The Next Chapter*, CBC, aired July 15, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-67-the-next-chapter/clip/15997352-romance-reads-thatll-spice-summer>.

¹⁴⁰ Iyana Jones, “Laura Nowlin’s #BookTok Favorite Gets a Companion Novel” *Publishers Weekly*, April 25, 2023, accessed November 28, 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-book-news/article/92123-laura-nowlin-s-booktok-favorite-gets-a-companion-novel.html>.

¹⁴¹ BNC SalesData, “If He Had Been With Me Canadian Sales as of Nov 29-23,” accessed November 29, 2023.

¹⁴² Baverstock and Bowen, *How to Market Books*, 242.

quality of written reviews in the comments is secondary to the overall aesthetics of the post and the Bookstagrammer's entire feed.

As Dr. Amanda Lastoria, a scholar of book materiality, points out, “the cover of a printed book has always been a mask. It shields the contents of the book, and it entices the consumer.”¹⁴³ Bloom titles obscure the content of the books with discreet covers. Bookstagram precipitated the need for the cover motifs they use with pretty flowers and illustrations, a departure from the bodice rippers and shirtless men that once adorned the covers of romance novels. The rise of Bookstagram makes reading a much more public activity, and so many want to obscure the sexual nature of many of today’s popular romance novels. Why would one want to hide what they read? “Social media platforms are placed to promote the book and the self.”¹⁴⁴ The desire to hide one's reading choices on social media can be attributed to the platforms' dual role in promoting both books and the reader's personal image.

The RWA’s 2017 survey revealed that younger romance readers are reading increasingly frequently while being extremely engaged on social media.¹⁴⁵ This surge in social engagement within the romance community initially began on Instagram and expanded from blogging to Book Twitter, with the added possibility of authors noticing and interacting with readers. The act of an author “liking” your review post you tagged them in, creates a sense of “performed intimacy thus constitut[ing] the currency of social media encounters.”¹⁴⁶ This extends to Raincoast and its client publishers, as now everyone is encouraged to cultivate online communities across various platforms, making themselves

¹⁴³ Amanda Lastoria, "Digital Masks of Printed Books: On-Screen Representations of the Materiality of the Codex," in *Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ed. Corinna Norrick-Rühl and Shafquat Towheed (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 133, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05292-7_7.

¹⁴⁴ Lastoria, “Digital Masks of Printed Books,” 148.

¹⁴⁵ Romance Writers of America, “About the Romance Genre.”

¹⁴⁶ Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 50.

more accessible and approachable online. As literary scholar Simone Murray explains, “publishers... are everywhere admonished to cultivate online communities” on a variety of platforms.¹⁴⁷ Raincoast engages with influencers through direct messaging, fostering a sense of community even on a corporate account. On Instagram, Bloom's presence is pivotal, serving as the primary platform for announcing new authors, books, and covers. Many fans turn to Instagram rather than traditional media publications for the latest updates on Bloom. Publishers like Bloom have found success on Instagram, but breaking into spaces like TikTok has proven to be more challenging.

Rise of BookTok

TikTok currently wields significant influence in the book industry. According to Kristen McLean of BookScan, “even if BookTok sales are softening, it remains the industry’s most important platform for discovering new writers.”¹⁴⁸ In essence, TikTok continues to expand the existing readership while catapulting new authors to prominence and driving sales of backlist titles. Research from BookNet Canada reveals that sales for books featured on BookTok surged by 1,047% from June 2018 to June 2022.¹⁴⁹ Notably, the platform plays a pivotal role in boosting the discoverability of authors, with the romance genre experiencing rapid growth on TikTok. The BookNet study underscores this point, indicating that half of the most popular books on TikTok fall within the romance genre.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 76.

¹⁴⁸ Jim Milliot, “BookTok Helped Book Sales Soar. How Long Will That Last?” *Publishers Weekly*, August 18, 2023, accessed September 13, 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/93014-booktok-helped-book-sales-soar-how-long-will-that-last.html>.

¹⁴⁹ Aline Zara, “The Real Impact of #BookTok on Book Sales,” BookNet Canada, September 29, 2022, <https://www.booknetcanada.ca/blog/research/2022/9/29/the-real-impact-of-booktok-on-book-sales>.

¹⁵⁰ Zara, “The Real Impact of #BookTok on Book Sales”.

Romance reading has seen a resurgence since the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing in new readers. Authors like Nicolas Sparks and Nora Roberts are becoming less popular as unit share shifts to Colleen Hoover, Emily Henry, Lucy Score, and Ana Huang.¹⁵¹ Circana, the consumer behaviour research arm of NPD, the American market research company that aggregates book-selling data for the industry, also reports that “coastal markets are over-indexing in sales” demonstrating a rise in the dominance of romance reading in middle America.¹⁵² Sourcebooks, for instance, has achieved remarkable success with over one million copies of Lucy Score's books sold domestically from January to September 2023. In the first week of sales for *Things We Left Behind*, it was second only to the new Stephen King out the same week.

For publishers like Bloom, breaking into the BookTok community presents unique challenges. Bookseller Alice Harandon, speaking to *The Guardian*, remarked, “When traditional publishers try to muscle in on the BookTok market, it never seems to work out quite the same way as an organic, viral recommendation.”¹⁵³ If the goal here is to have your book go viral and have it go viral organically then there is one way you can help that happen, visibility. So, the most effective strategy employed by Bloom and Raincoast is to provide books to accounts that will most likely create content about the title. TikTok virality is all about visibility, so the book cover and title need to be out there and circulating on different accounts. In the case of Elsie Silver's *Flawless*, influencer mailings were sent to accounts with between 10,000 to 100,000 followers on either Instagram or TikTok. Instagram is great for awareness, but a successful TikTok post has nearly three times the conversion rate of an Instagram post. TikTok converts impressions into print book purchases. As the Economist put it, “E-books do not make such attractive

¹⁵¹ Circana, "Circana Books Friday Facts: Weekly Update - Week 23," 2023, published by BookScan.

¹⁵² Circana, "Friday Facts: Week 23."

¹⁵³ David Barnett, “‘I Can’t Stress How Much BookTok Sells’: Teen Literary Influencers Swaying Publishers,” *The Observer*, August 6, 2023, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/aug/06/i-cant-stress-how-much-booktok-sells-teen-literary-influencers-swaying-publishers>.

visual props.”¹⁵⁴ The most engaging TikTok videos emerged from fans of Elsie Silver’s work who were genuinely excited about the new edition with bonus content, as demonstrated by @alsbookclub’s video to her 100,000 followers.¹⁵⁵



Figure 8: Screenshot from @als.bookclub's unboxing of Elsie Silver's *Flawless*. Image accessed from @als.bookclub on TikTok.

TikTok’s power lies in the repetition of book recommendations, creating a fear of missing out within the community. To elevate a romance title to this level, sharing ARCs and finished copies widely creates more opportunities for the occasional video that goes

¹⁵⁴ "TikTok is Changing the Way Books are Recommended and Sold," *The Economist*, accessed December 2, 2023, https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/09/21/tiktok-is-changing-the-way-books-are-recommended-and-sold?utm_medium=cpc.adword.pd&utm_source=google&ppccampaignID=18798097116&ppcadID=&utm_campaign=a.22brand_pmax&utm_content=conversion.direct-response.anonymous&gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiA67CrBhC1ARIsACKAa8Rl-Xi3jKZfvrxQDqN7Je_0pGla0WxfgsA5M7xn4G2biVqj3mi-qAcaAjB3EALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds.

¹⁵⁵ @als.bookclub. "Flawless by Elsie Silver: Re-Release out Now," TikTok video, August 29, 2023, <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMjSe9658/>.

viral. Once a title has gone viral, it opens countless more opportunities not just for media pickup, but for events.

Shifts in Event Opportunities

In 2025, more than one hundred authors are set to gather for a multi-day romance convention at the Sheraton in downtown Vancouver, marking the first-ever romance convention hosted in the city. The initiative to run the event came from a local blogger and author PA Melissa Teo, who wished to see a festival in her hometown. While romance festivals have been a staple in the United States for years, Canada's first took place this year in Banff, Alberta, and it is now moving to Calgary, Alberta next year in collaboration with Slow Burn Books. This time, the event will offer a more intimate experience, with four hundred fans attending split into morning and afternoon sessions featuring various authors. Literary festivals themselves are not a new concept, but romance festivals have carved out a unique niche. These events draw passionate fans who are avid readers, often having explored the works of numerous authors. Festivals provide them with the perfect opportunity to meet and interact with as many of their favorite romance authors as possible in a single location.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a shift to virtual events when in-person gatherings and travel became restricted. While many authors have since returned to in-person signings and festivals, some continue to embrace virtual events. These online gatherings make author events accessible to those who don't reside in major city centers, allowing participants to join from the comfort of their own homes. Virtual events also come with significantly lower costs compared to in-person ones, making them an attractive choice not only for promoting a single book but also for marketing multiple titles. As an example, on August 3, 2023, Bloom organized a multi-author virtual panel in partnership with Barnes & Noble, featuring authors Scarlett St. Clair, Sierra Simone, and Katee Robert.¹⁵⁶ As a virtual event, the authors had the opportunity to foster a casual rapport.

¹⁵⁶ Katee Robert, Scarlett St. Clair, and Sierra Simone, *BNEvents: Happy (Ever After) Hour with Authors Katee Robert, Scarlett St. Clair, and Sierra Simone*, recorded August 4, 2023, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDHDzbFR7FY>.

Notably, the event did not center around a specific book promotion, as Sierra Simone's next release was scheduled for September, Scarlett St. Clair had a recent release, and Katee Robert's upcoming book was still two weeks away. Instead, it served as a powerful tool to highlight the authors' backlist titles, introduce them to new readers, and promote Barnes & Noble's exclusive editions.

While Indigo did host virtual events during the pandemic, traditional in-person bookstore events are making a comeback as the world transitions to a new normal. Nevertheless, there's still room for innovation in the way these events are conducted. For instance, Indigo could consider adopting a format similar to the successful Barnes & Noble virtual event to engage their avid Bloom Books readership. This could involve featuring multiple authors in engaging panel discussions and spotlighting the numerous Indigo exclusive editions produced in collaboration with Bloom Books.

Additionally, literary festivals also could embrace the fandom around romance authors. They can put together multi-author panels that attract a huge number of readers, growing the profile of the festival, each author, and Bloom Books. Many romance readers have never had the opportunity to attend a festival in their area, representing an untapped market for literary festivals in Canada. New opportunities arise every day not just in event planning but for the entirety of Raincoast's SMP efforts.

Happily Ever After

Romance distribution has its challenges, but it is such a rewarding endeavour. It is more than just selling, marketing, and publicizing some of today's bestselling authors; it is carrying a legacy of romance distribution in Canada. Harlequin was the pioneering force in the field of romance publishing, and it found an audience of voracious romance readers in Canada. Harlequin not only revolutionized SMP for the romance category but for the entire publishing industry. Through innovative advertising, product sampling, and building their distinct lines, Harlequin built an entire generation of romance readers. Now, Sourcebooks and Raincoast have the same opportunity with Bloom Books, allowing them to reach the success of Harlequin and Curtis respectively.

The modern romance reader is markedly different from their 1980s counterpart. Gone are the days of mass-market paperbacks and discreet portrayals of intimacy. The 2023 romance reader is plugged in both to what they want to see in a romance novel and a wider online community. While traditional media and less enthusiastic retailers may struggle to recognize the potential of the romance category, the fact remains that the fans are there, eagerly awaiting new stories. There is still much to do to break the stigma around romance novels, as authors not just of romance but of any popular genre are excluded from the literary grant system in Canada.

In this evolving landscape, Sourcebooks and Raincoast need to embrace innovation, reaching out to non-traditional media and perhaps even bypassing media entirely to foster relationships with key influencers. Retailers like Slow Burn Books offer fresh opportunities to cater directly to the romance readership. Other retailers require guidance not just in maintaining adequate stock but also in effectively hand-selling books based on their tropes. The romance community presents numerous potential event opportunities and alternative formats, including the embracing of festivals and multi-author events. Raincoast is in talks now with Wordfest in Calgary, who see the success of Slow Burn Books and want to put on romance events in conjunction with them. It is a passionate community that eagerly embraces every title, so it's essential to bring them as many authors as possible.

As the romance category evolves alongside its readers, so must the strategies employed to support romance novels in the Canadian market. Is putting all this effort in worth it you may ask? While some may worry about the potential bursting of the BookTok bubble and that these authors are peaking in sales, it is crucial to remember that romance readers have always been here, and the readership is not going anywhere.

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