

# ~~XXXX~~ The Book of Love

BY PAMELA SWANIGAN

What's an aspiring romance writer to do?

Why, ~~fall into the arms of a copper-haired sheep-baron~~  
learn from the published at a Victoria conference.

**I**t's Saturday morning, and I'm sitting in the Crystal Room of Victoria's Empress Hotel learning how to create conflict. Not everyone who knows me would agree that I need help in this area, but as I listen to speaker Naomi Horton I realize that I'm truly an amateur. "Go deep!" she exhorts. "Go for the real murky stuff: the wounds, the self-delusions, the deeper fermentations." The 50 or so of us in attendance are taking her word as gospel. "Deeper fermentations," we write in our notebooks. But Horton, glancing over the group of almost exclusively white, middle-class, well-groomed women between the ages of 35 and 50, seems to think that many of us are not sufficiently in touch with our Inner Gaza Strip. She drills home some of the techniques for increasing our conflict quotient. "Guilt is great," she enthuses. And if that doesn't work, she has found a surefire fallback: throw a dead baby or two into the mix. "Try dead babies," we write.

And they say romance novels are too fluffy.

Of course, we knew otherwise coming in. The 110 women registered for the "Royal Rendezvous," a conference put on by the Vancouver Island chapter of the Romance Writers of America, have long since shed the common misconceptions about the genre—starting with the myth that writing a romance is easy. Though perhaps we never *really* believed the non-writing friends who told us that romance fiction isn't written by people but springs forth fully edited from the garburetor, it was still a hard blow to discover, as all writers do, that it takes work to write a cereal box, never mind a full-blown manuscript. This enlightenment has culled from our numbers the misguided



opportunists who try to write romances in the interests of cupidity rather than Cupid. The rest of us have come from all over the continent—Texas, Winnipeg, Alberta, Oregon and Toronto, as well as several from Vancouver and the Gulf Islands—and dropped at least a few hundred bucks to attend seminars, get tips on new imprints and changing guidelines, pitch our manuscripts to editors and agents

and spend the weekend surrounded by comrades who will understand us without judgement.

Intoxicated by this rare sense of consanguinity, we spend the first part of Friday afternoon eagerly asking each other questions that might be considered rude in some quarters. "Are you contemporary or historical?" we probe. "Are you mass or category? Do you plan to pitch on Saturday?"

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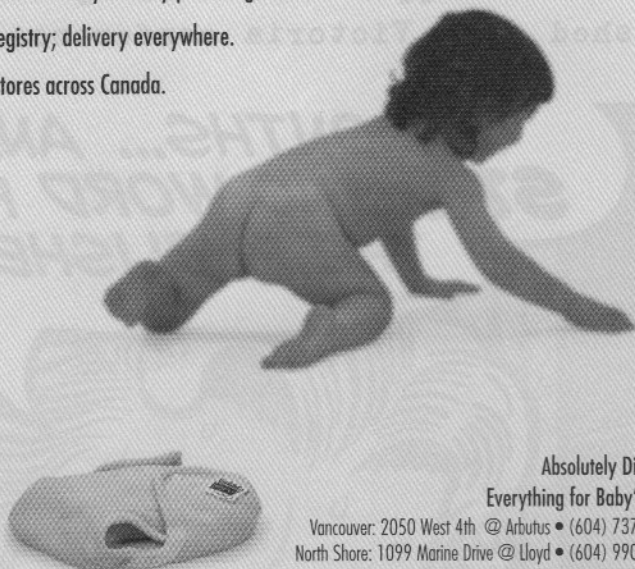
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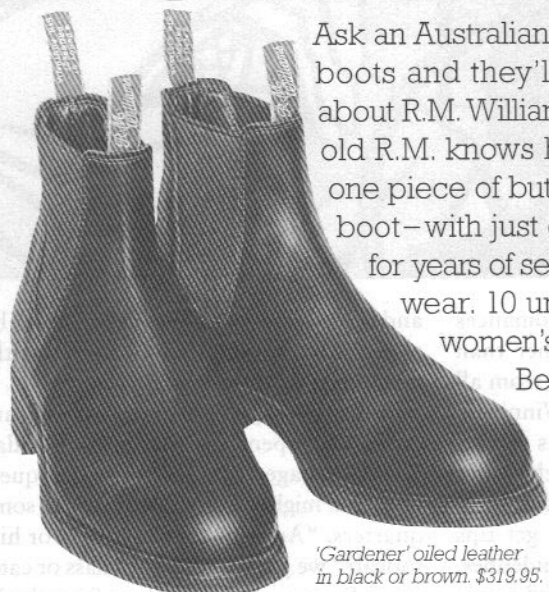
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## XXXX The Book of Love

The Historicals, when they find each other, talk animatedly about the medieval fashion show slated for that evening (though it will be of academic interest to the Regency subset, who confine themselves to the period of King George III's reign). The Contemporaries, free from the tyranny of costume details, recycle the huge scandal still rocking the romance world: Janet Dailey, North America's seminal romance writer and one of the world's best-selling authors, has been caught lifting dozens of scenes from latter-day powerhouse Nora Roberts. It's beyond us how someone who had sold 80 million books by the time she was 35 could feel pressured to keep writing after she had run out of her own ideas; those of us who remember back when Dailey was a Category writer (that is, writing for "series" or "categories" publishers like Harlequin and Silhouette, rather than single-title publishers like Dell and Avon) can only proffer a kind of previous-evidence argument about the uproar Dailey caused in the early 1980s by defecting from Harlequin to the newly started Silhouette (making Harlequin's 1984 assimilation of their archival that much sweeter).

As I move on, still pondering Dailey's motives, I'm inclined to consign published romance authors as a species to the realm of mysteries beyond fathom—which would be easier if I could move without tripping over one of them. One of the first women I meet, a kind-seeming soul named Susan to whom I relate the entire sorrowful circumstance of my current manuscript being stuck in the middle of chapter four due to my hero having a fuzzy backstory, turns out to be Susan Naomi Horton, who has written two dozen books for Silhouette and who the next day will inspire me to a new appreciation of guilt and dead babies. With a woman whose nametag identifies her as Mary Balogh from Kipling, Saskatchewan, I hold forth on the immeasurable superiority of Dorothy Dunnnett to any other historical novelist, before discovering that Balogh has written more than 50 historicals and just signed an exclusive contract with Dell. A moment later, when I move into a cluster that includes Harlequin heavyweight Vanessa Grant, only a passing familiarity with her appearance saves me the ignominy of mistaking a woman with 10 million books in print for a kindred aspirant.

Most of these women are from the area, too. Grant, a former accountant and CBC commentator, lives on (CONTINUED ON 84)



ton, a former engineer, lives in Nanaimo. Jo Beverley, a leading author for Penguin's Topaz imprint with 17 romances to her name (including a *New York Times* best-seller), and a Romance Writers Hall of Fame inductee, resides in Oak Bay.

And those are just a few of many. Of the 60 members in each of the Vancouver Island and Vancouver RWA chapters, 10 in the former and at least 15 in the latter are published. These include White Rock's Catherine Spencer, Delta's Judith Bowen and Richmond's Kay Gregory, who write for Harlequin, Vancouver's Moyra Tarling, who writes for Silhouette and Nanaimo's Carole Dean, who writes for Kensington. Kathleen Webb, a sharp-tongued Brentwood Bay resident who is largely responsible for the conception of the Royal Rendezvous, has recently jumped up to the big leagues, moving from smaller lines such as Kensington, Harper and Lionhearted to Silhouette.

No one is certain there are more romance writers per capita here than elsewhere, but it is certainly true that in 1991 Harlequin bestowed upon Vancouver its "Joey" award as the most romantic city in the world (Joey being the nickname of the Harlequin who sits in the diamond on the book covers). It is also true that in a business in which rejection slips are shipped out from publishers by the truck load, gatherings like this provide a boost that helps many an aspiring writer stick out the rough patches.

On the other hand, these conferences have their demoralizing side, as I complain to Molly McCarthy-Senebald when we meet on Saturday afternoon to compare notes.

I find Molly simpatico in a way one can't always expect in a Mass Historical. A self-possessed, gravely humorous woman, she joined the army at age 33, and is now a senior military officer and a Ph.D. candidate in educational research who works on her historical-romance manuscripts at night. The dictates of different subgenres have pulled us to different workshops, though, and while she has clearly been inspired by learning how to Make Settings Come Alive and how to Blend Myth and Reality in Historical Romances, my experience has been less happy. I have learned in Naomi Horton's seminar that not only does my hero suffer from fuzziness of backstory, but my heroine has a deficient PMF (Primary Motivating Force)

and my story overall shows a glaring

lack of retrospective inevitability. Despite Molly's soothing words, I head off to my next seminar in a mood to create some conflict.

An hour later, I'm having a Black Moment. Harlequin editor Zilla Soriano has confirmed what I've been hearing less officially for some time: Harlequin Presents is virtually closed to new writers. Presents (that's the verb, not

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the noun) is the world's best-selling line, and its stable of authors is so large and well-established, Soriano has said, that it is pretty much out of reach for anyone who hasn't already been published.

The Black Moment is a crucial component of every romance novel—the point when the conflict reaches its peak and any prospect of Happily Ever After seems impossible. I have in store for my characters a wonderful and realistic conflict resolution, which they will discover if I ever get as far as page 184. Unfortunately, I am not a fictional character. I see no way

around the external conflict of Presents' closed doors.

Poisoned by the foul vapours of my BM, I castigate myself for not submitting my manuscripts earlier—like 20 years earlier, when there were only three Canadians writing for Harlequin, and then-publishing director Fred Kerner was going around saying things like, "We could use another 150 writers." I was only 14 years old at the time, but I had already written several versions of a Harlequin romance, involving a handsome English lord who also happened to be an Olympic dressage rider (here my grey mare, cleverly disguised as a bay gelding, made a star turn) and a Princess Caroline look-alike/equestrienne, whose love was foiled by her psychotically domineering sister (my own elder sibling, disguised somewhat more thinly than my horse).

By the time I sent my tortuous masterpiece to Harlequin, 13 years and 17 full manuscript mutations later, the little company begun in 1949 by Winniepeggers Richard and Mary Bonnycastle had been bought by the *Toronto Star's* parent company, Torstar, and was well on its way to becoming a global publishing juggernaut. It had not only survived numerous buyout attempts by big publishers who thought the quiet Canadian concern was easy pickings, but had itself bought out Simon and Schuster's Silhouette imprint. In 1998, Harlequin sells books at the rate of 5.5 per second—175 million a year—in 132 markets and more than 23 languages. One of every six mass paperbacks sold in North America is a Harlequin or a Silhouette (which, despite their common ownership, maintain separate offices and different sensibilities), and Harlequin's slick selling techniques have helped create a market in which romances of one kind or another account for 46 percent of all mass-paperback sales.

Little wonder that at the bottom of my first rejection letter from Harlequin Presents—which stated that, although I "displayed writing skills," my plot was highly peculiar and my characters stereotyped—was a postscript announcing a temporary stop on the receipt of unsolicited manuscripts for the line. Though I received a letter a year and a half later telling me I could once again pursue the joys of rejection, Soriano's words suggest there is still a de facto stop on Presents.

"Why don't you write for Precious Gems?" suggests Molly kindly, when she sees that my Black Moment shows signs

## XXXX The Book of Love

of becoming a Black Pip-Emma Overall.

"But what about the Prime Directive?" I wail. The dictate "Write what you read" has been deeply impressed upon every aspiring romance writer, and we adhere to it with Picard-like zeal. "Presents is what I read. I *never* read Precious Gems."

In fact, I couldn't if I tried, as Precious Gems, a new Kensington imprint, is published for sale exclusively at U.S. WalMarts. Still, at a "chat group" with several local Precious Gems authors, I find that the idea has some merit. The length specification for PG is the same as for Presents—55,000 words—though the flat payment of \$2,000 US, without royalties, is a far cry from the \$20,000 to \$45,000 authors usually make for a Harlequin.

"Do they want alpha-males or beta-males?" inquires one scrupulous woman. "I've sent them alphas," says Kathleen Webb. But Carole Dean, who has sold five manuscripts to Precious Gems, chimes in that she has written them some betas. Indeed, PG's parameters seem to be wide open: the point of view can be up to 50 percent from the male side, the tone serious or comical. Where Harlequin stands firm on its prohibition of art-forgery plots, at PG we are welcome to try almost anything. Webb even made one of her men a guitar player—"and we all know musicians are the kiss of death," she reminds us.

Then again, not quite wide open. "They don't want any SSBs [Sardonic Sneering Bastards]," warns Dean, "and they don't like tycoons."

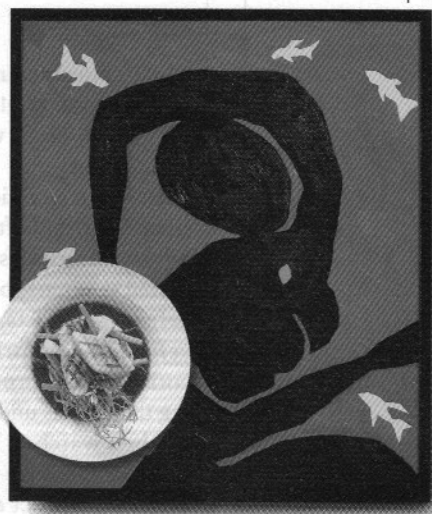
I don't do SSBs, but I do write tycoons. Presents *teems* with tycoons. My favourite romance author, New Zealander Robyn Donald, has populated the better part of the antipodes with copper-haired sheep barons, and I have long looked forward to doing the same for Vancouver (except my barons will have had to make their fortunes with something other than sheep).

On the other hand, I reason, my current hero isn't precisely a tycoon: he's merely an investigative journalist who has become independently wealthy through his own efforts. His wine-baron father has already disinherited him, and has no hand in the matter. I decide to try my manuscript on Harlequin and then, if it's rejected, send it to Precious Gems.

If I ever finish it. My Black Moment fad-

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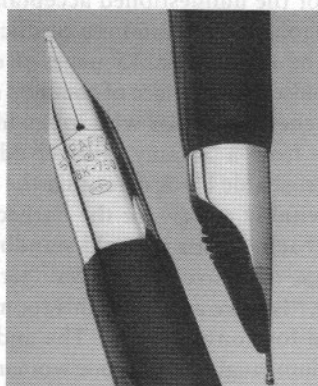
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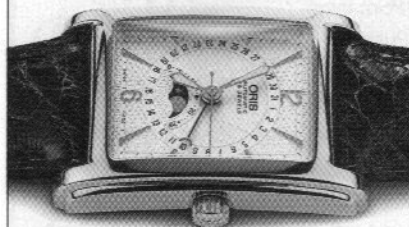


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ing to a brownie-pink, I set off to learn  
How to Save My Saggy Middle.

**T**

he next morning, Molly comes up and clutches my arm excitedly. "I got a bite!" she tells me. "The editor from Dell wants to look at my manuscript."

The "pitch sessions" have been going on since Saturday afternoon. As I have made my manuscriptless way to several depopulated seminars, bitterly contemplating my deficient conflicts, saggy middles and undeveloped backstories, I have passed in the corridors pale prospective pitchers, muttering their spiels under their breath, eyes fixed on their watches. They have only five minutes to present their characters, basic plotline, conflict and resolution, and their own writing background to the editor or agent of their choice. It's a chance to leap over some mountainous slush piles: Harlequin alone receives about 12,000 unsolicited manuscripts a year (and every one gets read).

We are all keenly aware that ideas fresh enough to catch an editor's eye are hard to come by. Though the so-called "formula" of romance fiction is strictly a construct of those who have never picked up a romance in their lives, any genre is by definition self-limiting, and the romance industry's prodigious output has exhausted the most accessible veins of conflicts, character types and plots.

Silhouette editor Leslie Wainger underlines this reality at one of the final seminars of the conference—a panel discussion called, inevitably, "Conflict: When It's Real, When It's Not." In lively, acidulous fashion, Wainger scathes some of the hackneyed conventions that irk her the most, though they were perfectly acceptable 10 years ago. Among these are the "misunderstanding" plotline, in which a letter gone astray or the unquestioned acceptance of an antagonist's lies sustains a conflict that would be resolved in 15 pages if either protagonist had an ounce of common sense; the rancher next door who looks like an escapee from a Tommy Hilfiger ad; and the uncrushable black dress that the heroine inevitably packs for the barbecue in the outback. As for that old standby, the marriage of convenience, Wainger asks wearily, "Is there anyone in this room who married for convenience?" The audience breaks into laughter when one woman raises her hand.

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Return to Koksilah Road and continue along it, crossing Highway 1. Stay on it as it becomes Cherry Point Road and twists its way to Cherry Point winery. If Vancouver seems a long way home by now, no problem: along with its tasting room, the winery has a B & B. Otherwise, retrace your route to Highway 1 and turn left. Victoria and its ferry connections are less than an hour away.



**Drivers wanted.**

## XXXX The Book of Love

**F**ortunately, as standards have risen, the scope has also broadened. Unlike the authors of 15 years ago, we are free to create characters who are physically imperfect, morally ambiguous, occupationally diverse. Mary Balogh, in her Saturday workshop, fondly described one of her male protagonists as balding, homely and 5'4" ("My editors wouldn't let me make him any shorter," she added regretfully). In his book *Merchants of Venus: Inside Harlequin and the Empire of Romance*, Bowen Island author Paul Grescoe describes a love scene in which the heroine strokes the arm stumps of the double-amputee hero (though, he notes, the arms were reinstated for the French translation, as it was considered distasteful in France). The heroine of a 1997 Robyn Donald book was a hipless, breastless, 6-foot-tall Olympic javelin thrower. And way back in 1984, Janet Dailey challenged the ultimate taboo: her hero for Silhouette Special Edition *Left-over Love* was so ugly the heroine recoiled every time she laid eyes on him.

Whatever Dailey's recent transgressions, everyone at the Royal Rendezvous owes her a lot. Not only did she stretch many aspects of the genre and singlehandedly raise the standard of writing several notches, but the success of her American-set books wrested the locale monopoly (and with it, the concentration of authorship) away from England. Now Vancouver is as legitimate as London, and Cowichan Bay as romantic as the Lake District. "You may not think the Gulf Islands sound exotic," says Vanessa Grant, "but people in New York or Japan do."

None of these advancements have brought the genre a shred of respect. Romance is still the Barry Manilow of the book world, and we know it. The Royal Rendezvous has provided all of us a welcome reprieve from this stigma. Our struggles have been validated, our creative fantasies supported. I head toward the ferry replete with phone numbers, inspirational thoughts and a bellyful of The Empress's high tea. I am eager to get back to my book: with all I've learned, I'm pretty sure I can make my Saggy Middle so taut a penny could be bounced off it, and my hero's backstory so well-defined that Calvin Klein will want to hire him. Best of all, I think I've come up with a much better conflict. Deep. Murky. Positively vinegarlike in its fermentation. And all without a single dead baby. ♥

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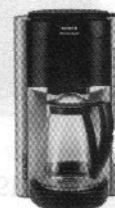
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