
The Connections Between and Among Women Are the Most Feared, the Most Problematic, and the Most Potentially Transforming Force on the Planet. How Did the Rise of Sixties Feminism Impact on the Publishing Output of Mills & Boon?

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Abstract

Since the 1920s, Mills and Boon has been a name synonymous with romantic fiction, successfully publishing unashamedly formulaic novels with passive, traditional heroines seeking and always finding their happy ending with a wealthy, handsome hero. The rise of second wave feminism in the 1960s brought into question the reliance on traditional gender roles which formed the foundation of a genre which was failing to reflect wider social changes. This article will examine how the rise of feminism affected the operations and output of Mills and Boon, a publisher intrinsically dependant on the social construct of gender.

Key Words

Feminism; Paratext; Mills & Boon; Romance Fiction; Distribution Model; Bourdieu

Introduction

The Sixties were a time of huge political and social change for Britain, in particular with regards to feminism and the rise of women's rights. Sexual morals changed rapidly, and the introduction of the contraceptive pill and legalization of abortion gave women options other than marriage and motherhood. Horizons were broadening, with more women becoming involved with politics, job opportunities increasing and work towards the Equal Pay Act gaining momentum.

So how did Mills and Boon (hereafter M&B), the UK's leading publisher of romantic fiction, respond to these changes? Key changes seen were the development and implementation of a radical distribution model, changes to editorial policy and paratextual interventions in an attempt to redefine interpretation of their content. In analysing M&B paperbacks from this decade with attention to Gerard Genette's theory of paratexts, Darnton's 'communications circuit' and Bourdieu's concept of a 'field of cultural production', this article will investigate the impact of feminism on interventions by the publisher which affected reader interpretation and reception.

Mills & Boon: Heroes of Romantic Fiction

The popularity of 'tuppenny libraries' combined with the demand for escapist fiction in the interwar years transformed British firm M&B into an exclusive publisher of romantic fiction (McKibbin 2000, 490). Little was spent on advertising, and all books were case bound in plain brown cloth leading to them being referred to as 'the brown books', which occasionally featured full colour illustrated dust jackets. M&B worked toward publicising its list rather than its authors, the distinctive brown covers further diminishing the significance of the author.

M&B titles provided an escape from the reality of the conformist female experience, whereby wealthy, thoughtful and reliable man swept the heroine off her feet to a happy ever after, rich in sweet sentiments and deeply engrained and accepted gender roles.

The years following WW2 saw a slow return to normality in respect of book production with paper rationing finally lifted in 1949, and brought with them a new approach to business for M&B. Advertising was introduced, authors were encouraged to make personal appearances, and press articles were published by M&B themselves.

The success of international development during the 1950s, including a two-way rights deal with Canadian romance publisher Harlequin Enterprises Ltd., delivered an increase in revenue which allowed for expansion into paperback publishing in the 1960s. This led to a standardised format with a maximum page extent of 192 pp. and featured full colour, glamorous illustrations on the cover.

Despite a downturn in commercial lending libraries in the late 1950s, the demand for romance novels remained steadfast into the new decade. Paperback publishing meant that M&B could offer their publications at a reasonable price, and in the 1960s made them available nationwide via newsagents and subscription services.

The 1960s saw the development of huge political, sociological and cultural changes for Britain, pivotal to which were the sexual revolution and resurgence of the women's liberation movement. Feminist Betty Frieden argued that women were only able to express identity and achieve fulfilment via marriage and children (1963) in a publication which "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world" (Fox 2006). Second wave feminism began in the US and soon spread to the rest of the West, seeking to deliver more equality for women than the enfranchisement achieved by the activities of first wave feminism; the debate was widened to focus on discrimination and equality, and the campaign for equal social and legal rights.

Key developments brought about included the 1967 increase in availability of the contraceptive pill (original only available to married women upon its 1961 introduction), the 1967 Abortion Act, recognition of women's financial dependence on men (husbands, fathers) by the revisions to the Married Women's Property act in 1964, work towards the 1970 Equal pay act and the increasing involvement of women in formal political processes.

M&B's editorial policy was impacted significantly in response to reflect the changing Britain, with both publisher and its authors striving to deliver an informed product to appeal to and be representative of the modern reader via the introduction of economically independent, emotionally free heroines and increasingly sexual themes (Dixon 1999, 90). Various M&B authors, including Violet Winspear, rose to prominence during this time, with storylines which took the reader to far flung destinations for passionate dalliances with exotic, masculine heroes (Bowring and O'Brien 2008, 14).

Paratext

One of the ways in which the rise of the feminist movement impacted on the publishing output of M&B was in the look and feel, or paratext, of their titles. Genette's theoretical model of paratexts addresses the material form of a text, and suggests that its peritextual (physical attributes, both authorial and by the publisher) and epitextual elements (in accompaniment to the text, physical and non-physical) which together make up the paratext, influence reader experience and interpretation. 'The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or ... a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside' (Genette 1997, 1-2).

Case Study: Paratextual Development of *The House on Flamingo Cay*

1967 saw the publication of the third edition of *The House on Flamingo Cay* by author Anne Weale (1967), which was previously released in the UK as hardback in 1962 (1962a) and for the first time in paperback that same year (1962b).

At 171 x 108 mm and 176 pp., the format of the third edition remained unchanged from its 1962 predecessor. The handbag-friendly dimensions and weight made the book ideal for the 'new woman', who it can be assumed were females of low- to mid-socio-economic class now able to work with wages and hours equivalent to men, to enjoy on her commute to the workplace (Stoecker 2000).

According to Genette's theory, series allow the publisher to 'demonstrate and control the diversification of their activities' and allow the reader to identify the type of content and genre (Genette 1997, 22). Use of colour to identify genre was made popular in 1930s by Albatross and Penguin, however for M&B it was necessary to divide their one genre, romance, into a sub-genre series of imprints which were easily distinguishable to a perhaps lay readership.

The House on Flamingo Cay belonged to the 'Modern Romance' series, recognisable by its blue livery, which as with all M&B titles, focused on the romance between a male and female character with little sub-plot, and tended to be set in exotic locations with rich men.

The formulaic nature of the imprint enabled readers to choose their next book with confidence based on the colour alone. The strong branding, which Genette suggests serves to ‘immediately indicat[e] to the potential reader the type of work, if not the genre, he is dealing with’ (Genette 1997, 22), was demonstrated by the M&B name, colophon, colour coding and bright illustration taking precedence over the author name - another prescriptive element of the distinctive M&B branding. The size and style of the author’s name in this edition is as uniform as that for other authors in the same series, regardless of reputation.

It is worth considering in a paratextual context that the author of this title wrote under a pseudonym. Genette argues that pseudonyms only have a paratextual effect if the reader is privy to the information that one is in use, a point that seems irrelevant here as the author was still deemed, at the time, to be comparatively insignificant by M&B readers.

The use of an alias in this case, however, may reveal more about the agenda of the author than Genette’s theory would suggest. Weale, real name Jay Blakeney, who also wrote under the alias Andrea Blake, was, according to website Fantastic Fiction in 2019, granddaughter of a well-known writer on moral theology, Richard Paul Blakeney; familial connections may have viewed writing for M&B as low-brow and undesirable. Furthermore, bibliographical information details Blakeney enjoying a promising career as a press reporter, which she ultimately sacrificed for marriage aged 19 in 1948, a fact which sits somewhat jarringly with her work, now republished in a time of huge social change for women, being represented paratextually as portraying a confident, independent modern woman.

The back-cover blurb describes the main female character, Angela, as glamorous, ambitious and newly-wealthy, and describes how she persuades her sister to accompany her on a luxury holiday to find a rich husband. The adjective used to describe her sister suggests Angela herself to be of a brasher character.

The front cover illustration on the 1967 edition (see Figure 1) portrays two attractive females; one (whom we can assume to be Angela) is looking confidently at the reader, as opposed to staring wistfully in the distance, presumably in the direction of the sought-after rich man, as demonstrated in more traditional M&B imagery (see Figure 2). Noticeably

absent from the main illustration is the male character, who appears as a mono sketch only in scenes depicting leisure activities Angela is appearing to enjoy regardless of his presence.

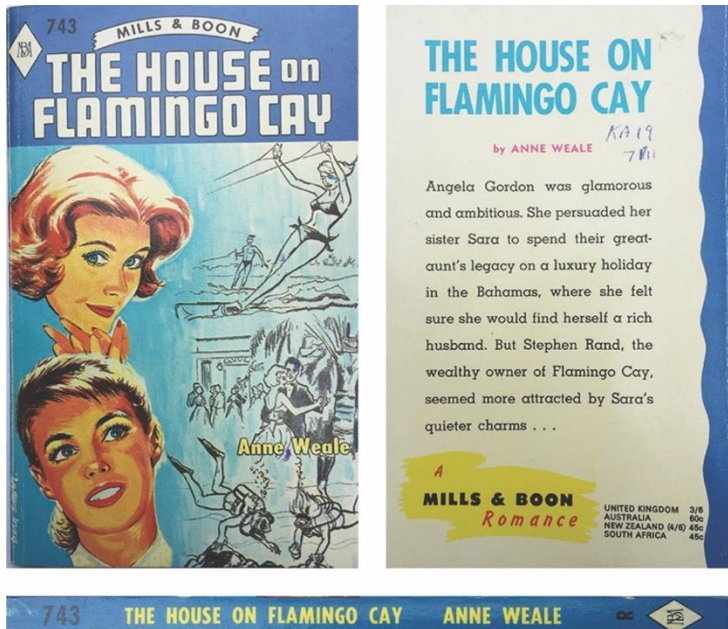


Figure 1. 1967 paperback

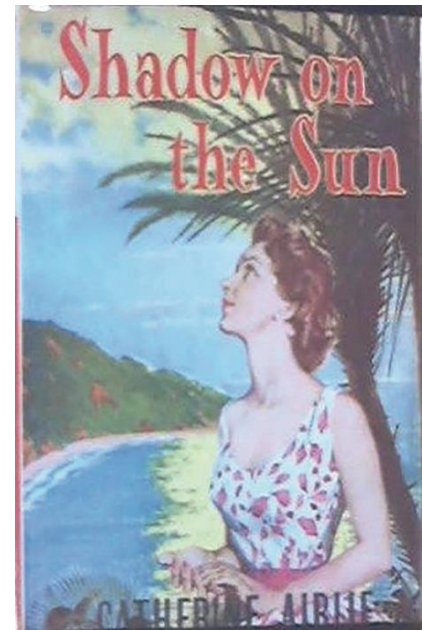


Figure 2. 1960 artwork

This scene is vastly different from the story portrayed on the cover of the 1962 version (see Figure 3), where a timid Angela with anxious expression is shown, the “rich man” character grasping her with one arm whilst the other rests protectively around her, suggesting he is in control of a vulnerable Angela.

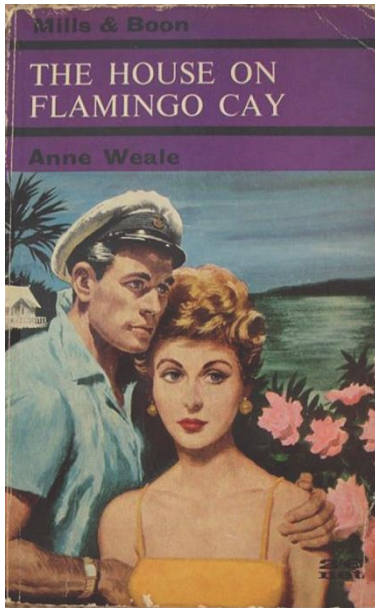


Figure 3. 1962 paperback

The choice of font used for the book title (both front cover and spine) on the 1967 edition offers a confident and bold statement, its outlined, san-serif uppercase imposition complimentary to the bold confidence shown in the representation of the character. By contrast the 1962 version's traditional, generously leaved fine serif suggests a fragility reflecting that seen in the depiction of Angela, denoting notions of innocence and helplessness.

It is clear M&B were positively reacting to societal changes by attempting via paratext to portray exactly the same story published just five years prior in a new positive light, so to appear befitting of and appealing to the newly empowered, self-sufficient female.

A Changing Distribution Model

The sales channels and distribution methods utilised by M&B in the 1960s marked a radical change from the traditional publishing model. Following the decline of commercial libraries in the 1950s, M&B, inspired by Canadian sister company Harlequin, began distributing their books via newsagents, a move which M&B claimed was made to grant readers easy access to reasonably priced books (Dixon 1999, 20). A mail order operation was also introduced which circulated the *Happy Reading* catalogue twice yearly to its subscribers. Serialisation in

popular magazines such as *Women's Weekly* served, in addition, to successfully tempt an increasing readership to seek out and purchase the full book.

A more pessimistic argument may be that elitism in publishing meant traditional booksellers would not stock romance fiction. Bookshops in the 50s and 60s were considered 'stuffy' and conservative, representative of white male culture, as indeed was publishing itself. Shops which sold mass-market paperbacks in the 60s are described by Laura J. Miller as 'signalling informality' and 'absence of elitism', as places where books were 'not collected as status symbols', and that romantic fiction was a genre that independent booksellers would only carry 'grudgingly, if at all' (2008, 43, 60).

Robert Darnton, in his essay *What is the History of Books?*, developed the 'communications circuit', a highly influential model by which to consider from sociological, economic and political perspectives the effects on both the dissemination and reception of texts at each aspect of a book's life cycle (Darnton 2006. 9-26). The circuit involves stages including author, publisher, printer, distributor and reader, yet 'fail[s] to discern that gender considerations play a determining role at every stage ... radically altering its nature for women' (Murray 2004, 13). Simone Murray also criticises Darnton's circuit for its disregard of 'books refused retail space or denied distribution outlets', suggesting 'silences within the system' lead to 'non-communication' (Murray 2004, 14).

M&B revolutionised and broke with the 'communications circuit' by creating their own myriad of distribution channels out of necessity, but this break was, by coincidence, hugely beneficial as books became available where the readers were, in grocery shops and newsagents: a radical form of distribution at the time. Again, Genette's epitextual concept can be observed: the strategic sequential numbering of each book which featured on the spines allowed retailers to track their stock, and short page extents meant the books could be read quickly, increasing the regularity of purchase and stock turnover. The convenience of availability and ease of purchase could have also affected reader reception and interpretation, the mundanity of everyday tasks (the commuter travelling to work, housewives doing the weekly shop) interrupted by the escapist promise of an exotic

adventure, glamour and freedom, a light read for the busy woman to pick up and enjoy when time permits.

M&B: A Radical Publisher?

Despite efforts by M&B throughout the 1960s to present themselves as a radical publisher representative of cultural changes of the time, under the surface of some paratextual changes and an innovative distribution model, little had fundamentally changed.

Pierre Bourdieu's 'Field of Cultural Production' (Bourdieu 1993) analyses how politics, economics and production are interconnected and organised in hierarchical terms as 'fields' and 'sub-fields', within which various types of capital operate (including symbolic, cultural and economic).

As operators in what Bourdieu refers to as the field of large-scale production, commercial success and the accrual of economic capital were priority motivations for M&B, and the key reasons behind attempts to present both themselves as a publisher and their books as reflective of the new cultural climate.

The political movements of the 1960s were oppositional to the established themes for which romantic fiction as a genre was known, with the introduction of new ideological currents threatening to disrupt the very formula upon which M&B had built its success. As such, it was necessary for M&B to navigate a fine line whereby a more modern heroine was seen to be exercising and enjoying her new rights and freedoms (albeit with no 'direct reference to feminism') without relinquishing the notion of finding her happy-ever-after with a man. Ann Rosalind Jones in 1986 claimed that M&B 'can afford a flirtation with feminism: the genre game is already won' (Radford 1986). At the same time, in what could be viewed as offering stability and reassurance to the reader in a time of social upheaval as well as (intentionally or not) reinforcing the tent poles of the genre, M&B introduced the 'alpha male' character who could be seen to balance out the traits of power and independence seen in the new heroine.

Prolific M&B author Violet Winspear in the early 1970s can be seen to defend M&B's largely unchanged ethos in archival personal correspondence with the publisher dated 29

July 1972: 'Romance belongs in the warm zones of feelings not where the intellect has its icy palace' and, dated 4 October 1973, 'The real aim of romance is to provide escape and entertainment, not to dish up "real life" and "real life people" '. These sentiments, which suggest a disregard for the progresses made for women, were also echoed in public authorial epitext via an original mediated interview (Genette 1997, 351) when Winspear, interviewed by the BBC's *Man Alive* (1971), controversially claimed her male leads should 'frighten but fascinate. They must be the sort of men who are capable of rape: men it's dangerous to be alone in the room with' (University of Reading Archive 2013).

Conclusion

As a commercially motivated mainstream publisher, M&B were vulnerable to trends (Gerrard 1989, 32) and therefore were significantly affected by the rise of sixties feminism. However, the changes brought about by the decade were primarily cosmetic exercises; the newly introduced independent, emotionally free heroines were counterbalanced with alpha males, the novel distribution model was born through necessity, and the paratext despite best efforts was unable to conceal the fact themes of the text were still inherently dependant on traditional gender roles.

Contributions to political or social culture were not of importance to M&B, echoing the comments of Abel who argued commerce to be the antithesis of culture (Abel 1996, 288). With commercial gain the primary concern for M&B, there is no evidence of any desire for accretion of symbolic or political capital (Bourdieu 1993). Despite a thin veneer of radicalism, ultimately M&B were unable to commit to a philosophical stance, when so intrinsic to their success was social stability and to some extent, the acquiescent female (Dixon 2004, 25).

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