

I Was a Mills and Boon Junkie by Beulah Gross

I used to be normal. I used to read the ten best books of the year before the list came out. I had ordinary reading habits - a good magazine in the park at lunchtime, the latest thriller at bedtime. Then I went to a garage sale and saw my first Mills and Boon romantic novels. The covers were all similar, each one portraying a large, strong man towering over a small, clinging, adoring female. I was just moving on when the cute logo on each book caught my eye - a small rose on an upright stem. Because my middle name is Rose, I have a similar logo on my letterhead. Amused by this coincidence, I bought two of the books.

I was hooked at once. I fell in love with the tall, dark heroes, men of the world, wise in the ways of women and seduction. Their taut, muscular thighs, sardonic smiles, mocking eyes and superb arrogance captivated me. Despite being a middle-aged grandmother - or perhaps because of it - I identified with the young heroines with their silken tresses, green-gold eyes, pert breasts and slim hips. I enjoyed reading about their small, lissom, pliant bodies, probably because mine no longer has any of these qualities. When these bodies betrayed their owners by responding to the senses rather than to reason, I would look at 'him who thinks he's always obeyed' snoring next to me and wish that I could rediscover romance of my own. I was definitely hooked.

For a while I bought other romantic novels but all paled in comparison to Mills and Boon. I soon discovered that secondhand bookshops are the major sources and, to my joy, I also discovered that there are literally hundreds of titles. My craving could be easily satisfied.

It was soon apparent that I was not alone in my addiction. All the novels I purchased - and so severe was my dependency that I was buying them in \$20 lots - were marked with tiny coloured crosses, ticks, hearts, circles and initials. After devouring the first fifty or so books, I began putting my own secret mark on them. Heaven forbid that I should repurchase one I had already read!

The attraction of Mills and Boon romances is that despite their exotic settings and the unusual first names they boast, the story lines are similar so the reader always knows where she is. Girl meets boy, there is a mutual antagonism fired by a series of misunderstandings and jumping to conclusions by both characters. This is confused by their sexual attraction which he acknowledges and tries to force on her, often in anger, and which she tries to deny. Her wanton body betrays her and she learns, much against her will, that she loves and wants him desperately. There is always 'the other woman' and 'the other man' who complicate things but in the end all is explained and forgiven and the story ends happily.

Who wouldn't fall for a tall, dark and handsome - and successfully wealthy - older man? What matter if his name is Fernando or Andreas or just plain Alaric? All that matters is that he be passionate and ruthless, yet loving and sensitive. Who wouldn't identify with a girl named Star, Tabitha or Ayesha? Which of us wouldn't like to find romance in the far-off wilds of Canada, the West Indies or on safari somewhere? I certainly would!

Most Mills and Boon readers are undoubtedly women, but contrary to popular opinion, they are not all sexually or romantically starved. Some may get a vicarious thrill from the romantic and sexual antics of the hero and heroine, but I don't think there are many and this does not explain the lasting popularity of Mills and Boon. After all, because of changing morality, only the more modern ones dare to be explicit. The Mills and Boon romances of less than a decade ago barely hint at anything so vulgar as sex, yet their appeal is no

less great. I know, because I devour them all with the same fervour and, judging by the little marks, so do my fellow addicts.

My craving became so bad that I became a 'chain' reader, opening the next intoxicating romance almost before I'd finished the previous one. To ensure that deprivation would never set in, I left small stockpiles of books in strategic places all over the house. I even kept a couple in the car. As I had to feed my craving constantly, I read everywhere and at every opportunity. I took to bathing instead of showering so that I could wash with one hand and hold a book with the other. I read while cooking - with disastrous effects on my family's digestion - and stayed up till all hours trying to satisfy my growing need for more and more thrills and swoons to feed my overwhelming habit.

Totally subservient to it, I became a mainline junkie and, like all junkies, was quite anti-social. If I had to attend parties, meetings or outings, I clutched the current fix in my hot little hand in case the conversation flagged or bored me. Family and friends tried to reason with me but I ignored them, preferring to lose myself in the delights of storybook lives and romances rather than face up to the reality of my own disabling intoxication. As far as I was concerned, Mills and Boon romances were merely an extension, suitably matured, of the fairy tales I had enjoyed in my childhood, and as no one had stopped me reading then, I couldn't see why they should now.

I began feigning illness to stay at home and read rather than go out anywhere. I became a social outcast and my unfriendly behaviour embarrassed my immediate family. Their persistent nagging made me realise that to the uninitiated there is something shameful about reading Mills and Boon and I found myself apologising for reading them rather than 'good' books. Even when story lines and characters began to merge until they were indistinguishable despite the differences in settings and names, the hypnotic fascination persevered. Nevertheless, for the first time since I became hooked on Mills and Boon, I gave serious thought to their effect on me and their general reputation.

I considered going cold turkey but knew this wouldn't work. I was in too deep. Perhaps, I thought, I could set up a 'Romance Readers' Detox. Group', specialising in Mills and Boon addicts. I could then appropriate the members' books and thus gain a huge reserve stash. Regretfully, I decided against this. I knew, deep within my romantic soul, that this group could never be. I realised that I and my fellow Mills and Boon addicts are discriminated against. We are regarded as socially and intellectually inferior to say, Agatha Christie, Nevil Shute and 007 fans. Now, I don't know if this is true about any of my fellow Mills and Boon devotees but I do know it is not true of me. I have read 'good' books in my time and I'm sure that one day I will again. The disgust and vilification I have endured for some time has incensed me so much that I've decided to vindicate myself and prove my critics wrong. What's more, I've discovered how to feed my habit and make it respectable. I am now able to satisfy my favourite habit openly - at home, at work, at bus stops, in trains and cars, in waiting rooms - simply everywhere. No longer can anyone make me feel guilty or ashamed of my dependence because I have at last given it acceptable credibility.

I'm researching the genre because I am writing my own Mills and Boon romance.

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