



Sex in the stacks:

Australia's colossal collection of
Mills & Boon



Blinky Kill



The National Library of Australia collects one of every book published in Australia.

Think about it.

One of EVERY book... including the sexy ones.

With a current monthly release of over 80 print books, and more in ebook format, Harlequin Mills & Boon lead the way in romance publishing output, comprising a formidable part of the National Library's erection. Er, I mean collection.



Just the tip of the Mills & Boon print collection!

Because the collection is so well endowed with Mills & Boon romantic treasure, and as I'm a voracious reader, I set myself a challenge to celebrate the National Library's 50th anniversary - to choose one Mills & Boon book to read from every year since the Library opened its doors in 1968. (My full list is at the end of the zine)

Attitudes towards premarital sex, women in the workplace, divorce, single mothers, sexual orientation, interracial relationships, and gender identity have all changed significantly over the past fifty years, so I was curious to see if and how these changes are reflected in Mills & Boon romance.

I was also interested to see how Mills & Boon books themselves change over time, including the introduction of ebooks, as well as the front cover design, which reflect the fashions and tastes of the day, and which can play an important role in grabbing readers' attention.

Mills & Boon presents...



Kerry Allyne

Carpentaria Moon



SHE WASN'T WHAT HE THOUGHT

Disclaimers:

- I am not an academic, and this is a short(ish) zine, so if you want to read detailed scholarly analysis of romance writing, there's probably something more appropriate in the Library's catalogue
- My list is by no means a comprehensive representation of Mills & Boon titles, as I frequently targeted Mills & Boon



that are set in Australia, have amusing titles, or that feature librarians!

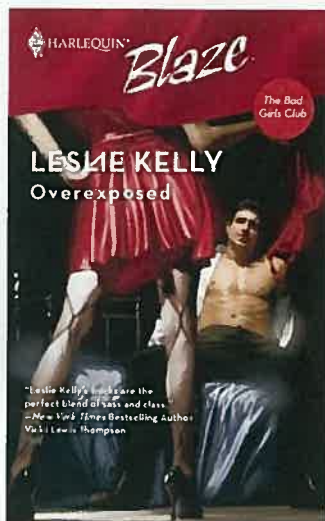
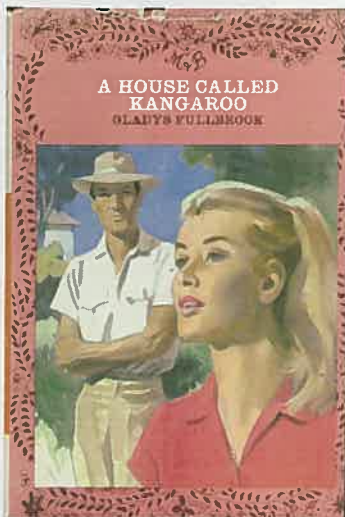
So where to start?

Searching the phrase 'Mills & Boon' and narrowing the results to 'Books' found 12,894 entries in the Library catalogue. To narrow the search to something more manageable, I used 'Advanced search', put 'Mills & Boon' into the search box, and set it to search books one year at a time (yes, I did 50 separate searches)

Some people choose books based on the cover. Personally, I'm a sucker for an intriguing title. So I skimmed each year's list for titles that stood out, then added those titles to my account 'Favourites.'



A book by its cover



To say Mills & Boon front covers have changed over the last 50 years is an understatement.

In the 1960s, the books I read were usually hardcover, with detailed illustrations and elaborate borders. The front cover images feature heroes and heroines with conservative hairstyles and clothing.

Over the decades, paperbacks became the standard, and today, ebooks are becoming more and more popular.

Apart from some imprints such as *Cherish* and *Medical*, front covers have become racier, and feature more glamorous heroes and heroines in less clothing.



Let's talk about sex, baby

In *A House Called Kangaroo* (1968) there is no sex. There's an awkward kiss or two, but definitely no sex. In these earlier Mills & Boon novels, the heroine is always a virgin until marriage, and if the hero suspects (falsely) that the heroine has slept with someone else, he's always horrible about it, even though they're not in a relationship.



Even today, this fascination with virgins is a common theme, with books like *The sheikh's virgin stable-girl* (2009) still proving popular.

As premarital sex became socially acceptable in real life, this is reflected in Mills & Boon as sex scenes started to become more common. But despite the upswing of sex scenes in Mills & Boon, there's sometimes a lack of technique evident in the hero's approach to initiating fun times:



Mills & Boon

MASTER
OF ULURU

Helen Bianchin



'Never had she been made so aware of a man's physical strength, and she was powerless to escape the hurtful pressure of his mouth as it plundered hers, forcing her lips apart as he savaged the delicate tissue against her teeth until she could taste the sweet saltiness of her own blood' *Master of Uluru* (1980) pg 62-63

When I read this particular passage aloud to my partner, he commented "if he's drawing blood (without explicit consent), he's doing it wrong!"

I was also confounded by the lack of basic sex education frequently displayed during the deflowering of virgins:

'It was only when his predatory hands slid further down her body that she felt a tremor of alarm. This was, after all, the time she was about to yield her virginity. It should be a simple and painless process. She was young and athletic, wasn't she?' *Torrid Conflict* (1992) pg 154

It was a relief to come across more realistic scenarios:

"do you honestly think you would have enjoyed it if I'd ignored your discomfort back then and simply ploughed on? Do you honestly think that at some point your pain would have turned to pleasure?"

That's rubbish. Romantic rubbish. For everyone that miracle happens to, there are hundreds who end up thinking sex is horrible. A good first experience requires a lot of patience and skill on part of the man" *Heart-Throb for Hire* (1994) pg 142

Harlequin Mills & Boon



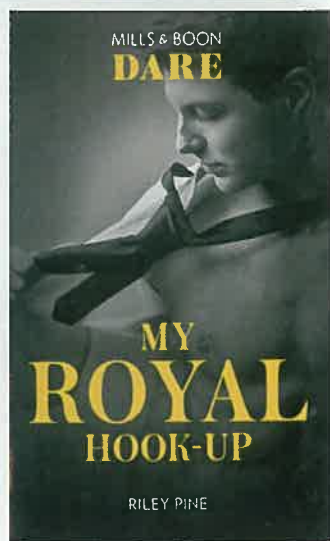
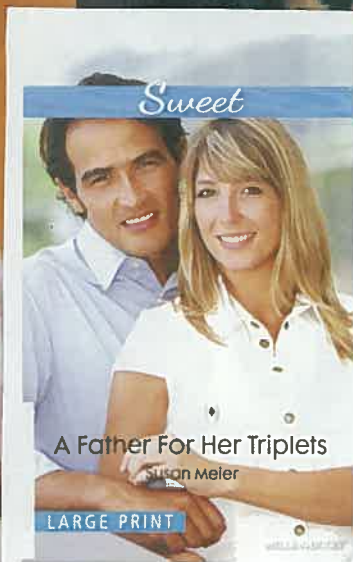
Heart-Throb for Hire

MIRANDA LEE



It was also interesting to note that the practice of safe sex in Mills & Boon is somewhat patchy - there are enough "secret shame" babies to populate a small country. I definitely appreciated the heroes and heroines who came prepared. Safety is sexy!

In modern times, Mills & Boon publish books across various imprints which all have different themes, and that theme is typically indicative of how much sexual content the books contains (for example, 'Sweet' and 'Cherish' focus on romance, 'Blaze' and 'Dare' focuses on more sexually explicit content, and 'Spice' contains casual sex and kink).



Sexual orientation and gender identity

Throughout the 50 Mills & Boon books I read, I only came across one book that featured gay characters (*The Sicilian's defiant virgin* 2017) in a subplot, but then 50 books is a tiny drop in the ocean of the many thousands of Mills & Boon books.

According to Julie Cohen*, although Mills & Boon have been publishing books featuring gay characters (usually relegated to subplots) since the early 1990s, LGBTQI and gender-diverse authors and characters are still underrepresented in romance writing. Some of Harlequin's other brands (such as Escape and Mira) feature more diverse characters in leading roles - find out more about these books via romance.com.au

*<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/sep/29/same-sex-love-fiction-romantic-novels-lgbt>

Sexism

Unfortunately quite a few of the Mills & Boon heroes play into the autocratic alpha male misogynist stereotype prevalent in romance novels.

"He was too male ... too impregnable ... too dominant!" *The Wool King* (1978) pg 14

To be honest, I found the books with these characters somewhat difficult to read. I kept having to put the book down in a rage whenever I came across gems like:

"You are an inconvenience...merely by being female"
Master of Uluru (1980) pg 12



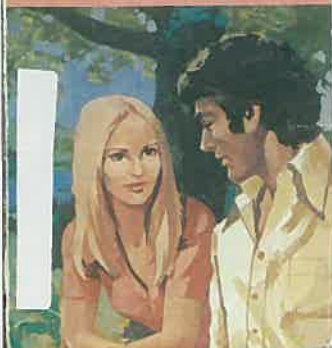
"Don't tell me he's brought home one of those militant Women's Libbers!" *The Wool King* (1978) pg 49

I was also disturbed by the undercurrent of domestic violence (sometimes physical, and sometimes in other forms) in one or two of the books I read. In what universe is domestic violence considered romantic or sexy? The following passage comes from my least favourite book:



Mills & Boon
**BOOMERANG
BRIDE**

Margaret Pargeter



"Quite deliberately he lifted his hand and slapped her coolly across her face... 'I've never slapped a woman before, Vicki. With you I believe it's the second time, and it may not be the last. God help me, but you almost drive me to murder!'" *Boomerang Bride* (1979) pg 153

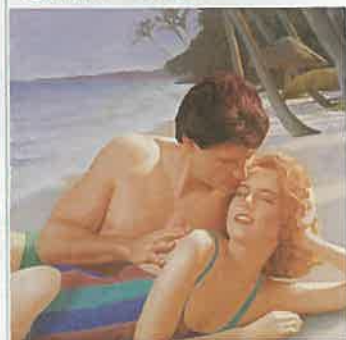
My favourite Mills & Boon books were the ones where the heroines refuse to put up with sexist, misogynistic behaviour, and where they set and enforce boundaries.

Mills & Boon



**A Very
Stylish Affair**

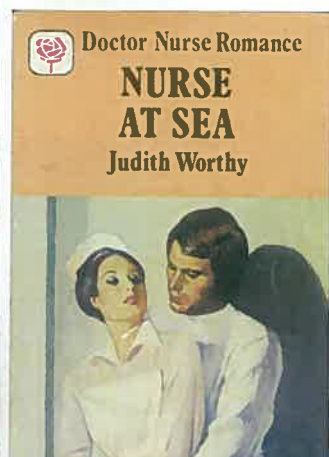
EMMA DARCY



"he had to learn she was not a stupid bunny to be manipulated any way he liked. Not with money, nor with sex appeal" *A very stylish affair* (1993) pg 103



Views around consent also evolve, from an initial attitude of victim blaming, to holding perpetrators accountable for bad behaviour. From self blame in 1981 to clear boundaries in 1993:



'For a moment his eyes flashed close to hers, dangerously, and she knew that she had allowed his passions to flare too strongly, and that if he insisted on forcing her to love him she would not be able to prevent it. It would be her own fault, not his, but he would probably regret it as much as she.' *Nurse at sea* (1981) pg 13

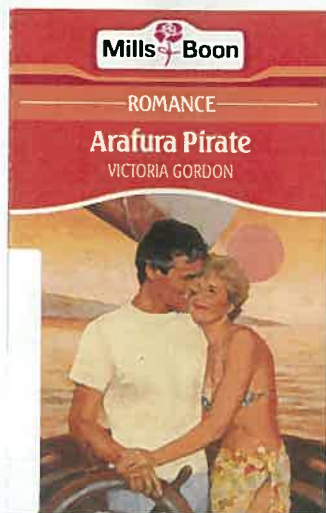
"I'll control my female problems if you control your male problems"... "To what male problems do you refer?" he asked, eyeballing her with avid interest. Sophie eyeballed him right back. "Men who think themselves irresistible, powerful and prestigious," she whispered with husky suggestiveness. "Men who believe they have the divine right of kings for the laying on of hands. Men who see a woman's body as a playground especially designed for their pleasure. Does that get across the problems I mean, Mr. Lombard?" *A very stylish affair* (1993) pg 21-22



Women and careers

"Marriage and the abandonment of a career were among the most fundamental changes you could make" *The Black Opal* (1975) pg 51

In the earlier Mills & Boon books, the heroines were teachers, governesses or nurses, then housewives once they got married. When I reached the 1980s, a greater variety of career paths appear: businesswoman, marine biologist, surgeon and etcetera. From this time, the heroine's career does not necessarily disappear the moment the heroine gets married; she now has choices. Furthermore, the books frequently delve into the struggle women face in the workforce, particularly in male-dominated careers:



"Women in science, she thought, might gradually be gaining more and better jobs, more and better recognition, but it was an uphill battle all the way, especially with chauvinistic, career-protecting bosses like her own" *Arafura pirate* (1989) pg 146

From the 1990s, books designed to appeal to working mothers become more frequent, and career paths for the heroes also expand...

Harlequin Mills & Boon



Miranda Lee

A NANNY NAMED NICK



"I'm sure you weren't thinking of a male nanny. But there's no reason why a man couldn't do the job as well as a woman" *A nanny named Nick* (1997) pg 135

One of my favourite moments depicting a Mills & Boon heroine exercising her right to choose what she wants to do with her life was in *The Black Opal* (1975). The heroine is engaged to be married to a man who, without any kind of discussion, automatically expects her to uproot her life as a nurse in Sydney to become a

housewife in the Outback. He is completely gobsmacked to discover that she's not keen on this idea.

THE BLACK OPAL



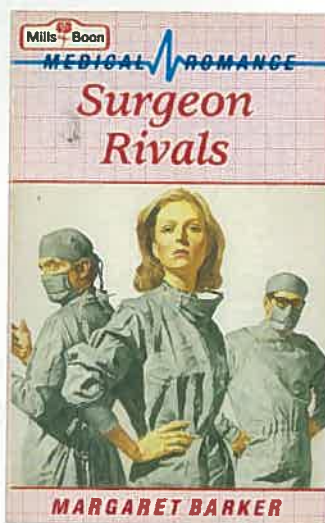
Elizabeth Hoy



"You're my woman,' she could hear John's voice saying. I'm not, she thought rebelliously I'm my own woman. If being in love means that you have to give up all rights to your own self, your opinions, your way of life, then I'm not in love" *The Black Opal* (1975) pg 133

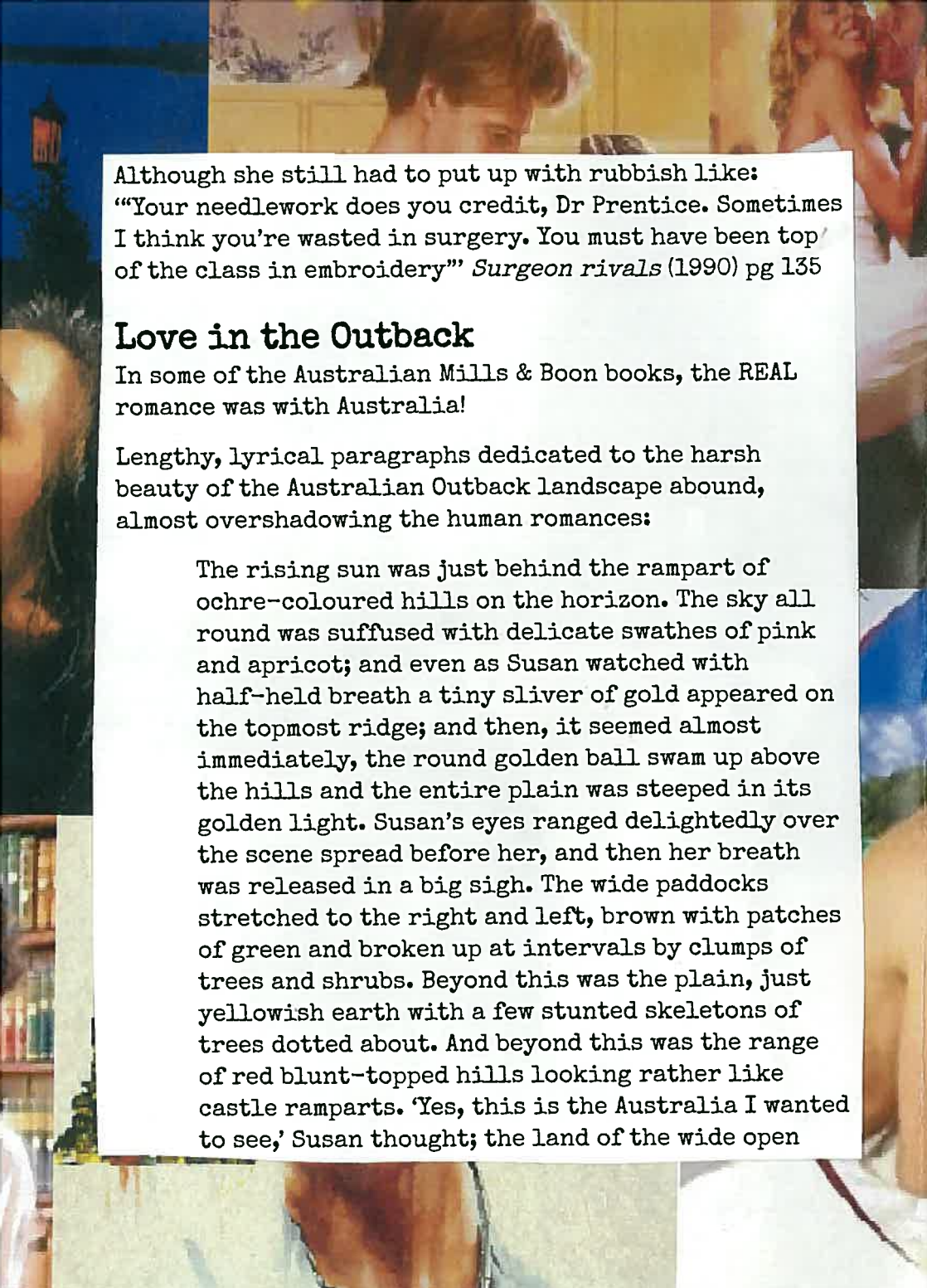
Spoiler alert, the heroine dumps John for a man who supports her life choices.

In the early days, the medical-theme romances were always between a male doctor or surgeon, and a female nurse (working in a subordinate role to the hero). Sometime in the late 1980s/early 1990s, Mills & Boon rebranded their 'Doctor Nurse Romance' imprint to become 'Medical Romance.'



I was delighted to come across *Surgeon rivals* (1990) where the surgeon heroine politely blasts her chauvinist colleagues:

“I would like you to remember that I am a doctor, not just a pretty little face. I dislike sexist remarks” *Surgeon rivals* (1990) pg 9



Although she still had to put up with rubbish like:
“Your needlework does you credit, Dr Prentice. Sometimes I think you’re wasted in surgery. You must have been top of the class in embroidery” *Surgeon rivals* (1990) pg 135

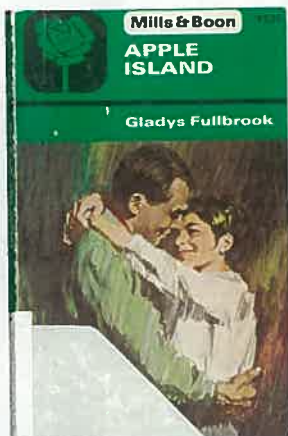
Love in the Outback

In some of the Australian Mills & Boon books, the REAL romance was with Australia!

Lengthy, lyrical paragraphs dedicated to the harsh beauty of the Australian Outback landscape abound, almost overshadowing the human romances:

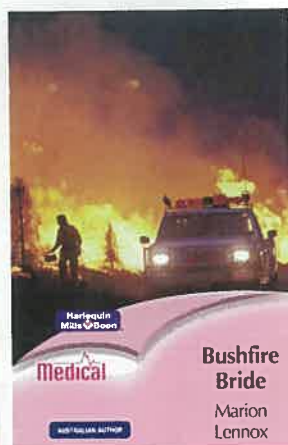
The rising sun was just behind the rampart of ochre-coloured hills on the horizon. The sky all round was suffused with delicate swathes of pink and apricot; and even as Susan watched with half-held breath a tiny sliver of gold appeared on the topmost ridge; and then, it seemed almost immediately, the round golden ball swam up above the hills and the entire plain was steeped in its golden light. Susan’s eyes ranged delightedly over the scene spread before her, and then her breath was released in a big sigh. The wide paddocks stretched to the right and left, brown with patches of green and broken up at intervals by clumps of trees and shrubs. Beyond this was the plain, just yellowish earth with a few stunted skeletons of trees dotted about. And beyond this was the range of red blunt-topped hills looking rather like castle ramparts. ‘Yes, this is the Australia I wanted to see,’ Susan thought; the land of the wide open

spaces, the land of the Never Never - *A house called Kangaroo* (1968) pg29-30

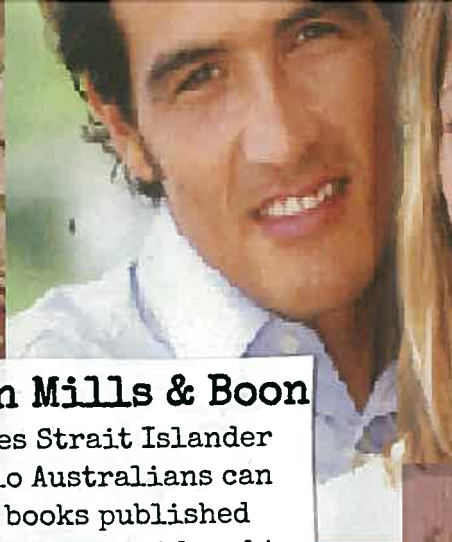


...and it's not limited to the mainland - Tasmania also gets some love in *Apple Island* (1974):

Tiny wavelets crept up the ribbed beach, then broke with a soft little smack on the pale sand. From a clump of eucalyptus just behind her came the drowsy, almost inaudible chatter of a magpie. The sweet-scented boronia was now struggling for precedence with the heavy bitter-almond perfume of pink oleanders, and Paula thought she could also detect a faint hint of the delicate red flower of the hibiscus. She sniffed appreciatively, and thought how much she loved this beautiful country - *Apple Island* (1974) pg 184-185



The Mills & Boon books set in the Australian Outback contain fascinating background information on the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Tourist Nursing Service, the School of the Air, stock musters, and the danger and isolation of rural life.

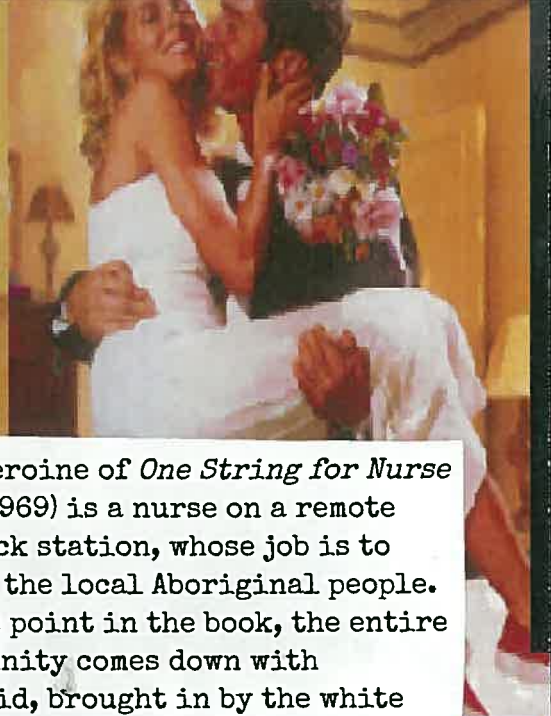


Indigenous Australians in Mills & Boon

The depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters in fiction written by Anglo Australians can be problematic. Reading Mills & Boon books published fifty years ago, authors who were probably considered to hold progressive views at the time now come across as colonialist and paternalistic. The books offer a fascinating view into life and attitudes back then, but I must admit I cringed every time the authors used offensive terminology, or when the well-meaning white folk in the books treated the Aboriginal characters like children and/or inferiors.

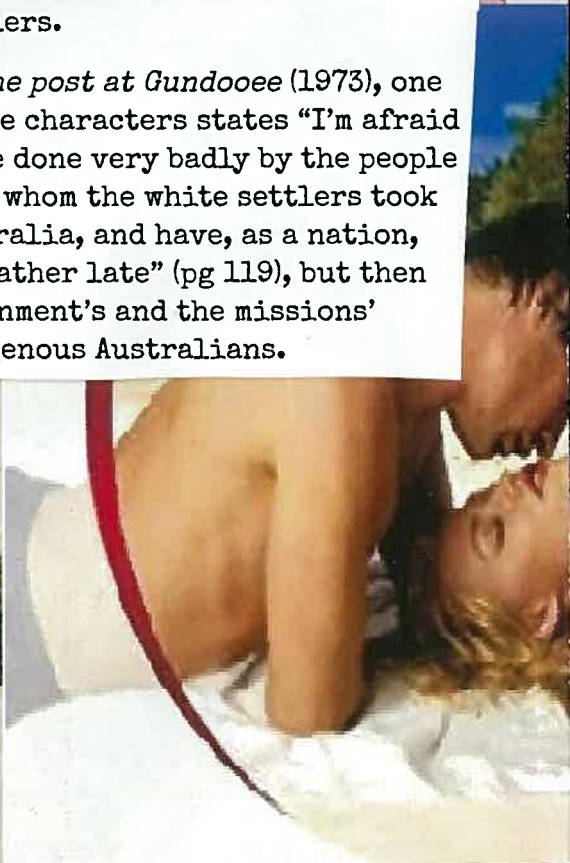
In *A house called Kangaroo* (1968), the hero's brother has a romantic relationship with an Aboriginal nurse named Charlotte, who grew up at a local mission. There is a whole subplot dedicated to the hero's brother trying to gain his family's acceptance of this relationship. In the end, the family relent, but only because Charlotte is pretty, passes as white, and only after she saves the life of the family patriarch.





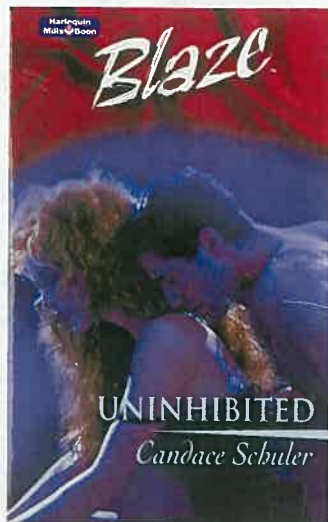
The heroine of *One String for Nurse Bow* (1969) is a nurse on a remote outback station, whose job is to nurse the local Aboriginal people. At one point in the book, the entire community comes down with typhoid, brought in by the white settlers.

In *The post at Gundooee* (1973), one of the characters states "I'm afraid we've done very badly by the people from whom the white settlers took Australia, and have, as a nation, realised our culpability rather late" (pg 119), but then goes on to praise the government's and the missions' efforts to assimilate Indigenous Australians.



The ebook revolution

The arrival of ebooks has been a 'boon' (#sorrynotsorry) to the romance publishing industry.

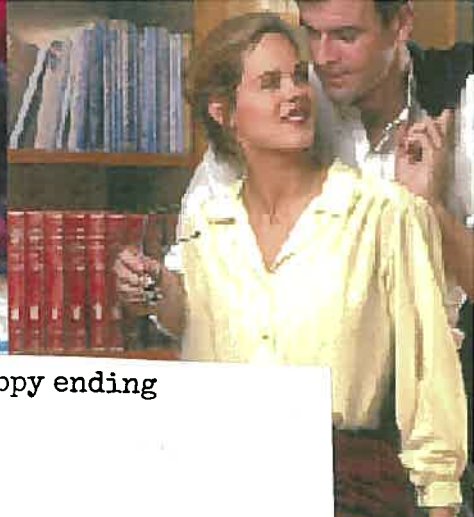


People can be embarrassed to be seen reading romances. In my opinion, whether you're into lurid romance, potboiler crime, misery memoirs, or whatever else, as long as you're reading SOMETHING and enjoying it you should never be embarrassed.

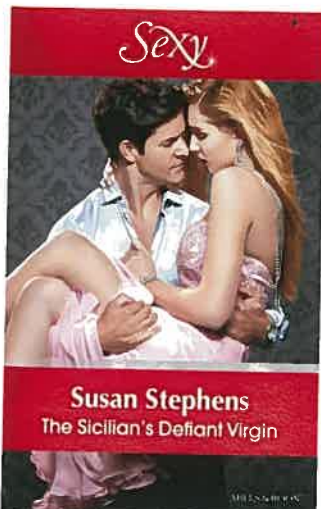
But for readers who may feel self-conscious, ebooks offer a stealthy way for romance addicts to get their fix.

In 2016 the National Library launched their edeposit service, allowing publishers and self-publishing authors to deposit their ebooks for legal deposit. In 2019, this service is being replaced by National edeposit (NED). At the forefront of electronic publishing, Harlequin Mills & Boon (a division of HarperCollins Publishers) were keen to deposit their ebooks.

Romance addicts can now go into the reading rooms of the National Library and use the Library's computers (or their own devices) to read about billionaires (millionaires are passé), princesses, sheikhs, virgins, playboys, vixens, single mothers, librarians and more all



getting their romance on, with a happy ending guaranteed!



This Mills & Boon challenge has been fun and infuriating by turns. Please excuse me now, as I go and read *For the term of his natural life* for a slight change of pace.



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Contact me: blinkykilla8232@gmail.com





The list

1968: A house called Kangaroo / Gladys Fullbrook

1969: One string for Nurse Bow / Joyce Dingwell

1970: Big man at Katta Wirri / Anne Vinton

1971: Kookaburra Dawn / Amanda Doyle

1972: Copper moon / Margaret Way

1973: The post at Gundooee / Amanda Doyle

1974: Apple Island / Gladys Fullbrook

1975: The black opal / Elizabeth Hoy

1976: Dreamtime at Big Sky / Dorothy Cork

1977: Outback rainbow / Dorothy Cork

1978: The wool king / Kerry Allyn

1979: Boomerang bride / Margaret Pargeter

1980: Master of Uluru / Helen Bianchin

1981: Nurse at sea / Judith Worthy

1982: Tropical knight / Lynsey Stevens

1983: Man from the Kimberleys / Margaret Pargeter

1984: Tropical Eden / Kerry Allyn

1985: Don't play games / Emma Darcy

1986: Flying doctor / Lilian Darcy

1987: Carpentaria moon / Kerry Allyn

1988: Snowy River man / Valerie Parv

1989: Arafura pirate / Victoria Gordon

1990: Surgeon rivals / Margaret Barker

1991: Dragon lady / Stella Whitelaw

1992: Torrid conflict / Angela Wells

1993: A very stylish affair / Emma Darcy

1994: Heart-throb for hire / Miranda Lee



1995: Cats in the belfry / Patricia Knoll
1996: The trophy husband / Lynne Graham
1997: A nanny named Nick / Miranda Lee
1998: Gentlemen prefer... brunettes : blondes aren't necessarily more fun / Liz Fielding
1999: Fruitcakes and other leftovers / Lori Copeland
2000: The bride wore gym shoes / Jacqueline Diamond
2001: Uninhibited / Candace Schuler
2002: The librarian's secret wish / Carol Grace
2003: The librarian's passionate knight / Cindy Gerard
2004: Bushfire bride / Marion Lennox
2005: Crisis at Katoomba Hospital / Lucy Clark
2006: Expecting Thunder's baby / Sheri Whitefeather
2007: Overexposed / Leslie Kelly
2008: Winning the single mum's heart / Lynda Goodnight
2009: The sheikh's virgin stable-girl / Sharon Kendrick
2010: What the librarian did / Karina Bliss
2011: The librarian's secret scandal / Jennifer Morey
2012: Cracking the dating code / Kelly Hunter
2013: A father for her triplets / Susan Meier
2014: Secrets of a Bollywood marriage / Susanna Carr
2015: Rock solid / Samantha Hunter
2016: Matchmaker wore skates / Cari Lynn Webb
2017: The Sicilian's defiant virgin / Susan Stephens
2018: My royal hook-up / Riley Pine