

Tales from the Albright
Episode 95: History of Romance Novel Covers

Alyssa: Hello everyone, welcome to Tales from the Albright. We are here with Jenny today.

Jenny: Hello

Alyssa: I'm Alyssa. If you're new to the podcast, now that it's in video form, it's been going on for quite a while now.

Jenny: Couple of years, yeah

A: Today, we are recording our first video podcast.

J: I'm honored to be the first.

A: And we will be covering the development of romance novel covers.

J: I love it

A: It's just such a hot topic in terms of where they've been and then now and it's a whole evolution and people talk about it all the time, especially now with the elevation of like booktok and very popular romance novels kind of becoming more mainstream. When you think of them as novel covers, what do you think of?

J: Well, I mean, I guess it depends if we're going like vintage book covers, I don't want any spoilers, but I'm going to do it anyways. Fabio, Fabio, of course. Now they're very, I feel as though if you were going to check out a romance novel at the library. It just looks like a normal book. It's, you know, they're so completely different from how they used to be.

A: Yes, and that's one of the common criticisms of the one now. They all actually kind of all started around 1900.

J: Okay

A: So, Mills and Boon were the first publishing company that published romance titles with scenes from the books on the front cover. Books for women in particular tended to be one or two categories at this time, either Gothic novels or family sagas. And the Gothic book developed a shorthand where the images on the book cover signaled what genre it was, and this is a style and style or illustrated choice that carried over onto the romance novel. Family sagas were books that told the history of an entire family through multiple genres.

J: So, it was like the Young and the Restless.

A: Yeah,

J: OK

A: But in novel form

J: but in novel form in the 1900s.

A: And the family sagas is where many female writers began their careers. At the time. So, they kind of merged together and then that turned into the romance novel that we know today. Harlequin Publishing, which is one of the main publishing houses that you think of began in Canada,

J: Oh

A: which I was surprised to learn

J: Yeah.

A: You don't think of it as Canadian. They opted to publish the books from Mills and Boon for a romance line for North American audiences. Then at this point the genre covers that were on earlier works then began to merge with more pulp covers of the 1940s because they were often cheaper and paperback books are cheaper and rose in popularity after the end of World War II. Pulp novels had topics that would go across genres, but the major impact was on the romance genre.

J: Did you see pulp?

A: Yeah, pulp like Pulp Fiction like, yeah, like they were cheap paperbacks with, like the very dramatic like painted covers that were like spy thrillers and sci-fi. A lot of sci-fi books.

J: oh, I didn't know that's what they were called.

A: Yeah.

J: Yeah, oh okay

A: Like wood pulp or like pulp in orange juice. The same pulp.

J: Well, see that's exactly what I thought. Like, yeah, like paper?

A: On Pulp covers, they often had stylized fonts, dramatic colors and illustrations to draw readers in because they had to compete with magazines for being a cheap literature option. In order to stand out the romance novels that would be published at this time, would employ artists such as Jon Paul Ferrara, Elaine Julio, Robert McGuinness and Barbara Bonham to help create the covers for the novels. So, they were all legitimate works of art and still are in many cases.

J: OK.

According to Victoria Lessard's article, "A Brief History of the Clinch", published in on Hazlitt that covers developed "an immediate visual visual language to direct the reader to their desired genre, as paperbacks were often grouped by publisher rather than genre stores."

J: Really?

A: Yeah, which is such a bizarre.

J: Yeah, that's. I can't even imagine.

A: No, I don't know how anyone found anything. In the 1940s, covers tended to feature a white man and a white woman staring longingly into each other's eyes. Books about doctor and nurse relationships were popular before turning to adventure and international travel tropes in the 1960s. Both genres would have been reflected on the cover of the romance novel, and all illustrated by an artist of the publishing house had hired. Some books would show the plot points on the cover that that wasn't necessary. It could just be a random scene that the artist came up with. In the 1970s and 1980s, the development of what is known as the clinch cover, which is what you tend to think of when you think of romance novels. With like the billowing, open shirt and everything flowing in the wind with unrealistic poses and giant flowers

J: Yes

A: and symbols of passion all over.

J: Yeah.

A: The font also tends to be a large stylistic and swirls around itself

J: Gold and swirly

A: Yeah

J: and raised.

A: Yes raised. So these new covers reflected not only new trends in the book industry, but also turning to more of a focus on women's desire during the time. So, these billowing shirts

J: That's what. That's what they wanted.

A: Yeah, and dramatic illustrations. We're just used to catch people's eye, and that became the shorthand for the romance genre. So, clinch covers tended to start out as a as

a photograph of two models dressed in clothing that the publishing house wanted to have on the cover of the book

J: OK

A: Traditionally the author doesn't really have much input at all on what is on the cover of the book, or what it would look like. The artist would receive a brief with the characters descriptions, a possible setting, and what else might be good to include on the cover, but there was no like the author being like I want this specific scene on the cover.

J: You get what you get and you. Don't get upset.

A: Yeah

J: OK.

A: When artists used models, they would then paint over the photograph and add in the fantasy elements and to symbolize the setting, their type of romance, and potential plot points. This is the era that had Fabio. So, Fabio Lanzoni was a pop culture sensation and is still instantly recognizable due to his long flowing blonde hair that hasn't changed in years and a lot of muscle.

J: So, was that like his claim to fame?

A: Yes

J: Is that was like, that was his first job. That was his, do we know?

A: I don't think it was his first job. But it's what he's most known for.

J: Okay, Okay

A: And that's what,

J: like, was he his whole? I'm trying to what am? I trying to say

A: He was a model, but he wasn't like.

J: OK.

A: Well known.

J: He wasn't just for a model for books. He was a model. And then someone said, hey, we want him,

A: Yeah. And and then he became primarily a model for books after.

J: Got it. OK.

A: Many of the romance book covers that he was on were painted by Elaine Julio and she was responsible for kind of like the Fabio image. So, when you think of him on the covers, it was likely done by her.

J: Really. Well, okay that's neat.

A: At the peak of his popularity, it was estimated that Fabio was featured on 16 book covers a day and became the masculine ideal of the time.

J: Sixteen a day?

A: Yep. Often when artists use models, they would potentially use the photos for a variety of covers as those shoots included different poses.

J: OK,

A: This is something that is very heavily continued today and I go in more to the modern version of it now. During the 1990s, the clinch covers began to be replaced with less dramatic covers. This is where the inset cover comes in.

J: Oh

A: Like the fold over,

J: Got it

A: So, the inset book covers would have the

J: The artwork

A: Yeah, the highly decorated artwork kind of on the inside of the first page.

J: Right

A: And then the cover on top of it would be slightly shorter and have something like a handkerchief or

J: An envelope

A: A necklace. Yeah, something like that.

J: Yes, a brooch, yes.

A: And this kind of allowed people to read them without it screaming I'm reading a romance book. And this is one of the first steps that were taken by publishing houses to design covers meant to minimize the shame people felt about reading romance novels.

J: Right

A: If the covers didn't have it inset, many of them featured. More characters, often a cowboy police officer, a dad, or just a generically shirtless man. As I mentioned, the 90s were very much an era where the romance novel cover began moving away from cliché covers due to the sense of shame readers often had about reading romance. Romance as a genre often had a reputation for being “trashy” or “scandalous”, partly due to it being considered a romance genre, and after, often involving scenes of the sexual nature in her thesis for the City University of New York, titled *The Romance Novel Cover*, Jessica D Spears states that “romance novel covers announced to every viewer that the reader is reading a romance.” Later in her paper, Spears states that for many people, what books we own and read are “visible proof, not just with what we like, but what we are intelligent enough to understand, and that this often clashes with the stereotype of a woman who reads romance novels as someone that lacks taste class, education and ambition. She is relatively poor, and she is very likely trapped in a loveless marriage.” Of course, the stereotype is false, but it is something that has a staying power in public consciousness at the turn of the Millennium, romance novels covers took another turn. The artists employed began moving to using stock photography or digital edits to make the covers. Artists today can also market themselves as having previously created images for book covers that are just chosen by the author of the novel to be used in the book.

J: Oh, so now they switched it over, so now it's the author that is choosing.

A: Sometimes yes. So like artists can put up a photography set or their artwork, and then authors can contact them and be like Hey, can I use it for a copy of the book.

J: Oh, so it's kind of like clip art.

A: Yeah

J: Like, yeah, if you were choosing

A: With the rise of indie and self-publishing, this is becoming a more popular trend and also explains why many book covers tend to look similar to each other, because they'll often reuse the same artwork, so multiple authors can contact them and be like, hey, can I use this? And they're like slightly tweak it like maybe change your dress color, add some bushes.

J: You see, I don't like that. Only because, oh, yeah, but I mean.

A: Yeah

J: You can't like reinvent the wheel like so,

A: Yeah, so that accounts for some of like the self-published books booking incredibly similar. Yeah. I mean, everyone's free to choose whatever they want to do.

J: Sure, sure

A: The level of shame from the readers perspective has also been reduced, as many readers can turn to ebooks for their romance titles. Or the new trend of books with illustrated covers. And a more cartoonish style.

J: Yeah, I'm finding it a lot more contemporary titles that they look as though they're, you know,

A: yeah, modern versions of clinch covers still exist, but they often feature shirtless torsos with no aspect of a person's face being seen. The more traditional looking clinch covers with two people and flowing garments can still be seen on a decent number of Regency romance novels.

J: Yeah.

A: But there is a definite trend toward making the cover seem more grounded in reality compared to the massive flowing florals of the past decade, many readers today want to be able to see themselves reflected in the books that they're reading with realistic settings.

J: Yeah, I can see it.

A: Another trend that has existed from the 1990s through today is diversity. Where it is work to do in terms of representation, it has become more common. In 2022, 39% of book covers contained a person who is not white, as compared to 2011 or only 5.5% of book covers featured in non-white character.

J: 5.5?

A: Yep,

J: That is wild.

A: And then the covers representing LGBTQ+ couples are also on the rise, meaning that is increasingly common to find books that represent the general population rather than traditional straight white couples of the past.

J: I have noticed that, yeah

A: With the new books of the cartoonish illustrations remain a controversial choice. Some authors use them to help get their books to a broader audience, especially when writing about characters of diverse backgrounds. While others say it hinders people from seeing

the characters that look like themselves. Either way, it helps avoid offensive cultural appropriation that occurred on many covers in the past. Another issue with the illustrative covers is the lack of sensuality that is often depicted on them, so some readers feel like it's making romance books more PG and cutesy. While the covers make it less embarrassing to read in public, it can also confuse readers into believing the work does not contain explicit sex scenes

J: Exactly

A: and is meant for young adult readers.

J: Yeah. I could definitely see that.

A: Yeah, I think that's something everyone has kind of encountered.

J: Yeah.

A: The most important thing to publishers, however, is that the book stands out against all the other books being published in today's market. To achieve this, they use very bright colors, including teal, pink, yellow, and purple. Illustrated covers make about 72% of the romance novels published today, which is a marked change from the real people covers that dominated since the inception of the genre. Diminishing the stigma around reading romance through the changes made on covers has helped the genre become one of the most popular at the moment, especially when it's promoted through things like Booktok and other social media. As a final thought in an article by Anna Wallentine published on The Electric Lit website, she states that the "illustration trend is helping to open up romance, allowing for greater representation of diversity and encouraging broader acceptance of the genre despite its, its sexist stigma... Covers will continue to evolve as attitudes do, using new techniques to attract readers to the world of romantic storytelling and welcome those already in the know." Yeah. So, it's really a whole progress of.

J: Yeah, and I and. Of course, like they do this for you know most titles.

A: Yeah

J: They'll redo the covers for the new batch of, yeah.

A: Yeah. And I've seen I. Feel like there's a tenant over. Original one that comes out with like the traditional more clinchy cover

J: yeah

A: and then the reprint comes out with the more illustrative.

J: Absolutely, yeah, I've noticed that as well. Yeah, because I'll. I'll go through and. Oh, did I read that? I Don't and I go by the cover. Yeah. So, if it's a new cover. Yeah. Like oh, I definitely did, right?

A: Yeah

J: That's alright.

A: You got like 2 chapters in and you're like I know these people

J: Wait a minute I've met you before,

A: Yeah. Do you have any favorite romance novel covers?

J: Well, fun fact, I actually collect some of the romance novels from the 80s and so I have a few in my collection of Fabio and some of the the double covers. What are they called again?

A: Insets

J: Insets. Yes. I have a couple of those. There were a few years all of my friends were giving them to me for Christmas presents, so I would have stacks and stacks of them. So yeah, and I also have a painting done by a friend of a book cover and it has, you know, the male with with the hair.

A: Yeah.

J: And I'm pretty sure there's a Unicorn on. It too,

A: Yeah

J: Yeah, they're all like that.

A: All like the tropes that all went into them. And I think even today, like when I think of romance novels, I think of those covers rather than the illustrative ones of today.

J: Yeah, definitely. And like I was saying before with, there's just that ideal with the, the the title is in scrolly font, gold, and just like. But I can see, you know you're on the bus and you're reading this book, and people definitely know that you're reading.

A: Yeah. And I feel like really the trends in social media are helping get more people to the place of, like, read whatever you want.

J: Yeah, yeah, definitely, I agree.

A: I'm trying to think if I I. Don't have any favorite covers. I don't know. I think because I'm also really an ereader. Yeah. So, I don't really pay attention to covers all that much.

J: Do you have? I mean, I have a a title that I think it's Harlequin. Do you have any that the titles stick out? and you're just like, oh, come on. That's ridiculous. OK. Do you have a favorite? That's like, ridiculous.

A: I don't know. I don't think I do.

J: OK so I have one. It's called *Pregnesia*. *Pregnesia*

A: Oh no

J: It's about. So, this well, do I really need to explain what I mean? She had amnesia. She was pregnant. And went on from there. So, but yeah *Pregnesia*. That one always sticks in my head. That's a good one.

A: Yeah, I feel like there's like a niche group of romance novels where it just tries to be the most ridiculous thing you can ever imagine.

J: And those are my favorites. The more ridiculous the titles the the covers. I mean I have other ones, but you know where

A: You know, but really, when you think about it, does spur like creativity.

J: Absolutely, yes. And then there are a lot more not genres, but.

A: Like sub genres, s

J: Yes, subgenres of romance that were not a thing?

A: Yeah,

J: back in the Fabio days now it's.

A: Yeah. So, I feel like now it's a lot of like dark romance. Then

J: Yes, Sci-fi

A: sci-fi

J: Yes,

A: and romantasy. That's the latest.

J: Romantasy

A: Yeah, that's like the romance but the fantasy novels. Like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is always considered like romantasy.

J: Oh, Okay I did not know this

A: Yeah. And so that's one of the newer ones that are very popular.

J: Okay Okay

A: But I think when they think of romance novels, when of, like, saw them in the grocery store growing up, it was like just like generic professions be like, here's like cowboy in Montana, yeah.

J: Yeah, a rancher

A: Or like I remember, a racecar driver ones

J: What? Okay. Do I have any of those?

A: Yeah, I think it was all

J: I think I have a couple of those racecar ones

A: Yeah. I just remember seeing them in the grocery store as a kid and I was like oh that's different. And then of course, it's like the standard hallmark style like.

J: Yeah. You know puppies feel like they're always puppies on the cover, yeah.

A: Yeah, there's like dogs and it's just. Like oh.

J: Golden Retrievers you know.

A: Yeah, they meet the vet and fall in love with the vet. So, so it's fun

J: It is

A: Do you have any final thoughts?

J: I don't but thank you so much for and I wish I would have brought some of my collection.

A: Ohh yeah, it's okay. Yeah. Thank you

J: Thank you. Thank you for having me

A: If you have any questions, comments on this, like to switch to video, please let me know at aloney@albright.org that is A L O N E Y at albright.org. Also, all the references of the sources I used on today's episode will be linked on our website and I'm sure a variety of other places. If you want to call instead of, e-mail the number for the library is 570-348-3000 and feel free to call us with any comments about the podcast or to put romance novels on hold.