

## Romancing History and Mystery by Karen Harper

Despite appearing on national bestseller lists and earning several awards, what I am most proud of in my twenty-seven-year writing career is that I am a survivor. First published in 1982, I have been continually in print in a national and global market that has seen many changes and, recently, much upheaval. I have had two literary agencies, twelve editors, and seven publishers. Over fifty of my books have seen the bookstore shelves of America



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and foreign countries—twelve foreign languages to date. All that only illustrates, that I know whereof I speak when I define or defend the romance genre of mass market fiction today.

But do not just take my word for it when I claim that the powerful, popular novels called romances are so much more than either their detractors or their proponents claim. *Webster's Dictionary* defines romance in a very broad sense as “a prose narrative treating imaginary characters involved in events remote in time or place and usually heroic, adventurous or mysterious.” Of course, the meaning given after that is the one most people think of today: “a love story, especially in the form of a novel.” I believe the romance genre today fully encompasses both of these definitions.

I greatly resent it when critics/reviewers/media personalities snigger about romances they usually have not read, classifying them as pink ink, ‘bodice-rippers’ or worse, lumping them all in the same light-weight category. The romance genre today is not only extremely diverse, but it is obviously—as sales figures prove in these tough economic times—popular, even somehow necessary to millions of readers. And especially today, when competition to be and stay published is so challenging, most are well-written. Is it merely popular fiction—the craze of our times? Even if that is true, so was the work of William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens in their eras.



*Passion's Reign* (1983)

I would also like to argue that most novels today actually *are* romance novels in the broadest sense of the word, that “prose narrative treating characters remote in time and place.” As for the second, better-known definition, the majority of novels today include romance elements, even if they are not labeled ‘romance’ as such. Science fiction, fantasy, detective novels, “literary fiction” (whatever that broad yet narrow term encompasses), mystery, thrillers, and historical fiction often have love stories as key elements of

their plots. The amount of ink spent on the romance in these novels may vary, but the trials and triumphs of love are part of the human condition and so of the entire gamut of literary creations.

I have always favored writing historical fiction, although when I was first published in the early 1980s, historical romance was what was selling. So, my first two historical novels, focusing on the lives of fascinating English women, were researched to the hilt and written in the sweeping style of Anya Seton (*Katherine*), Jan Westcott (*The Queen's Grace*) and Kathleen Winsor (*Forever Amber*). All of my main characters were historical figures; only servants or walk-on parts were fictionalized.

My heroines in these first two books were Mary Boleyn, sister to Anne (I wrote about the other Boleyn girl twenty years before Philippa Gregory did) and Joan of Kent, the first Princess of Wales. These novels included wrenching but ultimately triumphant love stories. An unhappy ending would not work for me or for my readers. I was writing books that showed women winning, not just suffering or being used as chattel.

My first publisher, with finger firmly on the pulse of that current, thriving romance market, gave these historical novels romance titles and covers. For example, my title *The Golden Snare* for the Boleyn book became *Passion's Reign*. In the shift of the times again, which currently favors historical fiction as well as historical romance, the Boleyn book has recently been purchased and re-released by another publisher,

Random House, as *The Last Boleyn*. This time the cover is the historical portrait of Mary Boleyn rather than two windswept lovers surrounded by vignettes of king and castle.

Times change, tastes and what is selling changes, but, in this case, it is the same book—and it includes a powerful romance, actually two. The disastrous one, of course, is the relationship between King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn; the successful one is that of Mary Boleyn and William Stafford. But neither of these romances are the main thrust or structure of the novel. Rather it is the life story, a fictionalized but extensively researched biography of a woman who stood up to her domineering father, her king, and the weak-woman culture of her day. It is women like Mary Boleyn who inspired her niece Elizabeth Tudor to be a strong woman and queen. And like



*The Last Boleyn* (2006)

other novels with romance themes, the story can still encourage and empower women today. As a former teacher, I love novels that educate and encourage as well as entertain.

Not only have I romanced history (and still am with my recent release *Mistress Shakespeare*, the story of Will's other wife), but also mystery, again through Queen Elizabeth I, who is also the amateur sleuth in my nine-book series, *The Queen Elizabeth I Mysteries*, which were published from 1999-2007.

Many mystery series take their protagonist through a developing romance or even several, but the books themselves are not structured around a love relationship. Unlike romances, mysteries do not begin when the future lovers meet and end when their conflicts and mutual future are happily resolved; of course, mysteries begin with a serious crime, usually murder, and end with the solving of that crime. A love story may be a key part of the novel, but it is does not dictate the structure of the book.

Romantic suspense novels are a popular subgenre now. But, that was not the case when I began writing them in 1996, the first being my Ohio Amish novel, *Dark Road Home*. These stories, usually

about an average woman who meets and overcomes a dangerous, often deadly challenge, have undergone a real transformation in the marketplace. As recently as ten years ago, when they began to come into their own, publishers were almost afraid to put Romantic Suspense on a book's spine, because booksellers did not know whether to shelve it in their romance or mystery sections.

Now this blend of romance and mystery has become so popular that deciding where to shelve them has become a moot point. Readers will look for these novels wherever they are shelved and select their favorites depending on the level of violence, explicitness and the mix of suspense/mystery with romance. I suppose mine are about 30% romance and 70% suspense/thriller. (Thrillers, the new hot genre on the block, often include romance, although they are so fast-paced that there is seldom time for the development of a love story or the characters.) How to label romantic suspense may still be a mystery, because Borders Books shelves my romantic suspense novels under romance and Barnes & Noble shelves them under mystery.

Again, as in my historical novels or mysteries, my romantic suspense books include more than the love story. I often write what my agent calls 'enclave novels' in which I take the reader into a fascinating American subculture. Either the hero or the heroine comes from the mainstream culture and the other from—for example—the Amish, the Shakers, Appalachians, a modern-day Native American tribe or just small-town America. That provides quite a cultural clash that always works well in any sort of fiction. As Mario Puzo, the author of *The Godfather* put it once, "Nothing is interesting but trouble." Adult fiction must have at its heart conflict, conflict, conflict, whatever the genre.

If we would skim through the national bestseller lists today, we would find, with a few exceptions, that much fiction today is blended fiction, this genre-bending or -combined fiction, or what has lately been termed interstitial literature. Life is a blend of the tragic and the comedic, love and loss, and so is all vibrant fiction. Today's romance novels in their myriad forms, whether shaken or stirred with other genres, are that very thing.

A native Ohioan born in Toledo, Harper has lived in the Columbus area for more than thirty years. She earned her BA from Ohio University and her MA in English from The Ohio

State University where she taught freshman English for two years. After teaching literature and composition at the secondary school level in the Columbus area for fifteen years, she left teaching to write full time. A *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author, her papers are housed in The Ohio State University Rare Books and Manuscripts and Author Collections. Her website is [www.karenharperauthor.com](http://www.karenharperauthor.com).