

Love & Lust in the Library : our colossal collection of Mills & Boon

In 2018, I set myself a year-long challenge to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the National Library's building by choosing 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 this post)

Attitudes towards premarital sex, women in the workplace, divorce, single mothers, interracial relationships, sexual orientation, 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.

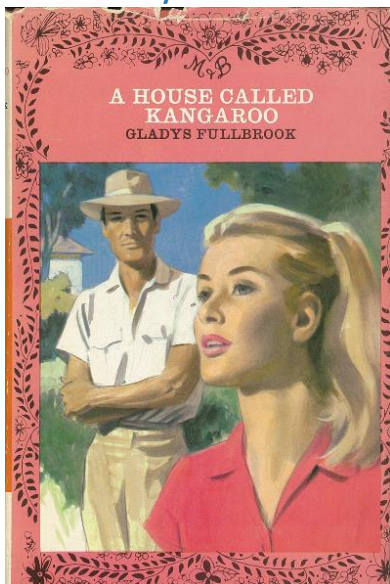
I was also interested to see how Mills & Boon books themselves change over time, including the introduction of ebooks, as well as the front cover design, which reflect the fashions and tastes of the day, and which can play an important role in grabbing readers' attention.

So where to start?

Searching the phrase "Mills & Boon" and narrowing the results to "Books" found 12,872 entries in our 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



A house called Kangaroo (1968)

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

In the 1960s, the books I selected were usually hardcovers, 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*, *Intrigue* and *Medical*, front covers have become racier, and feature more glamorous heroes and heroines in less clothing.

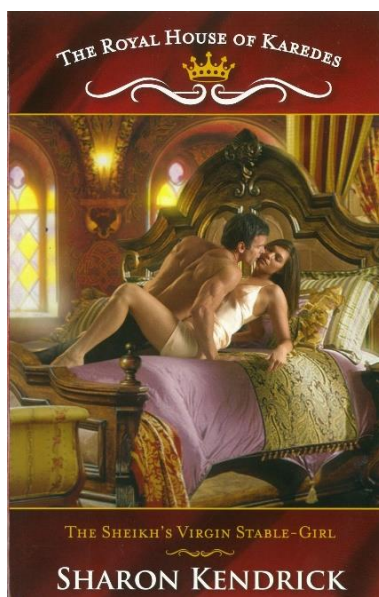


Overexposed (2007)

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.

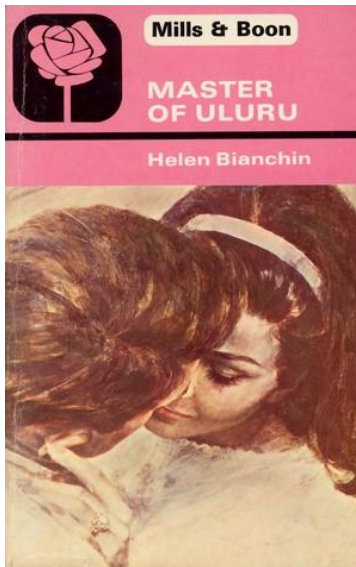
Even today, this fascination with virgins is a common theme, with books like *The sheikh's virgin stable-girl* (2009) still proving popular.



The sheikh's virgin stable-girl (2009)

As premarital sex became socially acceptable in real life, this is reflected in Mills & Boon too, with sex scenes becoming 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:

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



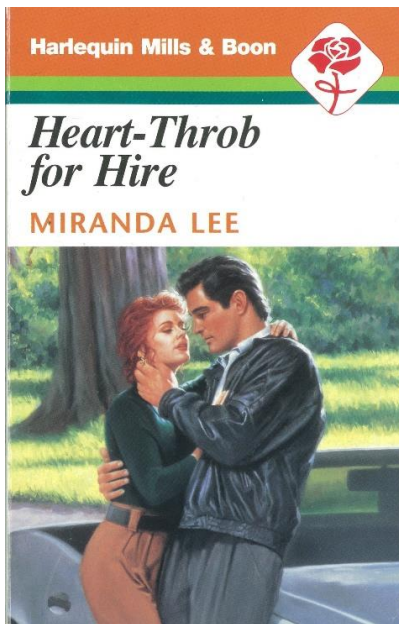
Master of Uluru (1980)

I was also confounded by the lack of basic sex education frequently displayed, as well as the often violent or aggressive nature of the sexual encounters. For example, this extract published in 1992 hints at both lack of education but also a lack of consent.:

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:

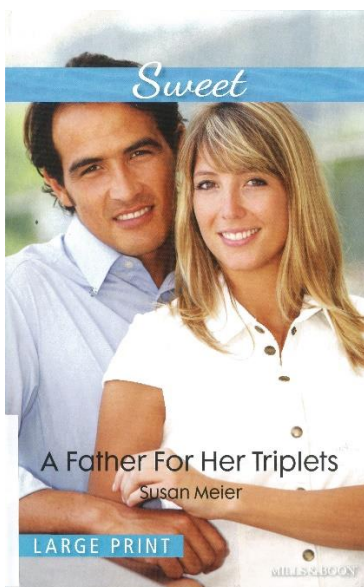
“do you honestly think you would have enjoyed it if I'd ignored your discomfort back then and simply ploughed on? Do you honestly think that at some point your pain would have turned to pleasure? That's rubbish. Romantic rubbish. For everyone that miracle happens to, there are hundreds who end up thinking 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



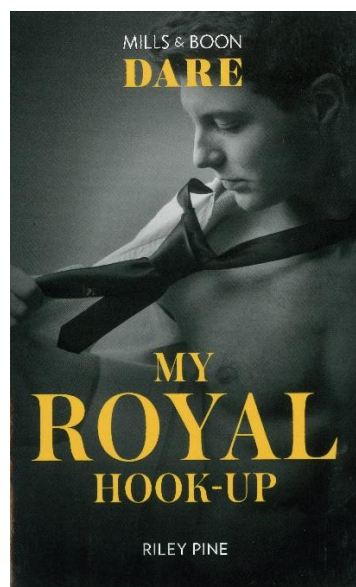
Heart-throb for hire (1994)

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’ focus on more sexually explicit content, and ‘Spice’ contains casual sex and kink).



A father for her triplets (2013)



My royal hook-up (2018)

Sexual orientation and gender identity

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

In the article [Same-sex love is an intimate joy our fiction still neglects](#), Julie Cohen states that although Mills & Boon has 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 imprints, such as Escape and Mira, feature more diverse characters in leading roles – find out more about these books via romance.com.au

Sexism

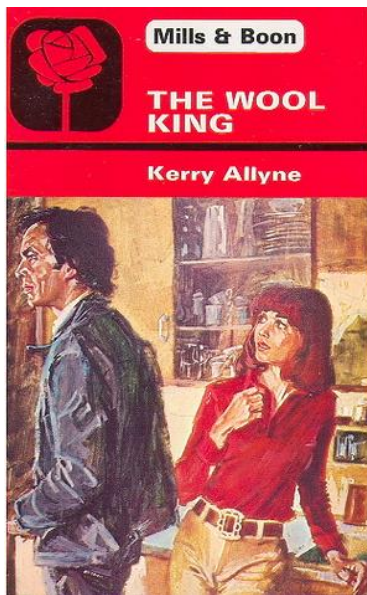
Unfortunately quite a few of the Mills & Boon heroes play into the autocratic alpha male misogynist stereotype often prevalent in romance novels.

'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

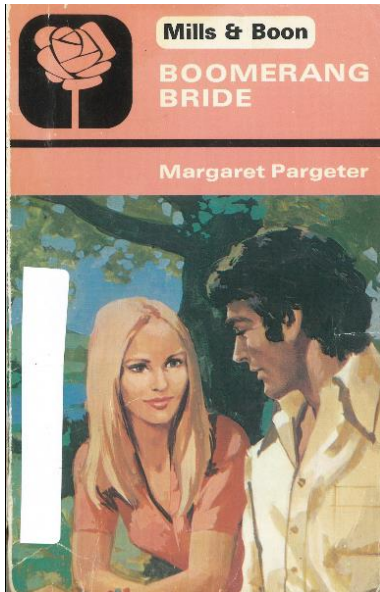
"Don't tell me he's brought home one of those militant Women's Libbers!" – *The Wool King* (1978) pg 49



The wool king (1978)

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:

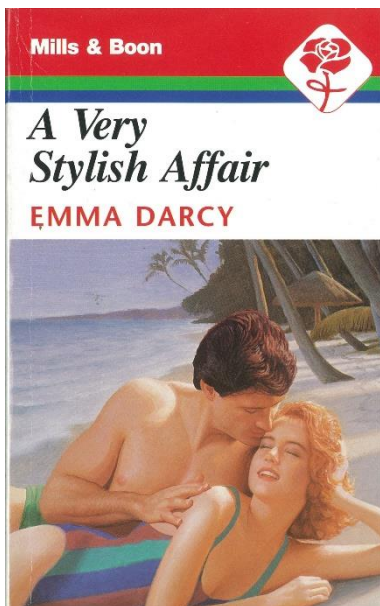
Quite deliberately he lifted his hand and slapped her coolly across her face... "I've never slapped a woman before, Vicki. With you I believe it's the second time, and it may not be the last. God help me, but you almost drive me to murder!" – *Boomerang bride* (1979) pg 153



Boomerang bride (1979)

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.

'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



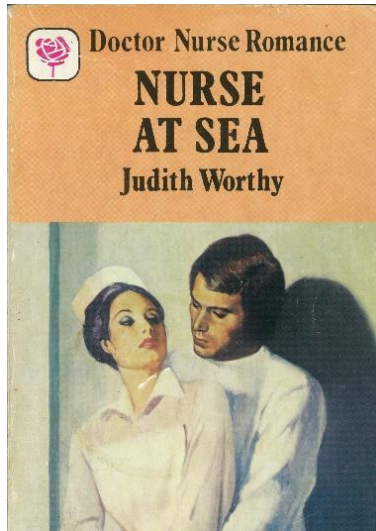
A very stylish affair (1993)

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



Nurse at sea (1981)

Women and careers

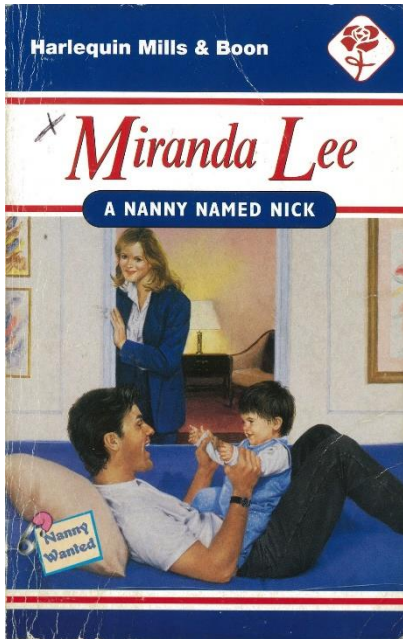
‘Marriage and the abandonment of a career were among the most fundamental changes you could make’ *The black opal* – (1975) pg 51

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.

“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

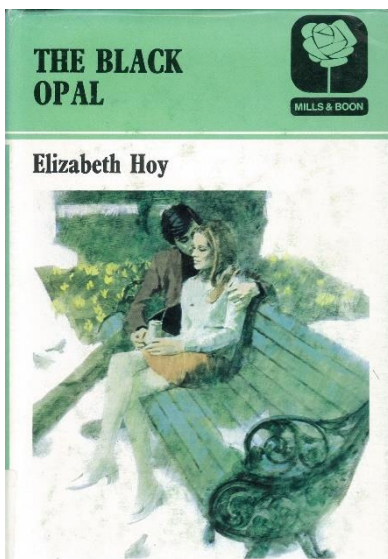


A nanny named Nick (1997)

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.

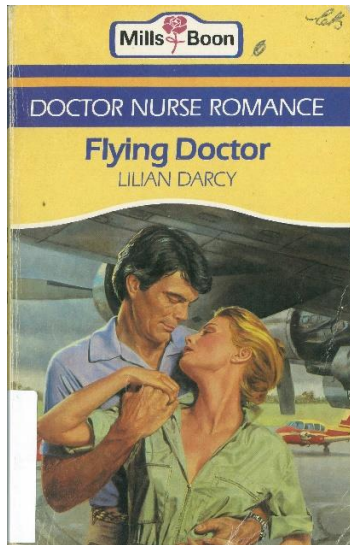
"You're my woman," she could hear John's voice saying. I'm not, she thought rebelliously I'm my own woman. If being in love means that you have to give up all rights to your own self, your opinions, your way of life, then I'm not in love. *The black opal* (1975) pg 133

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

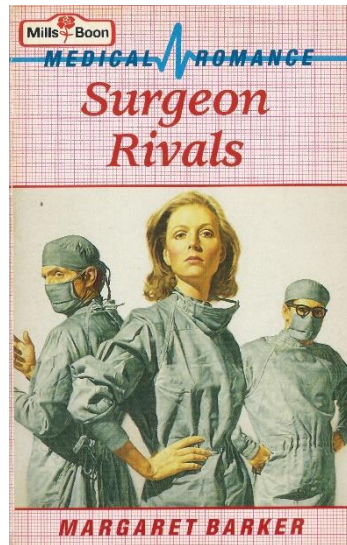


The black opal (1975)

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.'



Flying doctor (1986)



Surgeon rivals (1990)

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!

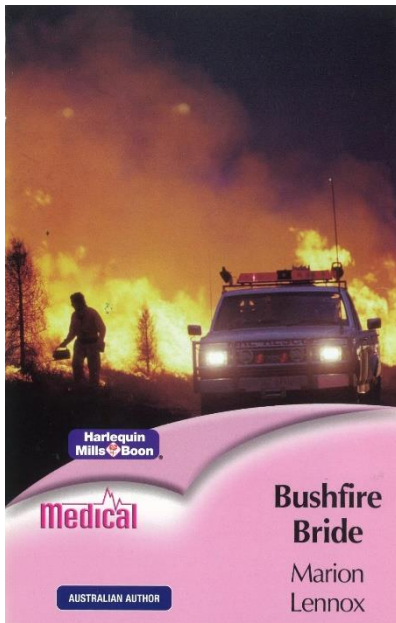
Lengthy, lyrical paragraphs dedicated to the harsh beauty of the Australian Outback landscape abound, almost overshadowing the human romances:

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.



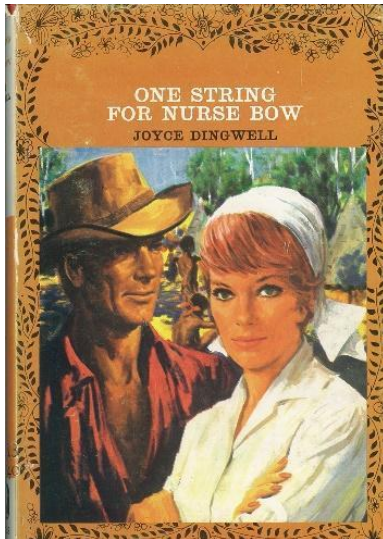
Bushfire bride (2004)

Indigenous Australians in Mills & Boon

The depiction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters in fiction written by non-Indigenous 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 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.



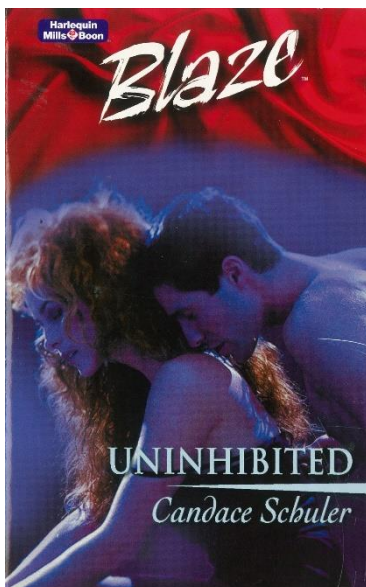
One string for Nurse Bow (1969)

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.



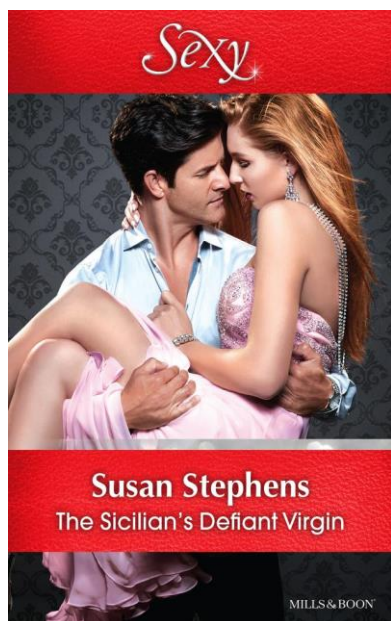
Uninhibited (2001)

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 our [edeposit service](#), allowing publishers to deposit their ebooks for [legal deposit](#).

At the forefront of electronic publishing, Harlequin Mills & Boon (a division of HarperCollins Publishers) were keen to deposit their ebooks. Readers can now come into the reading rooms of the National Library and use our computers 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.

In 2019 we are launching [National eDeposit](#), a collaboration between the National, State and Territory libraries. National eDeposit allows publishers to deposit their ebooks once to fulfill their [legal deposit](#) obligations. So stay tuned to hear about how you can access this prodigious part of your national collection!



The Sicilian's defiant virgin (2017)

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.

The list

1968: *A house called Kangaroo* / Gladys Fullbrook: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2393441>

1969: *One string for Nurse Bow* / Joyce Dingwell: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1298644>

1970: *Big man at Katta Wirri* / Anne Vinton: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1104461>

1971: *Kookaburra Dawn* / Amanda Doyle: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2888822>

1972: *Copper moon* / Margaret Way: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1086527>

1973: *The post at Gundooee* / Amanda Doyle: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2607135>

1974: *Apple Island* / Gladys Fullbrook: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1096777>

1975: *The black opal* / Elizabeth Hoy: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1080151>

1976: *Dreamtime at Big Sky* / Dorothy Cork: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn785754>

1977: *Outback rainbow* / Dorothy Cork: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn763479>

1978: *The wool king* / Kerry Allyne: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4612871>

1979: *Boomerang bride* / Margaret Pargeter: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn550977>

1980: *Master of Uluru* / Helen Bianchin: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4772317>

1981: *Nurse at sea* / Judith Worthy: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4772650>

1982: *Tropical knight* / Lynsey Stevens: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn281629>

1983: *Man from the Kimberleys* / Margaret Pargeter: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2529780>

1984: *Tropical Eden* / Kerry Allyne: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3028848>

1985: *Don't play games* / Emma Darcy: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4772895>

1986: *Flying doctor* / Lilian Darcy: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4808832>

1987: *Carpentaria moon* / Kerry Allyne: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4772657>

1988: *Snowy River man* / Valerie Parv: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4840539>

1989: *Arafura pirate* / Victoria Gordon: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4612046>

1990: *Surgeon rivals* / Margaret Barker: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn7054181>

1991: *Dragon lady* / Stella Whitelaw: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn7053749>

1992: *Torrid conflict* / Angela Wells: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6331074>

1993: *A very stylish affair* / Emma Darcy: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1567993>

1994: *Heart-throb for hire* / Miranda Lee: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1789132>

1995: *Cats in the belfry* / Patricia Knoll: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5810323>

1996: *The trophy husband* / Lynne Graham: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5917038>

1997: *A nanny named Nick* / Miranda Lee: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4772645>

1998: *Gentlemen prefer... brunettes : blondes aren't necessarily more fun* / Liz Fielding
<https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3312216>

1999: *Fruitcakes and other leftovers* / Lori Copeland: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3105453>

2000: *The bride wore gym shoes* / Jacqueline Diamond: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3105508>

2001: *Uninhibited* / Candace Schuler: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3965337>

2002: *The librarian's secret wish*: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3102499>

2003: *The librarian's passionate knight*: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4230433>

2004: *Bushfire bride* / Marion Lennox: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3122213>

2005: *Crisis at Katoomba Hospital* / Lucy Clark: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3427252>

2006: *Expecting Thunder's baby* / Sheri Whitefeather: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3765651>

2007: *Overexposed* / Leslie Kelly: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4236227>

2008: *Winning the single mum's heart* / Lynda Goodnight: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4398051>

2009: *The sheikh's virgin stable-girl* / Sharon Kendrick : <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4601418>

2010: *What the librarian did* / Karina Bliss: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4811876>

2011: *The librarian's secret scandal* / Jennifer Morey: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5018773>

2012: *Cracking the dating code* / Kelly Hunter: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5958697>

2013: *A father for her triplets* / Susan Meier: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6221813>

2014: *Secrets of a Bollywood marriage* / Susanna Carr: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6448374>

2015: *Rock solid* / Samantha Hunter: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6777526>

2016: *Matchmaker wore skates* / Cari Lynn Webb: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn7014260>

2017: *The Sicilian's defiant virgin* / Susan Stephens: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-662472283>

2018: *My royal hook-up* / Riley Pine: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn7864853>