

# Preaching Purity

THE STRANGE PHENOMENON OF THE National Library of Australia's collection of 'Australian romance comics', which turned out not to be Australian but more often illicitly imported American publications reprinted inside locally drawn covers, was explained in the March issue of *The National Library Magazine*. This article looks more closely at their content, which is also not quite what it appeared at first glance: rather than idle fantasy, a form of cultural propaganda.

Far from providing fantasies for young women to while away their time in a daydream world, pictorial romance comics of the late 1930s to the early 1960s deliberately promoted conservative images of womanhood and an idealised vision of American culture. Although regarded by some at the time as having a corrupting influence on young readers, the publications had a deeply moral flavour. They represented a reactionary response to a perceived threat of major social change, reflecting the anxiety engendered by the rise of independent women.

The front covers of these romance comics suggest that steamy and passionate stories are contained within. Almost all of the images are in colour, often lurid, and many depict overt lust, ranging from close body contact and open-mouthed kissing to scenes hinting at the next step of sexual intercourse. Women's expressions and other visual cues are highly seductive.

In fact, the stories inside conform to the central rule that physical or sexual desire is never fulfilled on the page. The climax is usually never racier than a kiss, a declaration of love, a proposal or a wedding, albeit portrayed in purple language and exciting visuals. Woven into the action are messages about disciplining desire, embracing routine, safety, predictability and, above all, about being a 'good girl'. The dumbing down of female characters is profound, as is the

THIS PAGE  
The steamy covers of the comics belie the conservative messages in the stories.



MARGOT HARKER LOOKS AT HOW THE ROMANCE COMICS ENCOURAGED WHITE WOMEN INTO MARRYING SOLID, RESPECTABLE MEN OF THEIR OWN RACE AND CLASS



message that the writer (usually a man) is legitimately placed to correct their silliness.

Many of the plot lines turn on the women's perceived foolish infatuations with 'Mr Wrong', while 'Mr Right' hovers in the background. Mr Wrong and Mr Right are often essentially the same in looks—both have the standard handsome face with chiselled features, underpinned by a strong square jaw, and a tall and muscular body. The clues as to who's who lie in their external trappings.

Mr Wrong is likely to have a thin moustache and wear a suit bearing aggressive stripes or checks, with wide lapels and a loud tie or bow tie. He might be Hispanic or Mediterranean in appearance and, therefore, ethnically and racially 'other'—hints of a threat to cultural and racial purity are never far below the surface. The first hints of Mr Wrong's lax morals are his love of money and fast cars, and his attempts to pressure the woman to 'do it' or to allow heavy petting before marriage. Further indications of his bad character appear when he suddenly adopts a cruel sneer or a vicious turn of phrase. Before long, the reader learns that he inhabits a sleazy city demimonde or operates outside the law. Mr Wrong invariably dumps the girl in cowardly fashion when his own interests are threatened.

Mr Right has his roots firmly planted in rural America. In an attempt to counteract the disruptive effects of war, romance comics of the 1940s, and the 1950s in particular, strongly promote small-town values. In this world, rural communities with traditional ideals and sense of American history are infinitely superior to cities. Readers are warned that the superficial gloss and glitter of the city can blind women to wholesome values. Mr Right is often a recently returned war veteran who, on the surface of things, has little to offer a girl. He is less likely to have an education beyond high school and may have been a mechanic, farmhand or salesman before he joined up. His holy grail is a small business or farm of his own—nothing flash but with great potential. He dreams that the right girl will be at his side when he finally makes good. But time and again the sophisticated Mr Wrong, with his flashy car and white-collar city job, easily seduces the willing girl away from simple Mr Right, who lacks the guile to show himself in a favourable light.

On the sidelines are the young woman's mother and father—old fashioned and dowdy, but generally wise and knowing. They

may warn their daughter against folly, even forbidding her to behave badly. Sometimes a sage aunt or a sensible sister performs this function. The giddy heroine does not heed the warnings, inevitably learning her lesson the hard way. Repentant after realising the error of her ways, she eventually turns to the safe and loving arms of Mr Right.

At the core of the story is the promise of domestic marital bliss, promoted to women as being the total and sufficient reason for putting other forms of enjoyment behind them. To be a successful wife, a woman must be neither overly glamorous nor too dowdy and dull; clever enough to figure out how to change herself or her behaviour to suit the man, but not so clever as to outshine him. She must be interesting and alluring but content with the vision of a quiet future raising children in the suburbs or hometown America. Glamour and fun are the temporary corollaries of youth that, on marriage, must be replaced by the long-lasting quiet glow that comes from giving to one's husband and children.

A striking feature of the comics is the swiftness with which the young women fall in love and marry—to wed fresh out of high school, college or nursing training is common. The publications enjoin girls to accept a rigid, highly circumscribed place in society. There is no place in their lives for individuality, freedom of thought, career ambition or worldly experience. The women who do work have subservient or nurturing jobs, usually secretarial or nursing. Work is only a temporary hiatus before a

BELOW, FROM TOP  
**Beware the ethnically 'other', thin-moustached Mr Wrong, with his striped suit, loud tie and wide lapels!**  
reproduced from 'Mardi Gras madness' in *I Married for Fun*, Honeymoon Library, no. 66, p. 58 (Sydney: Jubilee Publications)

**A typical Mr Right—a simple, open, good-hearted working man**  
reproduced from 'I was a cheat' in *I Ran Away from Shame*, My Secret Heart Pictorial, no. 113, p. 36 (North Sydney: Regal Publications)



woman takes on her destined role—indeed, her patriotic duty—to be a wife and mother. Like other forms of propaganda, the message smacks uncomfortably of the rhetoric of the totalitarian regimes that America opposed.

All women can be ‘rescued’ by a man. Rescue often takes the form of transforming the girl from being plain or unattractive. Of course, she is never really plain—she can always make the most of herself with a new hairstyle or different clothes. Writers call repeatedly on the old stereotype of the hard-bitten career woman who has lost touch with her soft, feminine core. Sometimes, just like in the movies, the man removes her glasses and lets down her hair. ‘Why, you’re beautiful,’ he gasps (or something similar). Mr Right is always able to see beyond the woman’s external appearance, even when the woman has a badly scarred face (and it is amazing how often she does in this kind of fiction). She will usually get her looks back or be able to hide her scar under a swathe of hair—choosing to conform to the wholesome American way of life for women is the key.

A twist on this storyline is the theme ‘my beauty betrayed me’. Here, a glamorous woman with the attributes of a model or film star finds that when a man chooses to date her because she is physically attractive, the relationship is transitory or shallow. Not that this woman ‘uglies’ herself to cope with the problem. She just needs to expose her *inner* beauty or to find a perceptive man who can see the potential domesticated wife and mother under the surface. At least one story tells of the temporarily blind man who falls for the heroine because of her inner beauty.

In another variation, a good man can redeem a woman from a life of sin and degradation. Echoing a sub-genre of American movies fascinated with prostitutes or women in gaol, this plot defies a long tradition in literature and film whereby the roles are reversed—the pure woman redeems the stray man. But, if we see romance comics as versions of archetypal Cinderella stories, this element accords with the rule of fairytale romance—the woman must and can only be raised to a higher status by the hero.

One of the most disturbing features is that some of the stories condone violence against women. The books feature stories in which a newly married woman has trouble settling into her role, mistrusts or misunderstands her husband, and perhaps nags or tries to modify his behaviour, even driving him to drink. In the final pages, she is cowed, by actual or implied violence, into realising that her husband is her master and she needs to change her attitudes or her ways.

Romance comics were part of a social trend to encourage ever-younger white women into marrying solid, respectable men of their own race and class. The desired effect would be to confirm America as being a predominantly white, Protestant, middle-class society with a narrow range of values and lifestyles.

BELOW LEFT  
A girl who ignores the wise counsel of her parents always lives to regret her folly reproduced from ‘Dance crazy’ in *Cruise to Romance*, Sweethearts Library, no. 86, p. 52 (North Sydney: Regal Publications)

BELOW RIGHT  
Domestic bliss: only a husband and babies can make a woman truly happy reproduced from ‘I married for fun’, *Honeymoon Library*, no. 66, p. 17 (Sydney: Jubilee Publications)

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