



MARGOT HARKER DISCOVERS
INTRIGUING EXAMPLES OF A
SOMETIMES MALIGNED GENRE

Cultural

ABOVE
A selection of romance comics
from the Library's collection

BELOW
An advertisement for
romance comics
reproduced from *I Married
for Fun*, Honeymoon Library,
no. 66 (North Sydney: Jubilee
Publications)

NOT LONG AGO, WHILE WORKING ON A cultural history of the white wedding, I came across the National Library of Australia's collection of Australian pictorial romances. They hide in the Bleek and Ryan general collections of comic books, and also exist as a small separate collection. Although they were produced in vast numbers and were at one time very popular, there are relatively few of them in Australian library collections and I can find almost nothing written about them here or overseas. Most other styles of comic, including the fantasy, war, superhero and western sub-genres, survive in large private collections and attract strong interest from researchers, fans and collectors. They attract swap meets, Internet discussion and 'fanzines', but there is no parallel activity in the romance field.

The comics fall naturally into two stylistic

periods: from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, and from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, when they ceased production. This article covers the first period—an era dominated by war and postwar developments.

The romance comics came in small booklets, each containing three or four stories. Most came out fortnightly in titled series, such as *Wedding Ring Library*, *Career Girl Romances* and *Sweethearts Library*, although there are no discernible differences among them. Romance stories were

exclusively for women and, with very few exceptions, they were narrated by the heroine.

Working through them brought surprises. Firstly, while the Library's collection is labelled 'Australian romance comics', it contains almost exclusively imported material. Secondly, these publications seem to have flooded the market from overseas, despite a government ban on their importation.

I can remember seeing the bright covers of comics at the station newsstand as I went to catch my train to school. Teenagers and young women from my Sydney suburb bought them to read on the way to work. The readers I knew were clerks, stenographers, bookkeepers or factory workers. Some of the teenagers in our neighbourhood had romance comics, but I never got a proper look at them, and my parents definitely disapproved of anything other than the bland Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse. So I have a frisson of guilty pleasure in poring over them today.

My parents were not the only ones who pursed their lips over this 'trashy' material. Between 1939 and 1959, the Australian Government enacted legislation under its customs power to stall the flood of cheap American material onto the Australian market. This protectionist act was almost certainly reinforced by anti-Americanism, as well as by distaste for the crudity and raciness of most pulp fiction. Led by Queensland, state governments responded to intense lobbying in the 1950s by legislating to censor comics or by strengthening obscenity laws and leaving it to courts to rule on individual publications. Educators were called upon to help parents decide which comics might be damaging to young souls.

But the fact remained that Australians had developed an insatiable taste for American



Pariah

The National Library of Australia's Collection of Australian Romance Comics

material. Consumers wanted a 'modern' style of publication, set in American environments, using American idiom and referencing the exotic lives, clothing and consumer goods which, apparently, all Americans had (and which we were observing in the movies and eventually on television). The regulations were enforced with varying zeal at different times and distributors managed to get around them anyway.

Initially, when the customs regulations were rigorously enforced and very little material entered the country, Australian publishers tried to satisfy the demand by employing local writers and artists to churn out large amounts of pulp fiction at a rapid rate—most of it ostensibly written by Americans, set in America and using American idiom. But there was still not enough local product to meet the demands; most publishers just reprinted American romances in large numbers, sneaking them past the barriers. Some publishers acquired the original bromides from overseas through the post, printing new runs from them. There was undoubtedly some plain old-fashioned smuggling of individual comics, from which multiples could be made using early photocopying techniques. Publishers then put three or four stories together, thought up a title and had a local artist design a cover. Even at the height of the long craze for romance comics, there was almost no truly 'local' content.

Hostile responses to the growing dominance of American culture condemned the overt violence, sexualised images and crude drawing and lettering in American comics. American slang, spelling and syntax, and references to dollars and cents, were also criticised as likely to confuse impressionable readers and lead them into bad habits. Parents and educators were especially concerned about the effects on children. In the face of this, distributors

of imported comics attempted to make them appear a little less American. A peculiar form of self-censorship emerged; the modus operandi was to leave pictures alone, whether violent or sexualised, and concentrate on making minor changes in the speech bubbles that accompanied them.

The changes were both inconsistent and clumsy. American spellings were blanked out and replaced with local versions: a close look at some frames reveals 'cheque' written over 'check', 'pounds' replacing 'dollars' and '£' replacing '\$'. In one story the word 'glamor' was replaced by 'glamour' in the first frame but left in its American form five times thereafter. Wherever text appears in a wonky hand, and is squashed into a too-narrow space or spread over a very wide one, we can be sure the original was erased and over-written.

These one-offs sit very strangely in contexts where everything else is blatantly American—characters answer to 'Randy', 'Buddy' or 'Homer', mothers are called 'Mom', and cars are on the wrong side of the road. Protagonists go to the 'hop', fill up at gas stations and wear college letters, and police officers and firefighters are dressed in American uniforms. And this is not to mention the rampant American colloquialisms. If there were attempts to 'Australianise' the comics, they were risible ones.

Were these changes intended to fool officials checking if American material had got past customs? Anybody who examined the few modifications carefully could not have been fooled for more than a second—but there is no

American comics were sometimes altered to suit Australian readers; here, American dollars have been replaced with Australian pounds
detail reproduced from *Framed by Love*, Illustrated Romance Library, no. 121 (North Sydney: Regal Publications)





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The artwork in the comics was not always of a high standard reproduced from *I Didn't Believe in Love*, Wedding Ring Library, no. 82 and *Mock Wedding*, Romantic Love Library, no. 153 (North Sydney: Jubilee Publications)

This 'Australian' street features American-style fire hydrants and house frontages reproduced from *Framed by Love*, Illustrated Romance Library, no. 121 (North Sydney: Regal Publications)

Critics of the comics took issue with depictions of violence and 'Americanisms' reproduced from *I Didn't Believe in Love*, Wedding Ring Library, no. 82 (North Sydney: Jubilee Publications)

evidence that officials bothered to check if the publications were genuinely Australian or, if they did, that they took punitive action against 'black' imports. The fact that after World War II the rights seem to have been acquired by local publishers, and the profits now stayed in Australia, may have caused Customs authorities to lose interest in checking the origins of the comics. Perhaps the haphazard modifications of slang and spelling were made so that the distributors could pick a page and point to it, hoping to satisfy the critics.

Why were the American romance comics popular in Australia?

The publications appealed particularly to the postwar generation whose eyes were firmly fixed on America as a cultural mecca. The Australian film industry had a brief flowering

but had never been a threat to the grip of Hollywood on our large screens. In popular culture, America ruled. Anything with an American gloss to it appealed, especially to the young. One of the strangest things I found when digging more deeply into this subject is that there were, in fact, a few locally written and drawn romance comics published at the same time. In the Library's McGee collection of comics from the 1950s and 1960s,

there are four romance comic books containing stories, all but one written by Moira Bertram. While importers were trying to disguise some of the evidence that their comics were from the United States, the Australian romance comics did the opposite, consciously instilling an overtly American flavour in their content. So Bertram ensured that dollar and cent signs were on price tags, flats were called 'apartments' and people said 'gotten' and 'gee whiz'; but clearly Bertram or her publisher drew the line at material that would be off-putting to their readers, so mothers were always called 'Mum' and the spelling of words was resolutely standard Australian English. In the Library's oral history of his career as a comic illustrator, Monty Wedd (b.1921) described how local publishers instructed their comic writers and artists to set their stories in recognisable parts of America, the Wild West for instance, that would be acceptable to Australians. These stories paralleled the hugely popular radio programs and serials of the postwar years, such as *Superman* and *Hopalong Cassidy*, which were written and performed by Australians but with American settings and accents.

Nobody appears to have worried about this weirdly hybridised world of the romance comics, whether written by Americans or Australians. This may have been because, as a later article will show, inside their racy covers romance comics purveyed strongly conservative messages and can even be viewed as reactionary propaganda.

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