

SYDNEY

The Saturday
Telegraph

WEEKEND

JANUARY 21-22, 2023

Our BILLION DOLLAR

love story

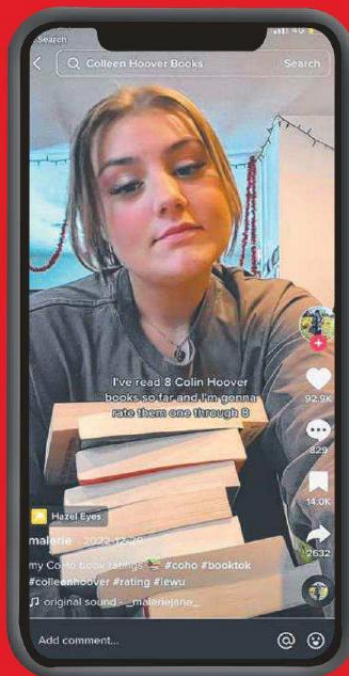


How social media is
turning more of us
into romance addicts
than ever before

MERCEDES MAGUIRE



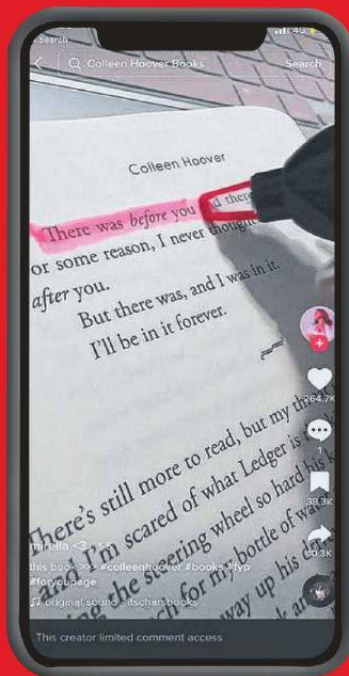
SURF'S UP FINDING THE PERFECT WAVE **YOU'RE WELCOME** THE LIFE-AFFIRMING JOY OF JOINING A CLUB



ALL FOR LOVE

Romance writers have sales figures many other authors could only dream of. And the genre is widening – capturing a new audience on TikTok

Story MERCEDES MAGUIRE





Sitting in a storage room underneath her busy home, with her three teenage children tearing around above her, Barbara Hannay wrote stories of love and lust. She wrote of rugged heroes with names like Jude Marlow and Kent Rigby and of women falling for unavailable men – their best friend’s fiance, their boss, their dead cousin’s widowed husband.

But whatever turmoil embroiled them, you knew by the last page, all would be well.

After all, a happy ending is an unwritten pledge between a romance writer and her reader.

The Australian author left the world of Mills & Boon behind 12 years ago, after selling more than 12 million copies, translated into 26 languages.

And while the romance genre is no longer dominated by novels featuring bulging biceps and ripped corsets on their covers, it would seem Australians are still in love with the notion of being in love.

The Australian romance category grew by 23 per cent in 2021 and by more than 80 per cent in 2022, according to Nielsen BookData.

The genre is worth \$1.08bn globally, about the same as the mystery and science fiction genres combined, and represents about 10 per cent of all book sales in Australia.

“Romance fiction has boomed during the pandemic because people are wanting to read books that make them feel good,” says Cheryl Akle of Australia’s biggest online book reading community, Better Reading.

“It is a billion-dollar industry, that’s something that should be taken seriously.”

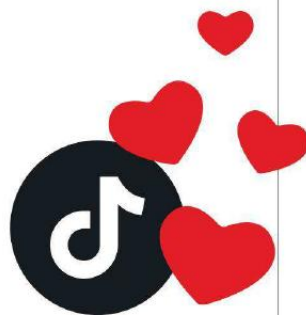
These days your average romance reader is more commonly a 20-something with a solid social media presence than a frustrated housewife hiding a well-thumbed copy under her bed. While Mills & Boon is still a publishing powerhouse, the genre is embracing a younger reader, courtesy of TikTok.

The BookTok phenomenon, so called for the literary takeover of TikTok, and the impact it



“*Often, romance was what people read in secret or something you didn’t know they were reading ...*”

Best-selling Australian author Rachael Johns, above, says TikTok has found a new audience for romance novels, and above left, US romance phenomenon Colleen Hoover. Main picture: Daniel Johns



has had on the romance genre in particular is hard to ignore.

“TikTok is today what chick-lit was in the 1990s,” says Kate Cuthbert, a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland who has studied the romance genre. “But the thing about TikTok is that it’s not promoting the whole genre, rather individual authors like Colleen Hoover.”

It was only a matter of time before someone mentioned Colleen Hoover.

Three of the top five romance books in Australia last year were by Colleen Hoover: *It Ends With Us*, *Ugly Love* and *November 9* – and she had sold more than seven million books from January to the end of August 2022 alone.

She is the reigning TikTok queen of romance and her biggest selling book, *It Ends With Us*, attracted two billion views.

On the day after the sequel, *It Starts With Us*, was released in October last year, the

hashtag already had 141 million views. There’s also a movie set for release this year.

“We have never seen anything like it,” says Penguin Random House publisher Ali Watts. “The books popular on TikTok are quite sexually explicit, which is part of the appeal for that younger age group. Whatever the reason, I’m thrilled at the boom in young people reading.”

It may not be the Aussie romance writers steaming up the TikTok posts, but they are benefiting from the spotlight on the genre.

Local author Rachael Johns is one of our most popular romance authors with a catalogue of 10 rural romances novels and eight books she calls “contemporary women’s fiction”.

She says the stigma around romance has definitely lifted.

“Often, romance was what people read in secret or something you didn’t know they were reading,” she says from her home in Western Australia’s Swan Valley.



It's an unspoken promise to my readers; I won't rip their hearts out ... there is something uplifting in a happy ending

"There was definitely a stigma attached to romance, but TikTok has really rocked that whole genre, in a good way. And it doesn't matter whether you're on TikTok or not, the effects are still felt.

"In my book club we have readers aged from early 40s to 70 – not your typical TikTok demographic – yet one of them chose for us to read *Verity* by Colleen Hoover. It's like TikTok makes these books big, and then we see the trickle-down effect in the book charts.

"While the stigma is not as bad these days, I think a lot of people still secretly think of romance as a bit of a joke; people snigger about it. But they're thinking of the Mills & Boon type books from the past.

"What a lot of people don't realise is that romance moves with the times."

Even the ever-lucrative Mills & Boon category, where it was said one of their books sells somewhere in the world every 10 seconds, has changed from the steamy "bodice rippers" of its 1970s and 1980s heyday. Today they cover topics that reflect modern society.

"I wrote one (Mills & Boon) book which was focused on a house swap situation between a woman living on Magnetic Island and a man living in Chelsea, London which was written entirely in emails," says Hannay, who at one stage was writing three Mills & Boon books a year.

"This was quite out there for Mills & Boon 12-plus years ago."

The romance category, experts agree, goes through its own trends and cycles.

"Much of the romance that was being read in Australia up until the late 2000s was from international authors," says Cuthbert.

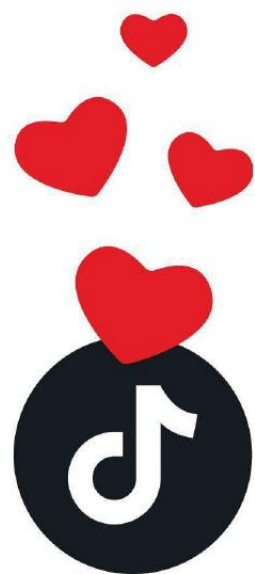
"Then the rural romance trend started to pick up and this showed publishers and booksellers in Australia that the market could sustain romance readers and we saw a boom in rural romance here.

"I think romance does reflect cultural trends. For instance, at the start of the 2010s, the biggest sub-genre was billionaire romance, where a female protagonist would find someone to take care of her. But the second Trump got elected in 2016, the bottom fell out of that category and it was taken over by the single dad sub-genre. All of a sudden we were seeing books where female protagonists, who were quite capable and competent, were faced with a love interest who was perhaps a little damaged from a previous relationship."

While those in publishing agree the Aussie rural romance genre – or RuRo as it's affectionately known – has plateaued after its rapid rise, those authors who established themselves when the category was on a high



Maya Linnell, above, on the farm – her rural romances are a genre readers love, and Australian authors excel in. Michelle Montebello, right, earned her stripes by self-publishing her works to retain creative control. Pictures: Tracy Botica, Sam Ruttyn



are still popular. In fact, most of the writers – and all the top five – in Nielsen's 10 best-selling Australian romance authors for 2022, write RuRo.

Leading the pack is Karly Lane, who has written 18 rural romance novels from the home on the mid-North Coast of NSW in which her family has lived for five generations. She is followed by Rachael Johns; Mandy Magro, whose latest release, *Jillaroo From Jacaranda*, takes her catalogue to 19; USA Today best-selling author from central west NSW, Alissa Callan; and Maya Linnell.

"Rural romance is very dominant in our market," says Sue Brockhoff of Harper Collins, who publish Rachael Johns and Mandy Magro. "Rachael Johns, Karly Lane, Fleur McDonald and Alissa Callan continue to tell Australian stories with great conviction."

Maya Linnell had always wanted to write about the rural Australia she lived in and when Allen & Unwin were looking to expand their rural romance selection, she was ready with her manuscript. Each of her books focuses on a different sister from the same family living in a fictional regional Victorian town and they struck a chord with Aussie readers who wanted more stories set here.

Linnell says the romance genre is so vast that often authors are placed under its banner who don't really belong there. She points specifically to Colleen Hoover, where relationships can be left open-ended, and Nicholas Sparks, who often kills off a central character in the end. These books, Linnell argues, don't end with the happy ever after, or even the "happy for now" promise a true romance book should deliver.

"In the traditional romance market, one general rule is that you need to leave your

readers with some closure over the romantic element," she says.

"It's an unspoken promise to my readers; I won't rip their hearts out because there is something uplifting or some security in a happy ending that people come to these books for."

One of the areas of strength that is unique to the romance genre is independent, or self-publishing, where the author takes care of the entire process of publishing, from writing and editing their own book to choosing the cover design, title, and then marketing it and selling it. Often it's a road an author goes down when they have been rejected by major publishers.

But Sydney author Michelle Montebello chose to self-publish her work, despite being approached by major publishers, because she wanted to retain creative control over her work. And the move has paid off.

The Camden-based mother-of-two has published three romance novels in her *Seasons of Belle* series and two historical romance books – *The Quarantine Station* and *The Lost Letters of Playfair Street* – to critical acclaim.

In 2021, *The Lost Letters of Playfair Street*, set in The Rocks area of Sydney during the 1920s, was awarded Favourite Australian Romance by the Australian Romance Readers Association and one of her contemporary romance novels, *The Forever Place*, was short-listed for the American Romance Association's (ARA) prestigious Ruby award, while *The Quarantine Station*, based at Sydney's Q Station in the early 1900s was short-listed for the ARA's International Book award.

"I still see comments like 'that's just soft porn' when I see an author say she writes romance online, but I think the tide is turning for romance writers and that's because authors are stepping up and owning it, embracing it,"



Montebello says. "Writing romance is perceived as being easy, but when you're writing about two people meeting for the first time, there's a certain behavioural psychology you have to tap into for it to be believable and that's not always easy."

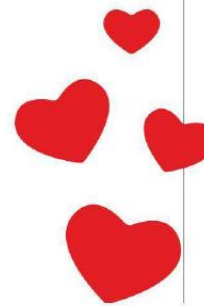
"Most people have had the experience of first love, or falling in love, so when you're writing about it, you have to make it feel

authentic or it doesn't work. That is not always as easy as it may seem."

Experts agree there are more independent or self-published authors in the romance category than any other. It's these self-published authors who commonly fall into the more specific sub-categories of romance – like paranormal, alien or vampire romance – which major publishers are not willing to invest in.

“

Most people have had the experience of first love, or falling in love... you have to make it feel authentic or it doesn't work



The sub-genres are vast and ever-changing, also following a certain cycle. One of the newest of these is the reverse harem, or "why choose" category of romance, in which a female protagonist has several partners. And don't be deceived into thinking there's a happy-ever-after traditional coupling at the end. In fact, the woman doesn't have to make a choice of partner in this category at all, hence the "why choose" label.

A more worrying trend is bully romance where a woman falls for a man who doesn't treat her right, may belittle and even threaten her, but she still loves him. It's an area social commentators are concerned is throwing a soft veil over domestic abuse – even excusing it.

There's a growing tribe who feel Colleen Hoover is moving frighteningly close to this dark sub-genre as her novels so often depict unhealthy relationships with psychologically dark undercurrents, particularly her three biggest sellers: *Verity*, *It Ends With Us* and *Ugly Love*.

There are pages and pages of forum chats on discussion website Reddit dedicated to this very topic.

"I tried reading *It Ends With Us*; I thought it was badly written, predictable, and a poor attempt at writing domestic abuse," one wrote. Another added: "There was something rather distasteful about the depiction of domestic abuse in *It Ends With Us* that I really struggled with". ■

10,000 REASONS TO CELEBRATE

\$10,000
OFF YOUR NEW HOME*

+

\$10,000
TOWARDS UPGRADES*

*Terms and Conditions Apply

Our resort community has now grown to 28 resort locations across Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

This year Palm Lake Resort has reached an exciting milestone, with 10,000 people now calling a Palm Lake Resort location home.

FREECALL
13 72 56

for more information.



**THE BEST IN OVER-50s LIVING.
THIS IS YOUR TIME.**

pallakeresort.com.au