

Re-Imagining the Gold Rush: Prospectors, Log Cabins and Mail-Order Brides in Contemporary Western Romances

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"Yukon Territory was a gold miner's heaven, and Devon O'Shea had come to claim her share." Thus goes the blurb of *A Handful of Heaven*, a western romance by Kristin Hannah published in 1991 by Fawcett Gold Medal Books. That same year the author was awarded the Golden Heart/RITA award from The Romance Writers of America for her efforts.

Western romance, one of the most popular sub-genres around today, often presents heroines travelling from the East to the West, sometimes to secure a husband, if they are mail-order brides, or to escape difficult situations at home. Travel and adventure have not been a traditional subject in tales written by women, which have focussed, more often than not, on what Ann Romines defines as "the home plot."¹ The appropriation by women of the western myths of gold to find and nature to explore has not been easy; "massive exploration and alteration of the continent do not seem to have been part of women's fantasies," writes Annette Kolodny. "They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden," but they often found themselves "shut up with the children in log cabins."² This paper will present a selection of contemporary western romances dealing with the Gold Rush and Mail-order Brides, and, more generally, romances where the heroine goes west, and examine if, in today's popular tales, writers and readers have finally adopted a different plot, the "on the road plot"³ and what kind of fantasies of gold, riches and adventure they spin for the contemporary public.

Since very few scholars seem to be familiar with the mass-romance genre, let's begin by presenting this kind of very popular women's fiction, the different types of romances of which the western romances are a sub-genre, and finally the gold-rush and mail-order bride stories.

We shall then focus on two novels that are particularly representative of the genre and look at a certain number of topics. First, we will evaluate the historical background of the novels: are they pure fantasy or are they, after all, credible historical romances? Then we will look at the heroine's quest and explore the possible meanings of a trip to the West for the heroine and the function of this kind of tale for today's female readers.

Western romance is one of the subdivisions of an enormous body of reading material for women known as *romances*. Among the many existing definitions, one by Johanna Tunon captures its essential feature from a generic point of view: "A romance is not simply a love story. A romance must focus on the protagonists' developing love and commitment and must depict them living happily ever after."⁴

The book-market share of romances in North America is a staggering 46 to 48 percent% of all paperbacks, with about two thousand titles every year, and Harlequin Enterprises of Don Mills, Ontario, sells, in any given year, about 200 million copies worldwide. Among all the romance publishers, at least eleven of them have an editor specialised in western romances.⁵

In spite of its enormous worldwide readership, romance has been until very recently the most despised and neglected of literary genres—even in the field of popular literature! Many intellectuals and scholars have relegated the reading of romances to the status of a shameful activity, likely to alienate readers, blind them to the realities of everyday life, or induce in them a drug-like addiction, and so forth. In short, romances have generally been dismissed as a frustrated housewife's pastime. Nevertheless, a reexamination of the literary canon in recent years has led to a rediscovery, and a new status, for these traditionally neglected works by women authors. Female scholars studying the reading habits of women have focussed particular attention on the romance.

The genealogical tree of the romance is intricate. Romance novels branch off into serials and into mainstream form; serial authors are obliged to follow strict formal guidelines provided by the editor or publisher; the authors of mainstream romances, on the other hand, have greater freedom, but they must produce a longer novel, full of adventure, sensational development and passion. In serials as well as in mainstream romances, the sub-genres are numerous and diverse and include historical, contemporary and futuristic settings.

A historical romance can be defined as a love story set in the past, the latter element never dominating the former. Since the publication of Kathleen Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* in 1972, historical romances have become increasingly popular among women readers and have gained an important share in the lucrative field of women's literature. In less than 20 years, the "genre" has split into a number of sub-genres, which can be identified by their historical setting: Mediaeval, Regency, North and South, and Western.

The Western Romance depicts a story, almost always the same, that begins with a young woman's decision to leave the sedate and orderly American East (usually Boston and its environs) in order to venture to a more turbulent and risky region, namely the American West. The east-to-west itinerary is a constant in these novels and constitutes the initial narrative situation. These novels all present stories set in the nineteenth century and are extremely popular today, just like any other form of western culture, be it music or dress.

Many of these Western romances present the story of a mail-order bride—in general a young lady but more often a woman who at that time was considered a spinster—travelling west to secure a husband. Some romances present the Gold Rush and their heroines decide sometime to participate in the great adventure of digging for gold and try to better their condition.

Actually the mail-order bride story is the euphoric side of the Western romances, since the heroine arrives in the West when the region has already been claimed and mastered: she can participate in the building of a new town and of a different culture. The romances that depict the gold rush represent the dysphoric side of the western story, since the heroine arrives in a savage place where the living conditions are particularly harsh and where she has to forfeit all her cultural habits. Whether or not the destination is the Yukon does not make a big difference, aside from the geographical facts: the Klondike is much colder than California or even Montana, and the mosquitoes are much bigger. It can also be seen as the far end of civilisation.

The first novel I want to discuss is Ana Seymour's *Brides for Sale*.⁶ Its framework is the story of the famous marriage entrepreneur Asa Mercer who, in 1866, recruited about a hundred marriageable women in the East and brought them to Seattle, where they were met by about 300 men eager to marry. The heroine of the novel, Emily Kendall, falls in love with

the only male in Seattle who does not want to get married: the prosperous owner of the local saloon cum brothel. In the end he will give in and marry her nevertheless. In addition to achieving her end to marry the man she loves, the heroine becomes a successful entrepreneur and skilfully manages the new Opera House. Thanks to Emily, civilisation and culture come to Seattle. Among the many books that were available on the subject, this one was chosen for its representation of the mail-order brides, and because it relates to the real life of Asa Mercer, the entrepreneur who ran this service.

The second novel is Kristin Hannah's *A Handful of Heaven*.⁷ Written in 1991, it is set in the Yukon in the years 1896-97 and is interesting because the action occurs at the exact moment when gold was discovered in the Klondike; the novel also portrays the man who made the discovery. It also won, as mentioned earlier, the 1991 Golden Heart/RITA award. Devon O'Shea is a 29-year-old "spinster" who decides to go West to manage a trading post in the Yukon with a man who has advertised for help in an eastern newspaper. She gets to the Klondike by boat and arrives to find her new partner, aptly called Stone Man, who looks and acts like his name. His companions and card playing partners are outcasts: they are dirty and raunchy, and they love to spit tobacco left and right. Little by little Devon, by the strength of her character and her hard labour, changes the lives of these savage men, cleans the tent, organises the trading post and serves good food with a white table cloth. She also forms a partnership with one of the men who wants to dig for gold and "grubs" for him. The prospector comes back with a lot of gold and shares it with Devon; suddenly she is rich and can return to a good life in the East. But she has fallen in love with Stone-Man, actually the new version of Stone-Man who has taken up to bathing and shaving, and has started to appreciate all the "comforts" a woman can provide. In the end, Devon leaps out of the boat that should carry her back to civilisation and stays in the Yukon with her Stone-Man.

Astute or "genre-smart" romance readers do not tolerate the slightest infringement of history or historical realities as far as the setting of the love story is concerned. The details provided in *Brides for Sale* on Asa Mercer and his "belles" (as his protegees were known at that time) are indeed accurate: up to the name of the boat that carried the belles to Seattle, the *SS Continental*.⁸ Chilkoot Pass, Rabbit Creek, Circle City, Forty Mile are all mentioned in *Handful of Heaven*, as in this example: "Rabbit

Creek had been optimistically renamed Bonanza Creek, and there was even talk of naming the valley after the geologist, George Dawson."⁹

In *Brides for Sale* the name of Emily's best friend and companion belle Ida Mae, reminds one of Ida May Barlow, who travelled on the *Continental* and then married a fellow from Seattle, Albert Pinkham, on August 14, 1866. This melding of history and fiction is characteristic of historical romances.

A Handful of Heaven is all the more remarkable for the fact that the novel's heroine presents a sum of traits that can historically be attributed to different women who really were in the Klondike and she has experiences that have been reported by these Klondike women: Devon, the heroine of *Handful*, is a compendium of the women who travelled to the Klondike and wrote or reported about their adventures. She has to do all the cooking for Stone Man and his cronies, as if it were natural for women to cook for the men even in such conditions as the ones experienced in the wilderness. The same complaint was made and reported by Emily Craig who had to cook for twelve men on the trail. Devon opens a restaurant, just like Belinda Mulroney and so many others. She brings her bicycle to the Klondike, just like Lotta Burns, who caused such a ruckus with her contraption that she was able to sell it, it seems, for \$700. Just like Emilie Tremblay, Devon is forced to clean the tobacco spit that litters the floor of the trading post's tent and, just like nurse Georgia Powell, she has to contend with the biggest and nastiest mosquitoes ever to fly east or west. Finally, like many women in the Klondike (Mulroney, Mimosa Gates or Lotta Burns), she invests in a partner or grubs for a prospector and finally shares his finds.

Gold is indeed discovered at Rabbit Creek: a man arrives at Stone Man's trading post,

"Stone man, how the hell are you?"

"Well, if it isn't Lying George, back from the dead."

"I ain't lying this time. I found it. The big strike."¹⁰

It's George Carmack himself who appears in the book; the identification is confirmed by a later reference to his Indian wife.

Living conditions are accurately depicted and they seem to be terrible. The food consists of beans and flapjacks, the cold is merciless, the tent is filthy: "She took a deep breath and immediately wished she hadn't. The tent smelled like rotten food, dirty socks, wet wood, and kerosene."¹¹ The same seems to be true for the living conditions in Seattle

in 1866: living is more dangerous but at the same time more adventurous and the heroine continuously emphasizes the fact that East and West are really two different propositions, for a woman at least.

The men who have paid Asa Mercer to find them brides are a bunch of riffraff. They are heavy drinkers, and always ready to fight: "One week into Mr Mercer's experiment in alphabetical matchmaking, the atmosphere was gloomy. Already there had been three gunfights over the prospective brides."¹² Little by little the influence of "good" women civilizes the men.

Why does the heroine go west? Emily, the mail-order bride, says: "I just know in my heart that this will be the adventure I have so long awaited."¹³ When she spots the hero on the quay she adds, "That's what we have come all this way for . . . If all the Washington men are as handsome as that one, we will have no trouble at all finding the right one. In the meantime, we'll be having the adventure of our lives."¹⁴

But, why did she travel west exactly? "Not to find a husband as much as . . . I don't know. I wanted to build my own life for myself. Back in Lowell I was Ralph Kendall's daughter. The Bennetts' future daughter-in-law. Then Joseph Jackson's sister-in-law. Poor aunt Emily. I guess I just wanted to be me . . . Emily Kendall."¹⁵

In the second romance, *A Handful of Heaven*, Devon O'Shea has left her home to make a new life for herself, but marriage is not on her mind; she feels she is too old to entertain romantic dreams, being already twenty-nine. On the other hand, she does not want to become the spinster aunt to her sister's children: "I left . . . because I was afraid of what I'd become if I stayed."¹⁶ "I came up here because I needed a new start in life." After all the sacrifices she consented to in her sister's establishment and family, she finds herself alone: ". . . I guess I thought if I were doing something just for me, something I loved, that I wouldn't be lonely any more."¹⁷

Even if new lives and adventure seem to be these heroines' top motives for leaving, it is obvious that in the end their goals have expanded. In both cases they end up married and, in both cases, pregnant. Yet they remain entrepreneurs and business women. It seems that the heroines of *Brides* and *Handful* have travelled west primarily and foremost to build a new life for themselves. Lilian Campbell Davidson, quoted by Foster,¹⁸ writes in 1889, ". . . of all the valued liberations, ' . . . none is more excellent in itself and in its results, than the power which has become

the right of every woman who has the means to achieve it—of becoming in her own unescorted and independent person, a lady traveller.” “To a greater or lesser extent, the women voyagers saw their journeying as a release, an opportunity to experience solipsistic enjoyment and to enrich themselves spiritually and mentally . . .”¹⁹ But it was not possible, for Victorian women, to publicly acknowledge such motivations without being accused of egoism and irresponsibility. So they often hid the true reasons of their trips under different, more acceptable goals—at least for a woman; health reasons were frequently put forward, a difficult financial situation or, in particular, the desire to civilize the far away country.

Even if the heroines of *Brides* and *Handful* confess, in the end, their longing for independence, the ways they find to achieve it are well within the limits of the common decency for a woman of their time. Both heroines are convinced they have a mission to civilize the West. Emily in *Brides*, well aware of the monotonous life in these far away regions, tells her friend: “You and I, Ida dear, are going to bring *culture* to the Wild West.”²⁰ As soon as she fits out and opens her opera house, she becomes a cultural agent and, as such, she plays an important and worthy role in her new community. In *Handful* Devon shows the same propensity for civilizing, even if the target is just one man: “That was it! That’s why God had sent her here. She was the one person who could organize Stone Man’s life and help him reenter civilisation.”²¹ But, for the women, this undertaking is not just an act of sheer good will and a way to do good solely for others: the heroines also want to make money. They become entrepreneurs out of the need to become financially independent and survive in the new, hard country. Doing so, they take up careers and find situations they would not have been able to envision in their old surroundings. In *Brides*, basking in the success of the first of her productions, Emily thinks: “A few more sold-out performances like this one and they would have enough money to start building the opera house. She could hardly believe it. In Lowell, she would never have even imagined doing such a thing.”²² Finally, she becomes a real businesswoman and calmly acknowledges the fact: “As she rifled through the sheaf of papers on her desk, she felt that now she truly was an impresario.”²³ In *Handful*, Devon starts a catering business and spends her time making tarts, pies, “preserves, jams, sauces, chutneys”²⁴ she can sell for a very good price, since the miners are eager to add variety to

their diet of flapjacks and beans. Finally, it is the money she has invested in a partnership that brings her riches and freedom. Her associate, Digger, comes home one day with a bagful of gold: "She was stunned. Ideas and possibilities and realizations crashed together in her mind, tumbling over one another. She was rich. *Rich*."²⁵

Thus the heroines who have left to go West do not stand still and do not accept playing a subservient role to their male counterparts. Devon must do battle with the men who pretend that women have no rights: "I have every right, Midas. I'm a Yukoner now, and all I ask is to be treated like any other Yukoner."²⁶ Finally Midas, who is, in the beginning, the most relentless of her detractors, will become her staunchest ally and will try to convince Stone-Man that a good woman is even better than a goldmine: "I left behind a fine wife and child to find gold. Only you know what I found? They *were* the gold—I was just too stupid to see it. 'Course by the time I figured it out, they were gone."²⁷ In addition to her cultural and commercial successes, the heroine achieves a maturity and a sexual freedom she would not have been able to claim if she had stayed East: both Emily and Devon accept a relationship with men they know quite well are not bent on matrimony.

Finally, what kind of women are these heroines and what is their final quest? In the beginning, I quoted *The Land Before Her*, in which Annette Kolodny defines women's fantasies and experiences of the American frontiers. Kolodny argued that "massive exploration and alteration of the continent do not seem to have been part of women's fantasies. They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden" but they often found themselves "shut up with the children in log cabins."²⁸ The heroines in our romances do not resemble these women at all. They do not seem to conform, either, to the Women of the West as presented, according to Sandra L. Myres, by male historians who either forgot the real women who travelled west or "portrayed them in ethereal, mysterious terms or presented a stereotypic portrait as false as that of the Hollywood Indian."²⁹ According to Myres, the first stereotype is "the frightened and tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the terrible West where she was condemned to a life of lonely terror among savage beasts and rapine Indians."³⁰ On the other hand "Concomitant with the image of the weary and forlorn frontier wife, a sort of helpless helpmate, was the stereotype of the westering

woman as sturdy helpmate . . . [who] trod westward with grim-faced determination, clad in gingham or linsey-woolsey, her face wreathed in a sunbonnet, baby at breast, rifle at the ready . . . That's the brave pioneer woman tradition."³¹

Again, the heroine of the western romances does not resemble either stereotype. There is only one rule for romance fiction, as for all popular narratives irrespective of their generic label, and that is that a balance must be found between history and fabula, between what the characters can do within the limits of the specific historical setting represented and what they must do in order to be accepted in a love story. In a romance, the heroine must be at the same time a woman of the past but also a woman of today. On one hand, she seems to have left behind the "home plot" but, on the other, she seems to have adapted quite easily to the "on the road plot"; the decision to leave a safe east coast to travel to a dangerous and uncertain future in the West is hers and hers alone and she does not seem to regret it one moment.

Her quest in travelling west is not linear, neither is it unidimensional. As we have seen, the heroine wants many things at the same time: adventure, career, money, romance, family, and a community where she can live peacefully and be accepted completely. Are we again facing the Superwoman so active in the women's best-sellers of the eighties? A kind of Emma Harte, a Woman of Substance gone west? I would rather suggest that Western Romances, with their tales of heroic struggles and homely pursuits, signal, as do many other tales written by women, the "Feminization of Quest-Romance." This form, according to Dana Heller, is the feminine version of the quest-romance in which the female hero "enables self-discovery through the forming of nurturing, reciprocal bonds with others. Women's quests must be able to embody the opposite impulses of separation and connection. How is a capacity for both autonomy and relationship, attachment and independence, to be expressed?" Western popular Romances for women seem to portray these "indeterminate processes" of self-discovery. If the western romances for women pertain to the well-known mythology of the Frontier, the Myth represented here does not play to the Slotkin's masculine scenario of "separation, . . . regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*."³² The specificity of western romances, in particular those presenting mail-order brides and gold-rush stories, consists mostly in the fact that, in going west, the

heroines secure for themselves a number of cultural and material advantages they could not have enjoyed had they remained in the East. The West, therefore, represents, for them, a place where generic rules, which regulate the lives and the behaviours of the sexes, can still be lifted and somewhat modified. The relevance and the functionality of these stories for today's readers become even more apparent if one foregoes the historical and geographical setting. The young women who go west are in their twenties, they have to assert themselves in an essentially male society and they succeed: they become business women, they become financially independent but they also have to deal with family and career. The problems facing the heroines are those of today's young women and the heroines' achievements in difficult environments serve as an "exemplum" to today's readers.

Even if these romances are fictions, the historical background is so accurate that today's readers can relate to what life was like for women who travelled west. In particular, the story set in the Klondike presents a heroine who seems to be a "synthesis" of many women who wrote down their journeys as they travelled and lived there. The Klondike can be seen here as the end of the world, but also as the beginning of a new way of life, and the experience of a new civilisation.

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Endnotes

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9. *Handful*, p. 110.
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11. *Handful*, p. 47.
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13. *Brides*, p. 12.
14. *Brides*, p. 13.
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17. *Handful*, pp. 87-8.
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21. *Handful*, p. 84.
22. *Brides*, p. 118.
23. *Brides*, pp. 178-79.
24. *Handful*, p. 93.
25. *Handful*, p. 246.
26. *Handful*, p. 126.
27. *Handful*, p. 257.
28. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, Preface, xiii.
29. Sandra L. Myres, "Women in the West" in Michael P. Malone, ed., *Historians and the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 370.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p. 373.
32. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 12. My italics.