

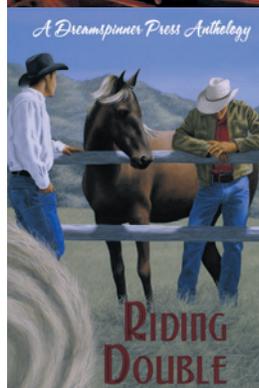
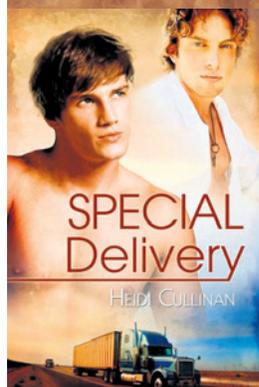
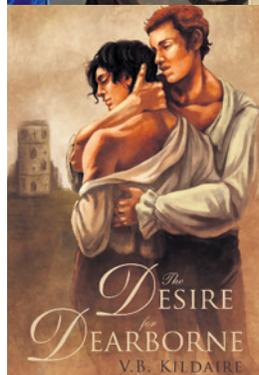
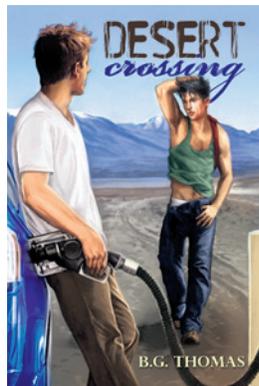
# What women want: gay male romance

Love stories centred on homosexual men are flying off bookshelves, but what's really surprising, writes **Elio Iannacci**, is who's writing – and reading – them. (Answer to both: heterosexual females)

Trends in contemporary popular fiction can be as unpredictable as fashion fads. Nobody expected, for instance, that the gloomy, bespectacled Harry Potter would help resuscitate the ailing book industry any more than Lady Gaga's bizarre looks would help motivate retail sales. Yet today's newest publishing trend is as out in left field as Potter and Gaga once were.

Over the past year, man-on-man romantic fiction – books featuring two male protagonists engaged in a sexual or emotional relationship with each other – has taken a significant bite out of one of publishing's biggest markets. Amazon's Kindle has had such success with the genre that the e-book site has tripled its "m/m" stock since January, 2010. Even Harlequin – the most profitable and old-fashioned romance fiction house in the world – has recently started to publish same-sex love stories via the company's digital imprint, Carina Press. What's most surprising, though, are the types of readers the books have hooked: Straight, married women are among the genre's top fans. That may be because the authors, such as Iowa's Heidi Cullinan, a 37-year-old suburban mother of two, are frequently heterosexual females, too. Cullinan has penned such recent works as the popular gay romance *Double Blind* and the homoerotic fantasy *Miles and The Magic Flute*.

"One of the reasons why more women are ravenous for these books is that they want to read something about gay men that doesn't involve them suffering from [HIV/AIDS], committing suicide or getting bullied. I know I was," Cullinan says, adding that mainstream TV shows such as *Queer As Folk* and *True Blood* have helped heterosexuals embrace guy-on-guy fantasies as "normal." "When I saw *Brokeback Mountain* [in 2005], my husband had to drive me away from the theatre for 45 minutes while I yelled out the car window because I didn't like the [tragic] ending," says Cullinan, who also devotes her time to LGBT advocacy in her hometown. "I was really tired of dead gay men in films and books or campy guys who never had sex, so I wanted to fix the problem and show that gay men were having great sex and had complicated, interesting relationships that people would love to know about."



Cullinan's hunch was right. Her first book, last year's *Special Delivery*, not only sold well enough to help her pay off a chunk of her student loan, but swiftly led to commissions to turn out a pair of sequels. *Special Delivery* focuses on a handsome, Iowa-based nurse named Randy and a studly, out-of-state trucker. Cullinan's publisher, Dreamspinner Press, clearly saw the potential of the genre, but it hasn't been the only one. In 2009, Pennsylvania's Running Press unveiled a new line of m/m soft-core erotica on the basis of growing demand. Most telling, however, are the 15 m/m erotic romance titles in Harlequin's Carina Press division since June.

"Now that [Harlequin] has started a gay romance line, my prayers have been answered," says Erastes, a 47-year-old British author whose novella *Muffled Drum* will be published by Carina in July. Erastes – her pen name is Greek for "lover of boys" – says that six years ago there were no options for m/m authors like herself, whereas today it's challenging to meet the demand. "We are in a totally different world now: I can't keep up," she says.

Erastes, who has been married to a man for more than 15 years and is director of the Erotic Authors Association, writes historical fiction that focuses on closeted men who are fearful of getting caught in the act. One of her biggest-selling novels, *Frost Fair*, is set in 1814 and tells the story of Gideon Frost, a printer and covert part-time prostitute who carries on a secret affair with a wealthy ruffian named Joshua Redfern.

"The uber-masculine stock characters portrayed in gay romances have always had great appeal with heterosexual women," Rinaldo Walcott, an associate sociology professor at the University of Toronto, notes, adding that soap operas have banked on them since their inception. "It's like a constant reliving of the Rock Hudson narrative. The unattainable is what makes these books so desirable and many straight women are now willing to investigate their own sexual curiosities."

Erastes offers a lighter take. "Well, two men in bed together are hot," she says with a chuckle. "But the main reason I write Regency-era novels which only feature men in [sexual and emotional situations] is that

the Regency female character isn't as interesting to me. She has to be a blue stocking or some sort of slave abolitionist or supremely feisty. With gay historicals, I feel you have the option to break the stereotypes and have your protagonists go off on swash-buckling adventures as well as unpredictable romances."

Unlike Erastes and Cullinan, author Alex Beecroft's motivation for writing about the love that dared not speak its name has little to do with advocacy or adventure. The 45-year-old Irish mother of two, who currently lives in Cambridge, England, admits that writing queer content addresses what she calls her own "layered sexuality." "When I started, it was a revelation," she says of her first book, *Captain's Surrender*. "Although I have a very heterosexual life with my husband, writing m/m romance felt like I was coming out in a way: I am writing about all the fantasies I have had since I hit puberty. There is an element of women's sexuality that has not been able to express itself for such a long time. These books allow that for me and the reader."

The criticism that m/m romances written by women for women is akin to lesbian pornography made specifically for straight men doesn't fly with Beecroft. "I have to disagree with that completely – what we do is not porn," she says. "*False Colors* [Beecroft's second novel] has two or three sex scenes in it – 333 pages of plot and three pages are sex. Are people ignoring the other 300 pages?"

Regardless of the genre's literary pretensions and its growing appeal with readers, m/m romantic fiction has yet to clear a big hurdle: getting onto Wal-Mart shelves. As the world's largest retailer and the place that dictates whether romance novels graduate to bestsellerdom, Wal-Mart has had a history of banning products that rock the status quo. Even so, Walcott of the University of Toronto suggests that it won't be long before you can throw titles by Beecroft, Cullinan and Erastes into your cart along with your cereal and personal hygiene products.

"I think that gay Harlequins will inevitably trump Wal-Mart's strategies," he says. "The [reader] numbers will be too staggering to ignore."

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