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# Gender in Pop Fiction: "Reading" Gender Power in Popular Fiction



Laura Colmenero-Chilberg\*

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**Abstract** This article investigates changes in the levels of women's power in the American publishing industry in the period between 1985 and 2004. Four areas are analyzed including the representation of women at the executive levels of publishing divisions and international media conglomerates, the gender of the most powerful mass market authors of popular fiction, the gender focus of those genres that are most popular with the buying public and the representation of male and female characters in that mass-market genre fiction.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 2008 run for the United States presidency, Hillary Clinton, a woman, came very close to being the Democratic candidate. At the same time, a woman, Condoleezza Rice, served as George W. Bush's Secretary of State, a position occupied in the prior administration by another woman, Madeleine Albright. Women head major companies, work as university presidents, and are called to serve as religious leaders in many religious organizations. There are no longer any public areas where we see women totally excluded from participation. Is this a sign that there is a totally level playing field between men and women in contemporary American culture? Sommers (2008:53) tells us, "Women in America have their freedom; they have achieved parity with men in most of the ways that count." Is Sommers correct?

Modern-day scholarship in diversity has included substantial investigations into how gender plays out in contemporary American popular culture. Scholars have investigated many areas of the mass media including the movies, television, advertising, and music discovering

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that women continue both to be portrayed stereotypically and rarely are part of the decision-making hierarchy that constructs American mass media as one form of American business (Anderson 2006; Inniss 1999; Hollows 2000; Lindsey 2005; Lont 1995; Mumford 1995; Tuchman, Daniels and Benet 1976; Wood 2006; Zimmerman 2006). One field of popular culture that has received less attention than others is popular fiction. This less-investigated area of popular culture, in particular mass-market paperback fiction (the least expensive and therefore most accessible version of popular narrative and, according to the American Association of Publishers, in 2004 a \$1.1 billion dollar business) provides fertile ground for investigating gender diversity.

*The Social Construction of the Gender Power Differential*

Gender and its accompanying role scripts are socially constructed based on society's definitions of appropriate femininity and masculinity. While somewhat elastic dependent on social location, women as a social group occupy and continue to inhabit the subordinate position in most areas of American society, regardless of a small number of women who succeed out of the norm. Historically, for every Elizabeth I there were hundreds of thousands of Elizabethan women who were not powerful. So today, though the power differential may have narrowed, for every Hillary Clinton, there are millions of American women who do not gain political power at that same level. The same can be said in all major American institutions where, Lambert explains, "Beliefs about the roles of the sexes are threads running through the fabric of society, having multiple effects upon human institutions and themselves [are] nourished and sustained by these institutions" (Mackie 1983:343).

The creation of this asymmetrical gender reality is socially constructed in the major arenas of socialization – the family, the school, within peer groups, and, of particular importance to this study, through the omnipresent mass media. These interactions create and

reinforce our gender identities, a process of gender socialization that begins at our birth but continues throughout the life course (Howard 1997). Traditionally, the cultural images have portrayed women as dependent and men as independent, women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, women as victims and men as aggressors; women as incompetent while men are consistently shown as having authority, usually over women (Wood 2006). As Berger (1972:46) has said, "To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men." Men and women, however, are not locked into these positions but construct and reconstruct their identities relative to the social context within which they live (Alcoff 2005). American mass market publishing is one such social context within which women as a social group are reconstructing their power identities.

### *American Mass Market Publishing*

In American mass-market publishing, gender dominance and subordination can be explored by asking four questions. Which gender holds the greatest number of power positions affecting mass-market publishing? Which authors sell the most books? Which genres sell the most books? How is gender presented in these texts – male domination/female subordination or a more egalitarian imagery?

This research combines an identification of the executives at the highest levels running the mass-market publishing industry<sup>1</sup>, a survey of the volume of books published between 1985 and 2004<sup>2</sup>, an identification of the star authors and popular fiction genres, and a discussion of the representations of gender that is found in those paperback novels.

### WHO CONTROLS THE BUSINESS?

It is clear which of the publishing companies recently have cornered the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> All information on publishing executives was obtained at Hoovers ([www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)), a reference service that provides data on business including industries, individual companies, and executives.

<sup>2</sup> The data used in this study was drawn from the *Publishers Weekly* yearly reporting of book publishing industry statistics, specifically those titles that sold a million or more copies in a year.

amount of mass-market business when the data from 1995 to 2004 is analyzed for the authors who have sold the most books. Random House, Penguin Putnam, Simon and Schuster, and Hachette Book Group (until 2006 called Time Warner) all consistently attained the top-five list with HarperCollins, Holtzbrinck and Harlequin periodically either making it into the top five or to be found in the #6 and #7 positions (see Table 1). A very small group of companies wields the power in American paperback publishing.

This business is no longer the "gentleman's profession" it once was. Feldman (1997) has reported that the book publishing industry has always been very private about its statistics, both about the numbers of books sold and the people who work in the industry, so finding out who fills what publishing positions has been fairly difficult. It is clear that women have always held some positions of authority in the industry. For example, between 1931 and 1967 Frances Phillips was editor-in-chief for Morrow. More recently, during the 1990s Phyllis Grann was CEO of Penguin Putnam, Carole Baron served as president of Dell, and Maureen Egen was COO for Warner. A *Publishers Weekly* analysis of industry salaries for 1994-95 showed that women held only 10% of the highest-paid corporate executive positions in American publishing.

What about gender equity today? Women have begun to make their way to the executive suites. Out of the 16 CEO, COO, CFO, CIO and President positions in the top seven American publishing houses, five (31%) are headed by women and eleven by men: Anne Lloyd Davies serves as CIO of Simon and Schuster, Susan Petersen Kennedy as president of the Penguin Group USA, Jane Friedman is president and CEO of HarperCollins, Sally Richardson is president and publisher at St. Martin's Press, and Donna M. Hayes is the publisher and CEO of Harlequin. These are important, powerful, and well-paid positions, and the number of women on this list is also, of course, substantially more than was found there in the past. At 31% of

**Table 1** Top American publishing companies, their parent companies and authors for 1985-2004 who made the top-five list

<b>American Publishing Company and their Star Authors</b>	<b>International Conglomerate Owning the American Company</b>	<b>Country of International Conglomerate</b>
<b>Random House</b> Jean Auel Michael Crichton Julie Garwood John Grisham Stephen King <sup>3</sup> Dean Koontz Danielle Steel J.R.R. Tolkien	Bertelsmann AG	Germany
<b>Penguin Group USA</b> Tom Clancy Patricia Cornwell Catherine Coulter Nora Roberts <sup>3</sup> Lawrence Sanders	Pearson PLC	United Kingdom
<b>Simon and Schuster</b> V.C. Andrews Mary Higgins Clark Jackie Collins Stephen King Johanna Lindsey John Saul	CBS Corporation	United States
<b>Hachette Book Group (formerly Time Warner Book Group)</b> James Patterson Nicholas Sparks Scott Turow	Lagardere	France
<b>HarperCollins</b> Robert C. Atkins (non-fiction)	News Corporation	United Kingdom
<b>St. Martin's Press</b> Dan Brown Jackie Collins (with Simon and Schuster until 2004) Janet Evanovich	Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck	Germany
<b>Harlequin Enterprises</b> Nora Roberts	Torstar	Canada

<sup>3</sup> Both Stephen King and Nora Roberts with their large backlists of books publish with more than one publishing company.

the publishing elite, however, women are still located in a subordinate position in American mass-market publishing compared to the 52% of the general population they hold.

Publishing, like much of the rest of the business world, however, is a complex maze of interlocking organizations. International media conglomerates own most of the top-tier paperback publishing houses these days. Of the seven publishing companies listed above, only one, Simon and Schuster (a CBS Corporation holding) has an American parent company. The majority is European with Harlequin's owner Torstar based in Canada. Women are beginning to reach the top of the American hierarchy, but their representation in the parent companies is much less common. They rarely are found at the top levels of the powerful international conglomerates that own and run the American industry. Out of 20 top-tier positions that run these businesses, presently a woman fills only one. Marjorie Scardino is the chief executive of Pearson PLC. Of course, this scarcity of women in senior management jobs is not unique to the publishing industry but is found throughout the business world (Feldman 1997; Fields and Blum 2003; Goodman, Kottke and Agars 2005; Kerbo 2006; Oakley 2000).

It is clear that the institutional structures of the major international conglomerates that run the American publishing divisions primarily are still run by men. While the gentleman's profession has begun to open its doors to women, it is at the top levels of the less powerful American divisions that we find the greatest opportunities for them to exert influence in the publishing world, but that influence continues to remain considerably subordinate to the power of men in this field.

#### WHO ARE THE MOST-PUBLISHED AUTHORS?

Another area that can be used to investigate which gender has the power in popular fiction is by looking at the "stars," those wildly popular and immediately identifiable authors of pop fiction, like Stephen King, who have immediate name recognition in the general public and

are able to sell books on the strength of their names alone (Look 1999). They command power in mass-market publishing demonstrated by their broad and loyal fan followings developed and supported by not only the authors' publishing companies, but also by the very fans that purchase their books. Look identified how these star authors demand huge advances and significant royalties for their novels, are represented by powerful agents and publishing companies, and exert control over issues related to the marketing of their works such as supervision of dust jacket designs and other items associated with the promotion of their "product". Between 1995 and 2004, the top five star authors of paperback novels were Nora Roberts, John Grisham, Danielle Steel, Stephen King, and Tom Clancy, in that order (see Table 2). When the publishing houses for which they write are identified, it is easy to see that each novelist writes for one of those top publishing companies in the business. A small group of

**Table 2** Mass market stars and their success – 1995-1004 (All numbers in millions)

<b>Mass Market Star</b>	<b>Mass-Market Novels Sold</b>	<b>Publishing Division (Media Conglomerate)</b>	<b>Gender of Author</b>
Nora Roberts	87	Penguin Group USA (Pearson PLC)	Female
John Grisham	61	Random House (Bertelsmann AG)	Male
Danielle Steel	53	Random House (Bertelsmann AG)	Female
Stephen King	49	Simon & Schuster (CBS Corporation)	Male
Tom Clancy	45	Penguin Group USA (Pearson PLC)	Male



genre stars write for a small group of powerful publishing houses owned by international media conglomerates run by a small but powerful group of men.

### *Branding the "Star" Authors*

Number of books sold is one way to identify the star authors, but another way is to evaluate how their products are marketed differently from other authors. Top writers' novels are branded, a marketing strategy that makes a product immediately recognizable. Visual elements are consistent throughout all of a star author's novels including fonts, images, color schemes, symbols, etc. While it probably always has been the case that readers will tend to choose books by authors they have enjoyed in the past, the new element in the equation is that today it is not necessarily the author's name on the cover to which the reader first responds. It is the brand instead that initially catches the attention. Behind the branding of a star author is the development of a set of expectations about his/her products so that the reading public becomes trained to respond to the brand built on the author.

In publishing, genres themselves have often been branded. A good example is the "bodice ripper" covers found on many romance novels, less so today, but heavily used in the 1980s and 1990s. Fabio and his blond-haired, bare-chested image, the model for a significant portion of romance covers, became the prototype for romance heroes (see Illustration 1). One glance at his likeness immediately communicated what kind of book was inside the cover. It was not just Fabio and his clones that identified the brand, however. The total design of the cover followed a set of standard criteria. The male was placed in a physically dominant position with the female below him in a stance of weakness and seemingly overcome with emotion. The poses were sexually suggestive with the male shirtless and the female with her dress torn (hence the name bodice ripper). There was a clear sense of gender domination and subordination in this artwork. Gender stereotyping has not just been found in romance novels.

Westerns, mysteries, horror and suspense novels have all utilized this gendered imagery (Palmer 1991).

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### Illustration 1



The cover in the middle from Laura Kinsale's *Prince of Midnight* is an example of a Fabio cover for a "bodice ripper." The covers on the left (from Johanna Lindsey's *Tender Rebel*) and on the right (from Johanna Lindsey's *Warrior's Woman*) are examples of how the Fabio style stood as the prototype for covers in this genre of paperback novels from the 1980s and 1990s.

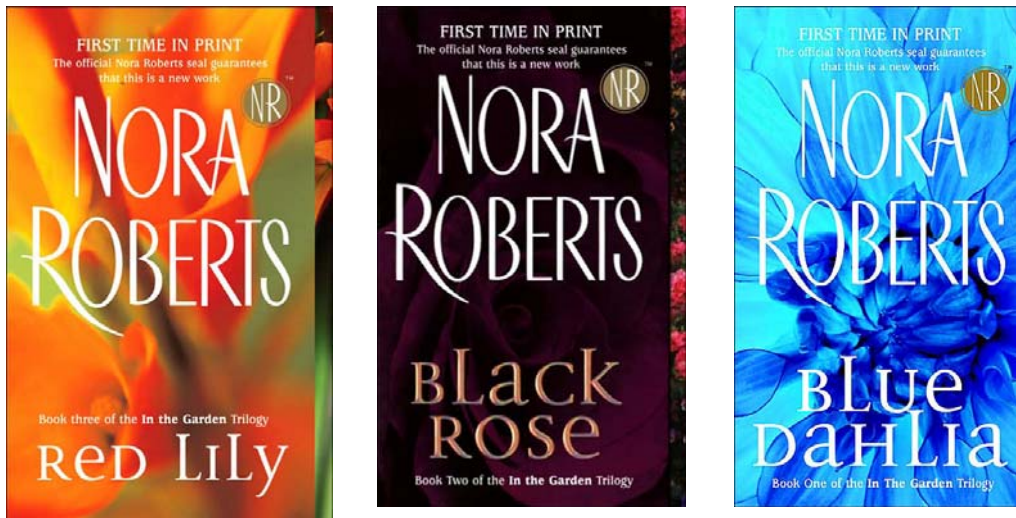
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Where genre paperbacks have in the past been branded, today star authors are individually identified by their unique brands. A reader of John Grisham, Stephen King or Nora Roberts can immediately identify a novel by their author by its marketing package. Nora Roberts' *In the Garden* trilogy (*Black Rose*, *Blue Dahlia*, and *Red Lily*) is an excellent example of branding (see Illustration 2). There is a common style to the cover with consistent type face, author name and title placement, and a series theme in both the titles and cover artwork. Another interesting addition to the Roberts library of novels is the fairly recent addition of the

“NR” emblem to the cover signifying a new Roberts novel helping differentiate these books from the long list of reissued “classics” that have been pulled from the back list and republished with new cover art. The sight of that emblem immediately communicates who the author is.

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## Illustration 2



Nora Roberts' Gender Garden trilogy is an excellent example of mass-market branding of a star author. There is a common style to the cover with consistent type face, author name and title placement, and series theme. Another interesting addition to the Roberts library of novels is the fairly recent addition of the “NR” emblem signifying a new Roberts novel helping differentiate these books from the long list of reissued “classics” that have been pulled from the back list.

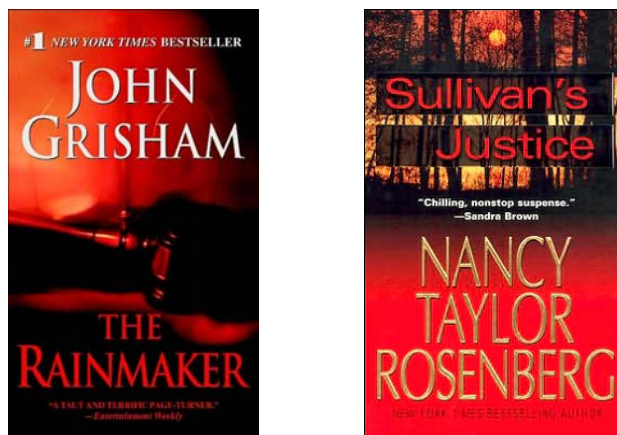
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An interesting offshoot of star author branding is the author copycat – less powerful authors who write in the same genre and whose books are designed in such a way that they call to mind a real star in the genre. Nancy Taylor Rosenberg, who is popular in her own right for authoring courtroom mysteries, is a good example of this. Compare the cover from her novel *Sullivan's Justice* to the cover of John Grisham's *The Rainmaker*, and it is easy to see how

the style of Rosenberg's mystery has been based on Grisham's already established brand (see Illustration 3).

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### Illustration 3



It is clear to see how the Grisham novel has provided a brand that has been "copycatted" in the marketing of the Taylor Rosenberg novel. While they are certainly not exact copies of each other, the common stylistic touches are obvious.

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Media tie-ins, or what Look (1999) calls "drivers" is another marketing method used with star authors, both male and female. Books that are contracted for movie scripts can substantially increase the already extensive visibility and selling power of an individual author. John Grisham has been one of the most successful at this with many lucrative movies based on his highly popular novels and showcasing A-list mega-stars. Eleven of his books have been turned into films. The list of theatrical movies includes *The Firm* starring Tom Cruise and *A Time to Kill* starring Matthew McConaughey. How important is this technique to develop popular fiction stars? J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an excellent example of the impact movies can have on book sales. While Tolkien did not make the top-five list for the

whole decade, when this deceased author's series of books recently were turned into movies, they did push him into the top-five category for both 2001 and 2002.

Theatrical movies are not the only way to reach out to the viewing and buying public. Nora Roberts' contract with Lifetime TV to bring four of her novels to this network in made-for-TV movies is another example of how authors and their publishers recognize the power of this practice (Andriani 2007). Danielle Steel may have been the first mass-market author to walk this path with the many popular television mini-series produced in the 1980s and 1990s based on her novels, and her novels are still actively being transformed into movies. *Safe Harbor* was released in January of 2008 (IMDB). All of the mass-market stars on the top-five list for 1995-2004 have had and continue to have produced movie or TV tie-ins. The recent queen of movie tie-ins, of course, remains billionaire J.K. Rowling with her Harry Potter franchise, grossing \$147 million a year (Kellner 2004). Why isn't she represented in our discussion above? Rowlings' books are not counted in the same category as adult mass-market fiction but are slotted into the children's category, even though they are widely read by people of all ages. She is, without a doubt, certainly part of the star author elite.

In addition to movies, there are other kinds of exclusive media tie-ins for pop fiction star authors, both demonstrating and enhancing their star quality. These author elites are regularly invited to appear on television programs like the *Today Show*, *Larry King* and *Oprah* where they are treated to the same treatment as film stars. They are even able to draw large crowds to live venues. Witness the August 2006 live stage reading "An Evening with Harry, Carrie and Garp." Two sold-out shows were held at New York City's Radio City Music Hall, a charity benefit that featured Stephen King, J.K. Rowling and John Irving reading from past works and answering questions (Roback 2006).

Who has the real gender power among the highest level star authors? What seems to be clear is that once authors reach that star level, regardless of gender, their "products" are branded and also used as models for other less successful writers. They also all benefit from broad levels of cross-media promotion which further enhances their ability to sell books. All of the top five authors for 1995-2004 have participated in and profit from these new trends.

### *Books Sold by Star Authors*

How about the number of books these writers sell? Is it women who have the upper hand in mass-market publishing or is it men? Overall, during the twenty-year time period from 1985 to 2004, 2.6 billion mass-market paperback books were published. Male authors wrote 54% of those books, with 46% by female writers. If we break the twenty years into two decades, from 1985-1994, women had combined totals of 755 million books, 43% of the whole (see Table 3). When we look just at books sold from 1995 to 2004, however, there is a sizeable transformation. The share of the 815 million total books for female authors was 49% of the total mass-market volume. Women authors were approaching an equal share of the market to male authors. For that same time period (1995-2004), the top five authors (the stars) included Nora Roberts, John Grisham, Danielle Steel, Stephen King and Tom Clancy, with Roberts in the top slot selling 29% of the volumes sold by all of the top stars. John Grisham sat in second place with 21%.

Roberts' numbers includes the mysteries she writes under her pseudonym J.D. Robb. Why include these books from a different genre? Although the Robb books are categorized as mysteries, they closely follow the formula seen in the Roberts romances and contain a large amount of romantic content. The main character of the Robb series, detective Eve Dallas, marries her true love at the end of book five (*Ceremony in Death*), but each mystery after that

**Table 3** Books sold 1985-2004 by gender (All numbers in millions)

	<b>Books Sold 1985-2004<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Books Sold 1985-1994</b>	<b>Books Sold 1995-2004</b>
Total Books	2551 volumes	1736 volumes	815 volumes
Books by Males	1372 volumes	977 volumes	395 volumes
Males % of Total	54%	56%	48%
Books by Females	1151 volumes	755 volumes	396 volumes
Females % of Total	46%	43%	49%

continues to have as one major plot line the trials and tribulations of her relationship with her husband. To further blur the differences between these romances and mysteries, Roberts' romances usually include a mystery as a central plot device. A good example of this is *Angels Fall*, which centers on the identification of an unknown killer. Apparently recognizing the close ties between the kind of content found in the Roberts and Robb novels, in 2003 Roberts/Robb published *Remember When*, a combination romance/mystery using both her real name and pseudonym on the cover and sold in both the romance and mystery sections of bookstores. Roberts continues to blur the difference between these two genres.

The combined total of the two female authors (Roberts and Steel) was 47% at 141 million books, whereas the three men (Grisham, King and Clancy) produced the other 53%. Out of the 20 years investigated for this project, a male author has held the top slot only seven times, three times by Grisham and King each, and once by Clancy (see Table 4). Roberts has

<sup>4</sup> In both 1985 and 1991 there were books published listing the author as the publishing company. The 1985 book was a dictionary. The 1991 publication was an astrology book. This accounts for why the total books published by males and females do not add up to the total books.

held that top position consistently since 1999. V.C. Andrews headed the list for one year, and the other five years Danielle Steel filled the position. The impact of V.C. Andrews on this list is interesting. The author died in 1986, but her publisher, Simon and Schuster, fails to mention this piece of information on its website biography, possibly because new novels continue to be published bearing the author's name but written by a ghost author (Contemporary Authors).

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**Table 4** Top 5 "stars" over time (All numbers in millions)

<b>Top 5 1985-2004</b>	<b>Volumes Sold</b>	<b>Top 5 1985-1994</b>	<b>Volumes Sold</b>	<b>Top 5 1995-2004</b>	<b>Volumes Sold</b>
Danielle Steel (Romance)	147	Danielle Steel (Romance)	94	Nora Roberts (Romance)	87
Stephen King (Horror)	137	Stephen King (Horror)	89	John Grisham (Mystery)	61
John Grisham (Mystery)	95	V.C. Andrews (Horror)	62	Danielle Steel (Romance)	53
V.C. Andrews (Horror)	91	Dean Koontz (Horror)	48	Stephen King (Horror)	49
Nora Roberts (Romance)	90	Lawrence Sanders (Mystery)	48	Tom Clancy (Suspense)	45

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As authors, particularly as star authors, women hold an increasingly significant and powerful position in the mass-market publishing marketplace, a much more influential standing than they do in the top executive and management positions in the publishing industry itself.



## WHICH GENRES SELL THE MOST BOOKS?

Another way to identify the power of gender in mass-market publishing is by looking at what genres of books are most published, which gender these market niches target, and how men and women are represented in the books.

The years 1985 to 2004 provided an interesting set of decades to investigate. Prior to 1991, the kinds of mass-market books published were very different from what we find in the marketplace today. Non-genre (today called traditional or literary) was the largest category of mass-market paperbacks published (24% of the total). In 1992, a small decrease was experienced with non-genre paperback fiction still a large portion of the published books (21%) but taking second place to romance novels (23%). Within one more year, however, the non-genre mass-market fiction share had dropped to 12%, and by 2004 it was only 4% of the total mass-market fiction volume studied in this project. Where did those books go? They found their way into their genre niches. Overwhelmingly from 1995 to 2004, romance, mystery, horror and suspense novels shared the top four spots, with the romance and mystery categories always in the #1 or #2 places, far ahead of horror and suspense sharing spots #3 and #4. Genre fiction had taken over mass-market publishing, a situation that remains the case today.

Just as a side note, the strength of the romance numbers is somewhat surprising considering the stigma that traditionally has been attached to romance novels (Adkins, Esser and Velasquez 2006; Brackett 2000; Radway 1984) and to romance novelists (McClain 2000; Weber 1999), a stigma not attached to those genres that target males (Sachs 2003).

## HOW ARE THE GENDERS REPRESENTED?

Why should we consider into what genre a paperback novel fits? Popular fiction genres historically have reflected two important elements about gender. First, they have traditionally

marketed to a single gender, and second, they have tended to represent men and women in a very stereotypical manner – with men as dominant and women as subordinate.

### *Romance Novels*

For example, romance novels have overwhelmingly been written by and for women (Palmer 1991; Radway 1991). The images found in their pages have conformed to traditional gender categories. Men and women in romance novels tend to fit the stereotypical role scripts into which many Americans are initially socialized. Dubino (1993:110) describes the typical romance heroine: "[She] starts off as a self-sufficient and independent woman and at the end usually melts into a lifetime of dependency." Young boys learn the opposite: compete aggressively, engage in adventurous and courageous behaviors, do not show emotion except for aggression and anger, and be independent (Anderson 2006; Tannen 1990; Wood 2006).

This tradition of male superiority and female subordination is not just seen in the characters in the books, but may also be found in the readers of this genre who have sometimes been identified as exhibiting the same qualities as the characters about which they read. Opinions are varied and run from one extreme to the other. Hollows (2000:72) reports Germaine Greer's analysis of romance readers as "the negative opposite of the heroic feminist" and Modleski's assessment that they can cause readers to "exist in a state of pleasurable dependency." Radway (1984) is unconcerned and sees this state as both vicarious and short lived. Thurston (1987:163), on the other hand, feels romance novels actually can be "one of the most effective channels for communicating feminist ideas to the broad base of women" by providing the opportunity to use the genre as a teaching tool. Regardless of these varied opinions, whether the imagery is seen as harmful or not, all agree that the role scripts are stereotypical in their presentation of men and women and have a powerful socializing effect.

### *Mystery Novels*

Mysteries, until fairly recently written mostly by men and targeting a male audience (Palmer 1991; Svoboda 1995), have also tended to demonstrate formulaic role scripts with masculine characteristics represented as superior to female ones. Historically, male characters have behaved with toughness and decisive action, usually as strong, brave and independent loners (Palmer 1991; Stasio 1985). This traditional hero of crime fiction disliked authority, was cynically idealistic and a social misfit (Pronzini and Adrian 1995).

Today, however, there are many more mystery novels written by and about women (Anthony 1992; Carter 1991; Dyer 2001). Best sellers lists are as likely to show a novel by Sue Grafton or Mary Higgins Clark as James Patterson or John Grisham. Ebert (1992), however, sees no real difference between the male or female heroes. The female detective has merely adopted the characteristics of the stereotypical male detective. These women are equally hardened, courageous and independent, also unable to fit into the "normal" world and because of it are often alone with few social ties. Their actions do not result in movement towards freedom and equality for women, but instead reinforce the patriarchal world. Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone is molded in this traditional male/female PI formula. On Grafton's web site ("Kinsey Millhone." 6 July 2007), she has included a biography of her famous character discussing her "rebellious nature," her inability to stick with a job as a police officer because "she had trouble with bureaucracy," and a history of past broken marriages.

Not all scholars hold this negative analysis of the genre. Others look at today's mystery fiction with the flood in female main characters and instead see contemporary role models (Dyer 2001; Irons 1992). Some even worry that women writers are going to steal the genre entirely. John Grisham's strength in book sales over the last decade, however, would indicate that male mystery authors are not disappearing from the genre. The variety of opinions seems

to support the transitional nature of this genre from male focused to a much more egalitarian representation of gender.

### *Horror and Suspense Novels*

Horror fiction and suspense novels, usually written by and for men, are also seen as overwhelmingly stereotypical in their representations of gender (Irons 1992; Kelso 1996). An investigation into the horror novels of Stephen King and Dean Koontz (Colmenero 1999) supports this conclusion. In these novels, most often men demonstrate courage, strength, rationality of thought and analytical power while women are victimized, weak, passive and overly emotional. As for suspense novels, the world of James Bond is certainly not egalitarian. Women play very specific roles in the Ian Fleming novels – as temptresses, trophies, and workhorses (consider Miss Money Penny and Octopussy) -- but there is not a great deal of representational difference found in contemporary suspense fiction. The most successful writer of suspense novels found on the list of top authors for 1995-2004 is Tom Clancy, and female characters rarely play more than peripheral roles in his books either.

In most cases genre fiction overwhelmingly reproduces traditional gender role scripts rather than demonstrating a movement towards a more egalitarian representation. Between 1995 and 2004, the majority of all of the mass-market fiction books that were published were found in one of the four major genre categories (romance, mystery, horror, suspense). Three of the four – romance, horror and suspense – are clearly formulaic. It can be assumed that these books reinforce stereotypical gender images in the socialization process rather than blazing a trail into new gender paths for both men and women.

It is clear that the genre of a paperback novel is incredibly important for the two reasons discussed: readers targeted and gendered character representations. Romances (represented in this study by Steel and Roberts) have been and continue to be read by women

readers, and the representations of gender found within their pages are clearly stereotypical. Horror and suspense novels (represented in this study by King, Koontz, Andrews and Clancy) share the same characteristic of a single gendered reader group, although the target audience for them is men, and their gendered representations are also formulaic. When the number of books sold by the star authors in these groups is examined (see Table 4), it is apparent that the vast majority of the most popular mass market novels consumed by the American reading public are gender traditional stories told to gender traditional readers. Only mystery novels (represented in this study by Sanders and Grisham) have begun to transform into a genre that has broadened its gendered reader base and its male/female character representations.

#### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper asks four questions: (1) Which gender holds the greatest number of power positions affecting mass-market publishing? (2) Do male or female authors sell the most books? (3) Which genres sell the most paperbacks? (4) What image of gender is presented in these novels – male domination/female subordination or a more egalitarian imagery?

There have been some changes in who holds the power positions in the business of mass-market publishing. While the industry historically has been predominantly a gentleman's occupation with few women rising to top executive levels, we do see a change in gender equity over the 20 years investigated with women increasing their representation in these top American positions from 10% to 31%. This is somewhat misrepresentative, however, because although American publishing divisions have hired a greater number of women, we do not see this same trend in the international media conglomerates that own these American publishing divisions. Although women have begun to crack the glass ceiling, they have yet to totally shatter it and reach an equal share of the power positions at the very top of the international

media. Until they do, the playing field fails to be even, but their increasing presence helps reconstruct gender identities in the mass market publishing field.

At the other end of the process of book publishing are the paperbacks themselves. In the two decades under investigation, women have increased their share of the paperback market substantially, moving just slightly ahead of male authors. It is the powerhouse of the Roberts franchise that has been a large part of that change with her substantial lead over all other star authors in the number of books published.

When our attention turns to the genre of those paperbacks, we know that most mass-market books published today are genre fiction where we continue to find formulaic images of men and women. Women continue to write for women (in romance) and men for men (in horror and suspense). The one genre that seems to be heading in a different direction is that transitional category of mysteries. The number of female mystery writers has exploded, but while there is an ever-increasing number of both female authors and lead characters in those mystery novels, overwhelmingly many of the women detectives seem to have just donned the persona of the hardened PI, shedding their traditional female role scripts for a character that doesn't fit comfortably with either gender. This genre, however, is an area to watch.

Popular culture in general and mass-market fiction as part of that culture participates in the continuous cycle of gender socialization in American society. As Inness (1999:7) has noted, "Popular culture does not simply reflect women's lives; it helps to create them and so demands critical scrutiny." As gender equality is sought, it makes a difference how men and women are represented in this ubiquitous form of popular culture and what messages are communicated about gender. As long as patterns of male domination and female subordination are regularly represented in gender-targeted genre novels, the impact on gender development will continue.

Somewhere in the center of this process are the writers themselves. Important changes have been made here in the two decades under analysis. Nora Roberts and Danielle Steel run neck-to-neck with (and maybe just a bit ahead of) John Grisham and Stephen King as to popularity and star power. This is where there is movement towards a more egalitarian division of the mass-market publishing world. It is a world where an author's star power is based on the number of books he/she is able to sell, and the \$7.99 spent on a Nora Roberts romance is just as powerful as the \$7.99 spent on a Tom Clancy spy novel. It looks like men and women will continue to evenly share this market.

One final comment ... this analysis has only considered the issue of gender. Other elements of exclusion are at work here and are worth further research – race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and all of the other categories of uniqueness are almost totally excluded from positions of power in mass-market publishing. This too bears investigation.

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