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Linda

Barlow

&

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Beneath the Surface

The Hidden Codes of Romance

Townsfolk called him devil. For dark and enigmatic Julian, Earl of Ravenwood, was a man with a legendary temper and a first wife whose mysterious death would not be forgotten. Some said the beautiful Lady Ravenwood had drowned herself in the black, murky waters of Ravenwood Pond. Others whispered of foul play and the devil's wrath.

Now country-bred Sophy Dorring is about to become Ravenwood's new bride. Drawn to his masculine strength and the glitter of desire that burned in his emerald eyes, the tawny-haired lass had her own reasons for agreeing to a marriage of convenience . . . Sophy Dorring intended to teach the devil to love.

back cover copy for Seduction, *by Jayne Ann Krentz writing as Amanda Quick, Bantam, 1990.*

It is difficult to explain the appeal of romance novels to people who don't read them. Outsiders tend to be unable to interpret the conventional language of the genre or to recognize in that language the symbols, images, and allusions that are the fundamental stuff of romance. Moreover, romance writers are consistently attacked for their use of this language by critics who fail to fathom its complexities. In a sense, romance writers are writing in a code clearly understood by readers but opaque to others.

The author of a romance novel and her audience enter into a pact with one another. The reader trusts the writer to create and recreate for her a vision of a fictional world that is free of moral ambiguity, a larger-than-life domain in which such ideals as courage, justice, honor, loyalty, and love are challenged and upheld. It

is an active, dynamic realm of conflict and resolution, evil and goodness, darkness and light, heroes and heroines, and it is a familiar world in which the roads are well-traveled and the rules are clear. The romance writer gives form and substance to this vision by locking it in language, and the romance reader yields herself to this alternative world in the act of reading, allowing the narrative to engage her mind and her emotions and to provide her with a certain intensity of experience. She knows that certain expectations will be met and that certain conventions will not be violated.

How does the romance writer construct this fictional universe? By means of the figurative language she chooses to employ—rich, evocative diction that is heavy-laden with familiar symbols, images, metaphors, paradoxes, and allusions to the great mythical traditions that reach from ancient Greece to Celtic Britain to the American West. Through this language she creates the plots, characters, and settings that evoke the vision and transport the reader into the landscape of romance.

Because the figurative language, allusions, and plot elements of the best-loved stories are so familiar and accessible, romance writers are often criticized for the lack of originality of our plots (which are regarded as contrived and formulaic) and the excessive lushness or lack of subtlety of our language. In other words, we are condemned for making use of the very codes that are most vital to our genre.

But these codes, familiar though they may be, are extremely powerful. Contained within them is a collection of subtle feminine voices, part myth, part fantasy, part reality, messages that have been passed down from one generation of women to the next. The voices arise from deep within our collective feminine psyche and consciousness, and we suspect that most women have access to them, however strongly they have been defended against or denied.

What are these messages? They include the celebration of feminine wisdom and power. Celebration of female ability to share, empathize, and communicate on the deepest levels. Celebration of the integration of male and female, both within the psyche and in society. Celebration of the reconciling power of love

to heal, to renew, to affirm, and to create new life. And finally, celebration of the feminine ability to do battle on the most mythical planes of existence where emotions rise to epic levels, and to temper and transform all this energy in such a way that it is brought down to human levels by the marriage at the end of the book.

Romance novels are often criticized for certain plot elements that occur over and over in the genre—spirited young women forced into marriage with mysterious earls and heroes with dark and dangerous pasts who are bent upon vengeance rather than love. It is possible to write a romance that does not utilize these elements; indeed, it's done all the time. But the books that hit the bestseller lists are invariably those with plots that place an innocent young woman at risk with a powerful, enigmatic male. Her future happiness and *his* depend upon her ability to teach him how to love.

Writers in the genre know that the plot elements that lend themselves to such clashes are those which force the hero and heroine into a highly charged emotional situation which neither can escape without sacrificing his or her agenda: forced marriage, vengeance, kidnapping, and so forth. Such situations effectively ensure intimacy while establishing clear battle lines. They produce conflicts with stakes that are particularly important to women. They promise the possibility of a victory that romance readers find deeply satisfying: a victory that is an affirmation of life, a victory that fuses male and female.

The plot devices in romance novels are based on paradoxes, opposites, and the threat of danger. The more strongly emphasized the contrasts between hero and heroine are, the more the confrontations between the two take on a sense of the heroic. In many cases the heroine must do battle with a hero whose mythical resonance is that of the devil himself. She is light, he is darkness; she is hope, he is despair. The love that develops between them is the mediating, reconciling force.

These heroic quests are often carried out against a lush setting which subtly deepens the sense of danger by presenting yet another contrast. Dark menace can walk through a dazzling ballroom. The devil can pass in high society.

Stories that utilize these elements have always been wildly popular. After being used and reused for centuries, certain plot devices have become associated with an elaborate set of emotional and intellectual responses in the minds of both romance writers and romance readers. When she sits down to pen a novel, the romance writer takes this web of responses for granted. She knows the conventions, she understands the layers of meaning that certain words, phrases, and plot elements have accumulated through the years, and she knows how these meanings have been shaped and refined for romance. She can be confident that her readers also understand these subtleties. The worldwide popularity of romance novels is testimony to the way the familiar codes are universally recognized by women as cues for their deepest thoughts, dreams, and fantasies.

Most of the emotional and intellectual responses generated by romance plot devices are rendered complex by their paradoxical nature: marriages that are simultaneously real and false (the marriage of convenience); heroes who also function as villains; victories that are acts of surrender; seductions in which one is both seducer and seduced; acts of vengeance that conflict with acts of love. Such contradictory elements must be integrated in a happy ending for a romance novel to be deemed successful.

It is the promise of integration and reconciliation which captures the reader's imagination. She is reminded of this tacit contract between herself and the author every time she picks up a book, reads the back cover copy, and registers such code phrases as "a lust for vengeance," "a hunter stalking his prey," "marriage of convenience," "teach the devil to love." Drawing on her own emotional and intellectual background, both inside and outside the romance genre, she responds to these code phrases with lively interest and anticipation as she looks forward to the pleasurable reading experience the novel promises.

The concept of being forced to marry the devil, for instance, resonates with centuries of history, myth, and legend. Both reader and writer understand the allusions. They have knowledge on the subject of devils and demons that is wide ranging, gleaned from philosophy, theology, psychology, and literature, knowledge that encompasses many conflicting facts and cultural traditions. Both

reader and writer also have a vast acquaintance with the devil-heroes who appear in romance novels, since there is a time-honored tradition of heroines sent on quests to encounter and transform these masculine creatures of darkness.

When the romance reader picks up a book that describes a marriage of convenience to such a devil-hero, she understands she is being promised a tale that will deliver a strong sense of emotional risk and at the same time resolve paradoxes and integrate opposites. The happy ending will be especially satisfying because it will have been preceded by several exciting clashes between the heroine and her beloved adversary.

To make such clashes work, the hero must be a worthy and suitably dangerous opponent, a larger-than-life male imbued with great power and a mysterious past. He will not run from the coming battle. Recognizing the allusions that testify to his mythic nature, the reader mentally girds herself for the fray when she reads the code words—phrases such as "townsfolk called him devil" on the back of the book. She glories in the expectation of the complex warfare she—in her imaginative identification with the characters—will soon wage. If the romance is well done, she will, as Kinsale and Barlow indicate in their essays elsewhere in this volume, find herself plunged into a combat in which she will fight on both sides. The romance novel will be a chess game in which the reader simultaneously plays the white and the black, a medieval joust in which she rides both horses into the lists.

Such fantasies are exquisitely subtle and require that the reader be an active participant. She will enjoy the combat, relish the danger, and, perhaps most intriguing, exercise the full range of her options. This, by the way, is one of the true joys of romance fantasies. The reader knows that in the conflict between hero and heroine the heroine will never have to pull her punches. She won't have to worry—as many modern women do in their everyday lives—about being too assertive, too aggressive, too verbally direct because this hero is as strong as she is. He is a worthy opponent, a mythic beast who is her heroic complement. He has been variously described as a devil, a demon, a tiger, a hawk, a pirate, a bandit, a potentate, a hunter, a warrior. He is definitely *not* the boy next door.

Indeed, he's a man in every sense of the word, and for most women the word *man* reverberates with thousands of years of connotative meanings which touch upon everything from sexual prowess, to the capacity for honor and loyalty, to the ability to protect and defend the family unit. He is no weakling who will run away or turn to another woman when the conflict between himself and the heroine flares. Instead, he will be forced in the course of the plot to prove his commitment to the relationship, and, unlike many men in the real world, he will pass this test magnificently.

Should the book fail to deliver on its implied promise, should the writer be unable to create the fantasy satisfactorily, make it accessible, and achieve the integration of opposites that results in a happy ending, the reader will consider herself cheated. The happy ending in a romance novel is far more significant than it might appear to those who do not understand the codes. It requires that the final union of male and female be a fusing of contrasting elements: heroes who are gentled by love yet who lose none of their warrior qualities in the process and heroines who conquer devils without sacrificing their femininity. It requires a quintessentially female kind of victory, one in which neither side loses, one which produces a whole that is stronger than either of its parts. It requires that the hero acknowledge the heroine's heroic qualities in both masculine and feminine terms. He must recognize and admire her sense of honor, courage, and determination as well as her traditionally female qualities of gentleness and compassion. And it requires a sexual bonding that transcends the physical, a bond that reader and writer know can never be broken.

Thus, as the romance novel ends, the contrasting elements in the plot are entirely fused and reconciled. Male and female are integrated. The heroine's quest is won. She has succeeded in shining light into the darkness surrounding the hero. She has taught the devil to love.

Nothing about the romance genre is more reviled by literary critics and, indeed, by the public at large, than the conventional diction of romance. Descriptive passages are regularly culled from romance novels and read aloud with great glee and mockery by everybody from college professors to talk show hosts. You would

think that we romance novelists—who, like anyone else, cringe at the thought of being made the object of ridicule on national TV—would have the wit to clean up our act. After all, we are talented professionals. We're quite capable of choosing other, more subtle, less effusive forms of narrative and discourse. Yet we persist in penning sentences like "Caught up in the tender savagery of love . . . she saw him, felt him, *knew* him in a manner that, for an instant, transcended the physical. It was as if their souls yearned toward each other, and in a flash of glory, merged and became one" (Barlow, *Fires of Destiny*).

Why? Are we woefully derivative and unoriginal? Do our editors force us to write this way? Do we all have access to some sort of romance writers' phrase book to which we constantly refer? Are we incapable of expressing ourselves in any other manner?

The answer, of course, is none of the above. We write this way because we know that this is the language which best serves our purposes as romance authors. This is the language that, for romance novels, *works*. Why? Because the language of romance most effectively carries and reinforces the essential messages that we, consciously or unconsciously, are endeavoring to convey.

In our genre (and in others, we believe), stock phrases and literary figures are regularly used to evoke emotion. This is not well understood by critics of these genres. Romance readers have a keyed-in response to certain words and phrases (the sardonic lift of the eyebrows, the thundering of the heart, the penetrating glance, the low murmur or sigh). Because of their past reading experiences, readers associate certain emotions—anger, fear, passion, sorrow—with such language and expect to feel the same responses each time they come upon such phrases. This experience can be quite intense, yet, at the same time, the codes that evoke the dramatic illusion also maintain it *as* illusion (not delusion—romance readers do not confuse fantasy with reality). Encountering the familiar language, the reader responds emotionally to the characters, settings, and events in the *fictional* world of romance. And although what she feels is her own internal experience, it is something that can be shared with millions of other women around the world, so the commonality of the experience is appealing, too.

But the reader's pleasure is not purely emotional. She also responds on an intellectual level. Because the language of romance is more lushly symbolic and metaphorical than ordinary discourse, the reader is stimulated not only to feel, but also to analyze, interpret, and understand. Surveys of romance readers have consistently shown that these women are more highly educated and well-read than detractors have assumed, a fact which should be evident to anyone studying the mythological traditions underpinning the language of romance. When the heroine of Judith McNaught's *Whitney My Love* attends a ball costumed as Proserpina and meets a black-cloaked man whom she regards as "satanic" in appearance, the reader is expected to recognize the myth that is being alluded to and to identify this dark god as the novel's hero. Later in the novel when the heroine is forcibly carried off by this man, the reader understands that the story is following a map laid down by a far more ancient tale.

What exactly *is* the language of romance? For the purpose of discussion, we have decided to examine two forms of discourse: romantic dialogue and romantic description.

Dialogue in a romance novel serves a larger purpose than simply to provide exposition and demonstrate character. What is said between the hero and the heroine is often the primary battlefield for the conflicts between them. Provocative, confrontational dialogue has been the hallmark of the adversarial relationship that exists between the two major characters ever since the earliest days of romance narrative. It is Jane Eyre's verbal impertinence that calls her to the attention of her employer, Mr. Rochester, who notes in one of their first conversations, "Ah! By my word! there is something singular about you . . . when one asks you a question, or makes a remark to which you are obliged to reply, you rap out a round rejoinder, which, if not blunt, is at least brusque." She is not his equal in terms of fortune or circumstance, but Jane proves early on that she is very much his equal in verbal acuity and assertiveness.

Such is also the case in *Pride and Prejudice,* in which Elizabeth Bennet's growing attraction for Mr. Darcy is based not only upon her "fine eyes," but also upon her ready wit. The opportunity to engage in verbal sparring is rarely declined by the heroines of

romance since it is far more likely to be her words than her beauty that win her the love she most desires. Romances are full of heroes who eschew the company of beautiful but insipid women who would rather fawn than fight. Indeed, heroes of romance *enjoy* the duel of wits. Frequently they take the heroine's words to heart, changing in response to her stated criticisms. The heroine's words are her most potent weapon. It is Elizabeth's scathing refusal of his marriage proposal that forces Darcy to reevaluate his own behavior and relinquish the worst aspects of his pride; it is Cathy's overheard comment about Heathcliff's unsuitability as a husband that drives him from Wuthering Heights and inspires him to educate and improve himself.

In modern stories heroines continue to charm, provoke, and challenge their lovers with their conversation. After only one spirited dialogue with Whitney Stone, the heroine of Judith McNaught's *Whitney My Love,* the Duke of Claymore is inspired to court her. "She had a sense of humor, an irreverent contempt for the absurd, that matched his own. She was warm and witty and elusive as a damned butterfly. She would never bore him as other women had."

In real life women often complain about the reluctance of their male partners to engage in meaningful dialogue, but in the world of romantic fantasy heroes willingly participate in verbal discussions. They fence, they flirt, they express their anger, they talk out the confounding details of their relationships with the heroine. No hero of romance will ever respond to the eternal feminine query, "What's wrong?" with the word, "Nothing." He will tell her what's wrong; they will argue about it, perhaps, but they will be communicating, and eventually, as they resolve their various conflicts, the war of words will end. One of the most significant victories the heroine achieves at the close of the novel is that the hero is able to express his love for her *not only physically but also verbally.* Don't just show me, tell me, is one of the prime messages that every romance hero must learn. Romance heroines, like women the world over, need to hear the words, and the dialogue of romance provides them with this welcome opportunity.

Our second form of discourse, romantic description, is fre-

quently denounced by critics as being overly florid. But effusive imagery has a purpose. As we have already noted, the primary task of the romance writer is to create for her readers a vision of an alternative world and to give mythical dimension to its landscape and characters. Piling on the detail by means of a generous use of the romance codes is an effective way to achieve this goal. Lush use of symbols, metaphors, and allusion is emotionally powerful as well as mythologically evocative. It is the verbal equivalent of putting a person or an action under a microscope. Horror genre novelists like Stephen King use this technique to describe, for example, a murdered corpse, shocking the reader into a visceral response to the graphic horrors of death. Romance writers use the same technique in sensual love scenes to draw the reader into the landscape and to solidify her identification with the lovers by evoking within her some of the same emotions they are experiencing. The codes transport her to the world of romance and make her feel, briefly, as if she is a participant in the ancient dramas being enacted there.

The physical characteristics of the hero and heroine are presented in considerable detail, and phrases such as "his lean, hard thighs," "her sparkling, emerald eyes," "his penetrating glance," "her prim features were softened by a generous lower lip" are standard fare in romance. Many such codes reverberate with allusions to mythical archetypes: "He was leaning against the cold stone wall, regarding her steadily with a slight smile on his narrow, sensual lips. *Devil,* she thought" (Barlow, *Siren's Song*). And, from the hero in the same book: "Faerie music, he thought, listening to a low-toned feminine voice caressing the words of a ballad . . . this lovely Siren must be she."

A careful analysis of the physical description in most romance novels will demonstrate that, from a large lexicon of common descriptive codes, authors consciously or unconsciously choose those that best illustrate the particular archetypes with which they are working. Heroes associated with demons, the devil, the dark gods, and vampires tend to be dark-haired, with eyes that are luminous, piercing, penetrating, fierce, fiery, and so forth. Blond heroes are less common, but there is usually a fallen-angel quality about them.

In the passage of sample back cover copy at the beginning of this essay, the description of the hero is a blatant evocation of the Hades-Persephone myth. *Ravenwood* is dark and enigmatic, with the glittering eyes that one might expect to be attributed to the devil. He is clearly linked with the death god. Having drowned in the black, murky waters of a pond, the first Lady Ravenwood is a permanent shade in the underworld, and it is hinted that her husband may have been responsible.

Sophy is, in many ways, his opposite. Described as country bred, she is fresh and innocent. Like Persephone of the myth, she is drawn into a marriage that she does not, at first, desire. Her tawny hair, the color of wheat, evokes her role as the daughter of Demeter, the great earth goddess of the harvest, spring, fertility. Thus the descriptive language sets up one of the oldest and best-loved of romantic conflicts: the mythical battle of death and life, despair and hope, eternal darkness and everlasting light.

The individual words employed in the passage are highly connotative. Adjectives include such words as black, legendary, mysterious, beautiful, murky, country-bred, emerald, tawny-haired, and masculine. Verbs include whispered, drowned, drawn, burned, teach, love. Nouns include devil, wrath, waters, bride, lass, strength, desire, foul play, and marriage of convenience. Such language is emotionally loaded. Each word conjures up vivid images in the minds of the readers, and the combination of so many evocative phrases in a short passage of prose creates for the reader a dynamic, multi-layered intellectual and emotional gestalt.

Is it possible to do away with such language and still retain the romance? Suppose we tried to rewrite the passage in non-figurative language. It might come out something like this:

> His acquaintances regard Julian, the Earl of Ravenwood, as neurotic. He's an odd character with a belligerent temperament, whose first wife drowned in the family swimming pool. Some believe she committed suicide, others think he murdered her.
>
> Sophy Dorring, an unsophisticated young woman, is engaged to Julian. Strongly attracted to him, she overcomes her initial reluctance to marry and sets her own agenda for their relationship: to help her husband get in touch with his emotions.

Same story, different language. But what a difference. By expressing the same ideas in ordinary discourse, we sacrifice the fantasy, the mythical elements, and that sense of magnificent opposition between two powerful but opposing forces. The problems of the hero and heroine are reduced to the mundane. Such diction might be deemed appropriate for the writer of mainstream fiction, but it is worthless to the romance novelist.

Another interesting detail about romantic description is the use of paradoxical elements, echoing the heavy use of paradoxical plot devices. Although the hero is more commonly associated with darkness, hardness, strength, roughness, and evil, and the heroine with light, softness, vulnerability, gentleness, and good, there are elements of strength in the heroine and softness in the hero. "A mouth that smiled easily was counterbalanced by the firm angles of her nose and jaw" (Krentz, *Affair of Honor*). "His eyes were large, brown, and dramatic . . . heavily fringed with dark lashes and arched with delicate brows that might have appeared too feminine had the rest of his features not been so uncompromisingly male" (Barlow, *Siren's Song*). Or, as the hero of Amanda Quick's *Seduction* notes about the heroine, "beneath that sweet, demure facade, she had a streak of willful pride."

The reason for this type of description is to distract the reader from the fantasy elements of the story long enough to remind her of the underlying reality of the hero's and heroine's characters. The hero is not really such a bad guy, the reader divines. And the heroine is much tougher and more self-sufficient than she initially appears.

Paradoxical words and phrases like "fierce pleasure" and "tender command" (from *Seduction*) are also used to depict the dynamics of the developing relationship. Frequently, the romance heroine is described as a "willing captive" to the "tender violence" of the hero's lovemaking. Detractors of the genre tend to quote such phrases to bolster their view that romance writers are doing a disservice to their sisters by perpetuating the myth that women enjoy rape. In reality, the rape of the heroine by the hero is rarely, if ever, seen in today's romance novel. Readers do not take such passages literally; indeed, the very use of paradox makes a literal interpretation impossible. The words "captive" and "violence" remind the reader of the ancient *fantasy* underpinning such tales—the Hades-Persephone myth, for example—while the function of the words "willing" and "tender" is to clue the reader in to the *reality* of the characters' lovemaking, which is consensual and loving.

The use of paradox also serves to hint at the perfect reconciliation that will occur at the end of the romance novel. This will be possible because each of the main characters is, in addition to being the embodiment of an ancient myth, a whole person, integrated and autonomous, with various strengths and weaknesses. When these two individuals come together, they create a union that is both mythological and real, a union that celebrates the power of the female to heal and civilize the male.

In conclusion, we suggest that in order to understand the appeal of romance fiction, one must be sensitive to the subtle codes, contained in figurative language and in plot, that point toward a uniquely feminine sharing of a common emotional and intellectual heritage. Dedicated romance readers, long accustomed to responding to these cues, perceive the hidden meanings intuitively and find through them an intimacy with other women all over the world. It is our sex, after all, that excels at reconciliation and intimacy. Recent works on the differences between men and women, whether these be biological, psychological, or linguistic, suggest that women's particular expertise seems to be our ability to form significant relationships with the men, women, and children in our lives and to anchor and hold these relationships together. The messages contained in romance fiction, the language in which these messages are conveyed, and the intense experience induced by the act of reading itself tend to support and reflect this essential feminine concern. Like a secret handshake, the codes make the reader feel that she is part of a group. They increase her feelings of connection to other women who share her most intimate thoughts, dreams, and fantasies.

In general, women tend to be less afraid than men to blend our voices with others. Women who write romance don't seek autonomy in our story-telling. We don't seek a distinctive voice (although most writers have one). Instead, in telling stories and using language that we *know* are beloved of women all over the

world, we are validating each other. We are articulating the feelings and fantasies of our sisters who cannot, or choose not to, write them down. Their voices ring out, through us, as strongly as our own.

It may well be that the use of the romance codes are more important to the success of a particular romance novel than are the usual elements upon which fiction is judged—the logic and cleverness of the plot, the development of the characters, or the vigor and originality of the author's voice. It's interesting to note that what is usually regarded as "good" prose style—presupposing the value of the original, individual voice over the value of merged voices—is not necessary for the writing of romance. This is true because in romance novels the shared experience is more valuable than the independent one.

Is it possible that accepted literary standards of excellence are essentially patriarchal in nature? We propose this as a matter for further debate and discussion. Are there any differences between what men and women generally regard as acceptable prose style? Who made the rules that all serious writers are supposed to have internalized? "Get rid of every adjective and adverb," a male colleague advised me after reading a draft of my latest manuscript. He also advised the use of shorter sentences. Lean and spare, short and terse. No emotion.

But why, for example, must we show and not tell? Women *enjoy* the telling. We value the exploration of emotion in verbal terms. We are not as interested in action as we are in depth of emotion. And we like the emotion to be clear and authoritative, not vague or overly subtle the way it often seems to be in male discourse.

Why do many of us who write romance feel a defiant pleasure as we compose our "bad" prose? Are we really a bunch of silly, incompetent, unoriginal writers, or are we thumbing our noses at the literary establishment while continuing to use the sort of diction that not only works best in our genre, but satisfies our most deep-seated fantasies on a subtle and profound level?

This is a subject upon which a good deal more could be written, and we hope, through this essay, to stimulate such debate. The greatest challenge for the romance writer working today is to

excite and delight our readers while, at the same time, fulfilling their expectations. It has been our experience that this is best achieved by making full use of the codes and conventions that have served us well for centuries, codes that are universally recognized by our sisters in every nation and culture, codes that celebrate the most enduring myths of feminine consciousness.

Linda Barlow

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Ms. Barlow has written ten books, including eight series romances for Berkeley/Jove and Silhouette. Her historical romance *Fires of Destiny,* published by New American Library, appeared on the Waldenbooks mass market bestseller list. Her first hardcover novel, *Leaves of Fortune,* was published by Doubleday. Chosen as a main selection of the Doubleday Bookclub and an alternate selection of the Literary Guild, it was translated into foreign editions throughout the world. Among Ms. Barlow's numerous awards is the Golden Medallion from Romance Writers of America, which she won for *Leaves of Fortune. Her Sister's Keeper* will be published by Warner in 1993.

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Romance Writers on the Appeal

Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women

of the Romance

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