

M4C Collaborative Doctoral Award

Project Title				
Engagement and diversity in twenty-first century popular fiction publishing: An interdisciplinary study of Mills & Boon romance readership and publishing				
LEAD INSTITUTION				
Name of HEI institution	University of Birmingham			
Lead regional city	Birmingham <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Coventry <input type="checkbox"/>	Leicester <input type="checkbox"/>	Nottingham <input type="checkbox"/>
PARTNER ORGANISATION				
Name of organisation	Harlequin Mills & Boon			
Website URL	https://www.millsandboon.co.uk/			
THE RESEARCH PROJECT				
<p>This project will explore how the UK’s biggest publisher of popular romance fiction, Mills & Boon, engages with its readers. Undertaking archival research and interviews, the project’s focus is specifically on readers in the Midlands and readers from diverse backgrounds who have historically not read Mills & Boon’s fiction.</p> <p>Founded in 1908, Mills & Boon sells a novel in the UK every ten seconds. Mills & Boon has a long history of engagement with its readers and is particularly interested in researching the relationship between readers and the publisher. In 2016, the publisher’s Consumer Insights team conducted an in-depth piece of market research which looked at perceptions of the brand amongst readers and non-readers in the UK through qualitative, quantitative and ethnographic lenses. This report indicated that there were particular communities of active romance readers who did not routinely engage with Mills & Boon. This CDA project continues the research work of the 2016 report to explore why some romance readers (primarily younger readers, readers of LGBT+ romance, and BIPOC readers) do not engage with Mills & Boon, and how the publisher might reach these communities of readers.</p> <p>Mills & Boon’s close relationship with readers is arguably unique in British publishing, yet the specific strategies, intricacies and histories of this engagement have yet to be explored in-depth. Despite huge sales, academia has been slow to recognise the cultural impact of genre fiction and its industrial practices. This project is also timely. In 2020, Black Lives Matter protests around the world led many organisations – including publishers – to reflect on their approach to representation and diversity. Reaching diverse audiences matters; this project’s focus on readers in the Midlands, a diverse region with high reader engagement with Mills & Boon, allows for new regionally-specific findings to emerge as well as comparison against the national picture.</p> <p>The project is excitingly interdisciplinary, offering engagement with a range of textual resources (letters, fiction, publicity materials), quantitative data (market research statistics), and qualitative data (from interviews and focus groups). The project’s mixed-method approach offers responses to questions that previous studies focused on textual or interview data have not been able to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has Mills & Boon communicated with its readers? How has this changed? 				

- How have Mills & Boon publications been marketed and received in the twentieth and twenty-first century?
- How do readers in the Midlands engage with Mills & Boon? How does this compare to the rest of the UK?
- Why do some readers not engage with Mills & Boon? What are the perceived barriers?
- How might the publisher engage non-Mills & Boon readers from diverse backgrounds?

The student will be able to shape the project according to their specific interests, and supported with available training.

Part of this project will involve consulting historical items relating to marketing and editorial practices preserved in previously unexplored company archives in Glasgow. The candidate will have access to Mills & Boon's market research Insights team and will be supported to explore existing data. The interviews and focus groups will engage with two key groups to address the research questions: 1) identified Mills & Boon readers 2) identified non-Mills & Boon romance readers from specific groups (e.g. younger readers, readers who identify as LGBT+, BIPOC readers).

The Mills & Boon and the University of Birmingham partnership brings together expertise on the academic study of popular romance (provided by academic supervisors Dr Burge and Professor Longworth) and current editorial and marketing policy and practice (facilitated by the Mills & Boon supervisor). The student will benefit from peer support at the University of Birmingham as part of an existing postgraduate research group working on popular romantic fiction. At Mills & Boon, the student will be able to access key in-house market research findings, including the 2016 report, and have the opportunity to send monthly queries to the Insights team for further understanding.

The student's research will directly inform Mills & Boon policy and strategy; they will work with the Mills & Boon supervisor to develop a report containing actionable recommendations on how editorial and marketing policy and practice might shift to meet the needs of readers from diverse backgrounds. The student will be invited to spend time at the company's London offices, taking part in internal meetings where their findings will inform best practice in engagement with readers and editorial policy.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

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