

## Vivian Lorraine Stephens: Romance Pioneer

Rita B. Dandridge

Published online: May 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**About the Author:** Dr. Rita Dandridge is a professor in the Department of Languages and Literature at Virginia State University, where she teaches courses in African American Literature. She has published in many journals including the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. Her most recent published book is *The Collected Essays of Josephine J. Turpin Washington: A Black Reformer in the Post-Reconstruction South*, published by University of Virginia Press.

**Keywords:** Black romance, Dell, Harlequin, Romance Writers of America, Vivian Stephens

A Houston, Texas, native and graduate of Texas Southern University, Vivian Lorraine Stephens (1932-) has been a romance aficionado since her teens. In the 1940s, she read love stories in *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Redbook*, and regarded Faith Baldwin as her “favorite writer” (Moody-Freeman, “Vivian Stephens-Part one”). It was not until the late 1960s that Stephens bought and read Harlequin romances that she first discovered discounted and placed in a barrel at a Massachusetts bookstore. Working then as a professional researcher at Time and Life Books in New York, Stephens became intrigued by her romance paperback find. “I’d love to work for a publisher who makes these books,” she mused (qtd. in Swartz). When Time and Life Books transported “its book section to Virginia,” Stephens applied for a job at Dell and was hired as an associate editor of Candlelight Romances in 1978, several months subsequent to her résumé submission. She was placed in a storeroom that functioned as an office and was required to read five manuscripts each month from various agencies (Moody-Freeman, “Vivian Stephens-Part one”). After Stephens learned how to buy romance manuscripts from agencies, her employment at Dell set the stage for her to turn the predominantly British and Caucasian romance industry on its heels. Honing her craft and capitalizing on her works’ reception,

Stephens became a notable pioneer in the romance field as she launched Dell's romance ethnic line, introduced more mature and ethnically diverse characters, ushered in the liberated romance in the Candlelight Ecstasy line, spearheaded the Harlequin American line, co-authored *Final Summer* (1988) and *Second Act* (2014), and founded Romance Writers of America.

Before we look at Vivian Stephens's work in the romance genre, it is necessary to place her in the broader context of American romance publishing. This is important because the inroads that Stephens made into the predominantly Caucasian mass paperback industry enable a greater appreciation for her initiatives to scale barriers of racial and cultural exclusivity. When Stephens entered the publishing industry in 1978, Dell was seemingly indifferent to the progress of its Candlelight Romance series compared to its other publishing ventures. Stephens reminds us, "The line [Candlelight Romance] wasn't really looked at to make any money or make a statement for Dell" (qtd. in Markert, 86). An American publisher founded in 1921, Dell had profited from the publication of all-white pulp magazines, comics, puzzles, and "smoochies" (romances). It had even distinguished itself from its rival Pocket Books by incorporating "maps on the back covers" of its genre fiction (Lyles 10). Into this scenario came Harlequin Enterprises, identified as the largest North American reprint publisher of romance novels. Founded in 1949 in Winnipeg, Canada, it began publishing nurse romances in 1953, many of which Americans wrote. In 1957 under the supervision of Mary Bonnycastle, wife of Harlequin Enterprises' publisher Richard Bonnycastle, the company published Lucy Agnes Hancock's *The Nurse*. Medical romances depicted liaisons between white physicians and their nurses. When Richard Bonnycastle died in 1968, his son Richard, Jr. made changes. After moving Harlequin Enterprises to Toronto, he purchased Mills and Boon in 1971, began selling its mass marketed medical romance paperbacks in American supermarkets, and, in 1973, added the Harlequin Presents category. Similar to Dell, Harlequin had prioritized white characters as the primary figures in the romance. Harlequin and Dell were not competitors when Stephens was hired as Dell's associate editor. However, Stephens's desire to produce "quality" and "ethnic diversity" in the romance rather than careless love affairs for monetary profit enabled Dell to gradually gain an edge over the Harlequin brand.

As associate editor of Dell's Candlelight series in 1979, Stephens launched Dell's ethnic line. In the predominantly white romance industry, Stephens introduced African American characters into the 60,000-word linear category romance's formulaic plot —man and woman meet, fall in love, overcome complications, and marry. She asked her friend Elsie B. Washington to write a romance using the romance formula. When Stephens received Washington's manuscript, she sought clearance to publish the work from Linda Grey, Dell's editor-in-chief. With Grey's approval, Stephens shepherded Washington's manuscript through the editing, cover designing, and publishing processes. The result was *Entwined Destinies* (1980), which Elsie B. Washington wrote with the pseudonym Rosalind Welles. Lois Beckett affirms that *Entwined Destinies* is "the first Harlequin title in any of its lines to be written by an African American author and feature African American main characters" (n.p.).

*Entwined Destinies* (1980) was the first African American romance published in Dell's Candlelight series. This novel "[desegregated] . . . the paperback romance" notes a reviewer for *People Magazine* ("Picks and Pans Review"). The reviewer for *People Magazine* is correct, but with the inclusion of African American characters *Entwined Destinies* does

more than desegregate the races in romance paperbacks. The novel's African American history, heritage, and commitment to community add a palatable ethnic flavor to the romance field. Further, *Entwined Destinies* dismantles stereotypes as it illuminates a gallery of cosmopolitan upper-class Blacks in a diasporic setting on the European continent. The European setting and the role of the Black female protagonist were inspired by Elsie B. Washington's own trip to Europe for a journalism conference, where she thought out the plot for her romance novel. Protagonist and journalist Kathy Goodwin is depicted as the daughter of "a United States State Department consular officer" (Welles 85). She was born in Washington, DC, grew up in Africa, and was educated in England and in Atlanta, Georgia, at a prestigious women's college. As journalist for *Upbeat Magazine*, Goodwin is assigned for several months in London. In London, she meets and falls in love with Lloyd Craig, a Yale University-trained engineer, whose job as division manager at Trans Global Oil transports him to job sites and conventions worldwide. In their on-and-off-again relationship, Kathy and Lloyd visit theaters, museums, international restaurants, and parties with West Indians and West African dignitaries. Their world presents to the romance fiction readership a seldom-perceived reality of educated and successful African American cosmopolites. African Americans' sophistication was presented for the first time, says Stephens, "in commercial publishing for category books in romance" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one").

Ray Walters, a columnist for the *New York Times Book Review*, acknowledged *Entwined Destinies* as Stephens's innovation and as the "575th title in Dell's Candlelight Romance series" (36). He admits, "The ethnic romance is the invention of the editor of Candlelight romances Vivian Stephens" (36). Walters' assessment of Stephens as the inventor of the ethnic romance is accurate for two reasons. First, Stephens set the precedent in thinking out and acting on the need for an ethnic romance at Dell, which had not stirred in that direction since its Candlelight line began in 1967. Second, Stephens vaulted ahead of larger and more prosperous romance lines at Harlequin, Dell's competitor, which did not have an ethnic writers' line. *Entwined Destinies* was a big success for Stephens. It sold nearly 60,000 copies of the first print (Bray 72). It facilitated Stephens's inclusion of other ethnic romances and smoothed her move up in rank at Dell.

When Stephens became editor-in-chief after less than a year at Dell, she introduced more mature and ethnically diverse characters in Dell's Candlelight series. Her decision came after she witnessed older consumers not purchasing Candlelight romance novels in a New York City Woolworths. One customer buying Regency romances told Stephens that she "never bought a contemporary Candlelight because the heroines were too young and too insipid" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"; Markert 80). After conversing with this customer, Stephens changed the type of manuscripts she bought from agencies to publish with the Dell imprint. This change is most noticeably seen with her buying Joan Hohl's manuscript *Morning Rose, Evening Savage* (1980) and publishing it with Hohl's pseudonym Amii Lorin.

*Morning Rose, Evening Savage* (1980) transformed the Candlelight series with the Jewish-American heroine and Russian-American hero exhibiting opposing views of marriage and then resolving their differences. Twenty-two-year-old protagonist Tara Schmitt has a liberated view about marriage, whereas Alek Rykovsky manifests the traditional perspective. Tara wants to choose the man rather than have the man to choose her. With serious intent, Aleksei Rykovsky proposes marriage to Tara the first day he meets

her because the rumor is that she is looking for a “prosperous man to marry” (Lorin 7). Unaccustomed to and unsupportive of “the masterful [male] type,” Tara engages in a bold game of proposal acceptance and setting a wedding date to call Alek’s bluff. Her sexual unreadiness in the eventual marriage and her talk of divorce conflict with Alek’s Catholic intentions to prevent the separation and to procreate children. Alek’s resourcefulness in resolving their conflict is aided with the metaphoric function of the cigarette that he gives to Tara to smoke as sexual enticement. Similar to the hypnotic effect of a cigarette’s nicotine, Alek’s “hypnotic druglike voice. . . [saps] the resistance from [Tara’s] body” (Lorin 159). The long-sized cigarette compares to Alek’s “long-brown fingers” and suggests an equally long phallus. As a phallic symbol, the cigarette is used to entice Tara to consummate her marriage to Alek. The metaphor manifests the increased sensuality in the 1980s romances. Moreover, Tara’s performance of her sexual duty in the marriage revives Alek’s regenerative power and resolves the strife between the two of them.

Lorin’s *Morning Rose, Evening Savage* was a quick sell with no negative reviews. Expecting negative reviews because of its extreme sensuality, Stephens remarks, “I didn’t really hear anything. That’s all I was waiting for. I was waiting to hear a negative. But I didn’t hear anything at all” (qtd. in Markert 88). Reviews of the first printing of *Morning Rose, Evening Savage* seem non-existent; however, the novel was republished in paperback in 1994. In 2011, it was offered in Kindle editions in the United States, Canada, Australia, and United Kingdom. The reception of *Morning Rose, Evening Savage* spurred Vivian Stephens to launch “a new line” called “Candlelight Ecstasy.”

The Candlelight Ecstasy line ushered in the liberated romance novel and revolutionized category romance. American scholar John Markert identifies the Candlelight Ecstasy line as “liberated romance novels” (80). It updated heroines to manifest American women’s inevitable transformation resulting from the influence of the women’s movement. Each novel reflects the changing position of women in American culture in the 1980s as a result of the significant impact that liberation politics had on American women’s lives. In these novels, the heroine is an older, career-oriented, well-rounded, clear-thinking, and self-directed agent. Some of the heroines have been married before. In each romance, the heroine is transformed, and the hero respects her progress. The two co-exist as educated and employed social equals within the orb of contemporary American life.

Jayne Castle’s *Gentle Pirate* (1980) debuted as a Candlelight Ecstasy with liberated characters. Heroine Kirsten Mallory and hero Simon Kendrick are free of restrictions related to age, virginity, employment, and wholesome health. Kirsten is 28 and Simon is 37. Both have been married before. Kirsten is widowed; Simon is divorced. Kirsten is stable in her career as a librarian, and so is Simon, her supervisor. Both have been wounded. Married to an abusive husband, Kirsten suffered emotional trauma; Simon was injured in the Vietnam War. Yet, Simon satisfies Kirsten’s desire despite a metal hook extending from the remains of his amputated left arm. Both characters manifest self-restraint, as evident in their delay of the sexual act until the novel’s end. The delay is purposed to reveal Simon’s need to know that he is what Kristen really wants. He explains, “I want to know that you’re so sure of your feelings for me . . . that *nothing* will drive you from my side . . . I want the words to come willingly and wholeheartedly from the bottom of your warm little heart” (Castle 136). Simon’s integrity demonstrates his maturity and his respect for Kristen. The answer to his proposal takes precedence over the sexual act in determining equity in the relationship. Kirsten’s “yes” answer to Simon’s proposal defines her as a broadminded

woman capable of finding happiness with a wounded Vietnam-War veteran in contemporary America.

*Gentle Pirate* was well received. It “sold out of its first printing within weeks and paved the way for the growth of the Candlelight Ecstasy line” (Markert 88). Among those manuscripts that Stephens edited and brought under Dell’s Candlelight Ecstasy imprint were Jean Hager’s *Web of Desire* (1981), Marisa de Zavalas’s *Golden Fire, Silver Ice* (1981), and Lia Sanders’ *The Tender Mending* (1982). These novels represent Caucasian, Mexican American, and African American ethnicities, respectively. For each ethnic group, Stephens had a tip sheet for writers to use. Among the requisites were the “upwardly mobile” and job-holding heroine, a successful and attractive hero, an appeal to the five senses, and an American setting (Moody-Stephens, “Vivian Stephens-Part one”). Stephens developed these tips for Dell and used them in her own workshops for would-be writers. The tips reflect her uplift sensibility within the American milieu, and they were purposed to offer hope to the romance readership.

The Candlelight Ecstasy series was a great success. In Marisa de Zavalas’s *Golden Fire, Silver Ice* (1981), Vivian Stephens notes the success of the Candlelight Ecstasy line on the unnumbered page preceding Chapter 1. In a note that begins, “Dear Reader,” Stephens updates the reader on the coming frequency of the Candlelight Ecstasy Romances. She reports, “In response to your enthusiasm for Candlelight Ecstasy Romances, we are now increasing the number of titles per month from two to three. We are pleased to offer you sensuous novels set in America, depicting modern American women and men as they confront the provocative problems of a modern relationship” (qtd. in de Zavalas 7). The increase in monthly productions retired Dell’s Regency line of historical novels and placed Dell in competition with Harlequin Romances. Moreover, “the initial release of two books per month (1981) rose steadily to peak at eight Ecstasy novels every month in 1983-1984” (Markert 89).

Despite Stephens’s success at Dell, some people were not convinced of the importance of the romance novel. In 1983, Ted Koppel, host of CBS Nightline, began his interview on romance novels with Janet Dailey, Vivian Stephens, and Dr. Patricia Frazer Lamb with the words, “Much of the creativity in these [romance] books appears to be used up in the names of the characters” (Koppel). Koppel’s comment was not only a slap in the face of Janet Dailey, then author of seventy-nine romances, but also a swat at Vivian Stephens, Dell’s innovative editor, both of whom defended the genre. To make matters worse, Koppel’s choice of Dr. Patricia Lamb, English professor at Westminster College in Pennsylvania, seemed inappropriate. She used her teaching career as a springboard to qualify her to judge paperback romances. She condemned romance novels “as a most pernicious influence on the life of women because I think they are written to women for the most part who are stuck in dreary marriages and unsatisfying lives” (Koppel). Professor Lamb goes on to say that “Women are, for the most part, sold on romantic love as the only adventures they can expect life to offer them” (Koppel). Stephens reminds Dr. Lamb that women who read romances “are not stupid” (Koppel). Their lives do not change because they read a book. Stephens and Dailey were extremely polite even as it was evident to the listener that neither Koppel nor Lamb had an authoritative handle on the romance novel.

Vivian Stephens’s success at Dell with the liberated Candlelight Ecstasy novels caught the attention of Dell’s rival—Harlequin in Canada. Harlequin aggressively pursued Stephens because it was interested in the new American line that Stephens had started at

Dell. One editor wanted to buy the rights of *Morning Rose, Evening Savage*. Refusing to sell the rights, Stephens was then approached with a salary offer from Harlequin that she could not refuse.

In 1982, lured by a high-paying salary, Stephens moved to Harlequin and launched its American line. However, Harlequin had seemingly conflicting tasks for Stephens. It wanted Stephens to buy and edit American novels, but not too American, and it wanted more universal plots. The underlying implication is that Harlequin wanted American plots but not the burgeoning American ethnic diversity in the plot. The President of Harlequin in Canada instructed her, "Vivian, don't buy a book that's too American because we don't have the language to translate that" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"). The warning can be interpreted to mean that ethnic characters have peculiar idioms difficult to translate. Harlequin had an international readership, but in its attempt to push back on the vernacular of America's ethnic groups, it claimed the limited translational ability of its translators. What Harlequin wanted was daunting, but Stephens pressed on.

As an editorial director of Harlequin, Vivian Stephens published Sandra Kitt's first three novels in rapid succession: *All Good Things* (August 1984), *Rites of Spring* (November 1984), and *Adam and Eva* (December 1984). An African American writer and Harlequin's first Black Romance writer, Kitt wrote *All Good Things* to feature a white heroine making a career change from model to photographer. The setting is South Carolina. *Rites of Spring*, with all-white characters, depicts heroine Monica Hamlin, a well-known ballet dancer, faced with a career-ending injury. The topic is universal, and the setting is New York. *Adam and Eva* is the only romance of Kitt's first three novels to have all-Black characters.

First published in the Silhouette line of Harlequin romances, *Adam and Eva* continued Vivian Stephens's vision of the liberated American romance. It begins and ends with an American setting, the heroine and hero are older, both are engaged in "upwardly mobile jobs," romance is complicated with the modern problem of long-distance travel, and sex moves into the bedroom. Harlequin had a history of prudery in its romance novels, but Stephens ignored that history. She reminds us, "women and men went to bed without the benefit of clergy and that could be in the books because that was a part of reality" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"). Moreover, because the liberated American romance was a product of the American women's movement and sexual revolution, *Adam and Eva* reflected the carnal shift in paperback romance novels.

Set in the United States and in the West Indies, *Adam and Eva* (1984) relates the romantic encounters of Eva Duncan and Adam Maxwell. An African American widow and law clerk, Eva lost her husband and daughter in a house fire. To take a much-needed rest, she flies on her first airplane trip to the Caribbean islands for a six-week vacation. On St. Thomas, she meets Adam, a divorced African American marine biologist, whose 10-year-old daughter Diane has met Eva on the airplane and has come from New Jersey to visit Adam on St. John Island. Both Eva and Adam complicate the relationship. Eva has difficulty freeing herself from the memory of her dead husband. The sexually spontaneous Adam has a side woman and relates to Eva that "There's never been any pretending that [my] relationship [with Lavonna Morris] was ever anything else outside of a bedroom" (Kitt, *Adam and Eva* 154). Despite these complications, Adam and Eva consummate their affection for each other. However, Eva's decision to leave St. John and return to New Jersey without saying goodbye to Adam infuriates him. His decision to travel to New Jersey

resolves the conflict. Their admission of their love for each other leads to their planning to pursue their careers and to live their lives together in Washington, DC.

Writing a review of *Adam and Eva* thirty-one years after its 1984 publication, Sunita comments on the novel's point of view, resolution, and multiculturalism. She "loved the pace and focus of this book" but laments the fact that "like many Harlequin books from the 80s, there is no hero POV" (Sunita). In the resolution, Adam speaks up; he "admits his past stupidities." Adam also initiates conversation about his and Eva's future together, and his point of view is clearly evident in the resolution. Regarding the novel's multicultural component, Sunita notes, "For a pathbreaking book, *Adam and Eva* wears its multiculturalism lightly". She claims, "the reader knows immediately . . . that Eva, Diane, and Adam are African American . . . I wasn't sure of the race of some of the minor characters". In addition to the authenticity of characters, *Adam and Eva* contains an important piece of multiculturalism—the July 3rd and July 5th carnival on St. Thomas—that celebrates the inhabitants' emancipation from slavery under Denmark and the island's Independence Day, respectively. Overall, the reviewer likes *Adam and Eva* so well that she has read its sequel *Promises in Paradise* (2010) in which Diane Maxwell is featured. Another reviewer, Gwendolyn Osborne, notes that Sandra Kitt "became one of the publisher's most popular authors during the 1980s" (15). This novel should have drawn more attention from reviewers, despite the fact that this is a category romance.

Despite Vivian Stephens's every effort to satisfy Harlequin's request for American romances, she was told to leave less than two years after she started working. She was given no reason. Stephens was not fired because she was unable to receive unemployment compensation. She confides, "When I went to draw unemployment, the unemployment person said but you were not fired [*sic*]. And I said why would I walk away from a job paying this much money [*sic*]" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"). To receive compensation, Stephens threatened Harlequin with litigation. She says that she was asked to leave Harlequin "before [I] was able to edit the first hundred books that I had [bought]" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"). It appears that Stephens was manipulated into coming to work at Harlequin. The company was willing to pay her any salary to find out more about the American line that she had launched at Dell. As one Harlequin editor said to Stephens during the pre-hiring stage, "We felt that if we got the [Dell] editor, we could get the writers" (qtd. in Moody-Freeman, "Vivian Stephens-Part one"). Once Stephens was hired and started buying the writers' American manuscripts, then Harlequin had what it wanted, could pick and choose what it wanted out of the stack of manuscripts that Stephens had acquired, and did not need Stephens as editor. Harlequin's game of greed seems an old American strategy: find a scapegoat and enrich yourself. It was a game with Harlequin applying an American strategy for its own ends.

Harlequin's strategy did not end when Stephens left the company. Several years later when Stephens tried to establish the Vivian Stephens line of Black Romances, Harlequin was developing its own ideas about an African American line. It is reasonable to conjecture that as Dell, Waldenbooks, and Avon listened to but rejected Stephens's idea for them to support her line, word reached Harlequin about Stephens's project. After all, editors and publishers do not exist in isolation. In 2006, Harlequin launched Kimani Romance, the only mainstream line of African American romances. The line provided an opportunity for African American writers to obtain a wider reading audience, but Harlequin also expected considerable investment profits. Black women romance writers at

other publishing companies, Beverly Jenkins at Avon and Terry McMillan at Viking, were superstars for their publishers. To launch the Kimani Romance line, Harlequin bought Arabesque, New Spirit, and Sepia imprints from Black Entertainment Television (BET). Arabesque at Kensington had been the first line of African American romance novels established in 1994 before Kensington sold the line to BET at a profit. For a while, Harlequin did well with its various romance lines. In 2018, however, with declining readership, Harlequin decided to discontinue five of its lines that included “Kimani Romance, . . . Harlequin Western Romance, Harlequin Superromance, Harlequin Nocturne, and Harlequin Love Nocturnal” (DeLoatch, “Black Harlequin Romance,” pars. 1, 10). Harlequin’s strategy seems to have been to create a monopoly in the category romance field; however, with all investments, the tide ebbs and flows.

In 1988, Stephens co-authored with her friend Angela Dews *Final Summer*, issued as a Starlight Romance with the pseudonym Angela Vivian and with the Doubleday imprint. Set on St. Simons Island in Georgia, *Final Summer* weaves the love story of Adam Morgan, an engineer, and Melissa Dawson Kendall, a PhD student and widow. The two work together to preserve Melissa’s mother-in-law’s home as a historic site and to save it from encroaching white developers. The Kendall homestead came into possession of ex-slave Jeff Kendall when “General Sherman drafted a special order that set aside a zone for newly freed black men” (Vivian 19). Despite conflicts between Melissa and Adam as lovers— each socially engages another person at one point— the homestead finally meets the requirements for consideration as a historical site, and the two marry.

Vivian Stephens and Angela Dews placed considerable research into the writing of *Final Summer*. Genealogy and Southern racism are woven into African American history. Evident throughout the Kendall generations are the knowledge of ancestors, accumulation and transfer of wealth in real estate, the education of children, the display of pride and “family continuity” (Vivian 87). Blacks residing on St. Simons “to some extent had been isolated from the daily indignities of life in the Old South behind their accomplishments and arrogance” (87). Writing with a racial uplift sensibility, Stephens and Dews allow the hero to state emphatically, “I’m the total of everything that went before me and some of my strength comes from that connection.” (99). The character implies that the past and present are interconnected, and this bond gives the racial victim strength to progress as a human.

A search for reviews of *Final Summer* proved unsuccessful. No luck was found with *Access World News*, *Black Historical Newspapers*, *Book Review Digest Plus*, *Book Review Index*, *Library Journal*, *Literature Online*, *New York Times*, or *Public Library*. In consulting with Steve Ammidown with the Vivian Stephens Collection at Bowling Green State University, I was informed that the lack of reviews “may be due to the fact that [*Final Summer*] was a Doubleday Starlight book. That means it was exclusively sold to libraries, and so probably didn’t get wide critical attention” (Ammidown) *Houston Chronicle*, September 28, 1988 did announce the coming publication of *Final Summer* and claimed Stephens as the “romance novel godmother” (“Footnotes,” 23). From my research, *Final Summer* did not receive must attention then and still has not received the attention that it is due. I base this statement on the paucity of reviews and on the fact that the copy of *Final Summer* that I ordered from Amazon was sent as a discard copy from St. Lucie County Library System in Ft. Pierce, Florida.

Stephens’s second novel *Second Act* (2014) debuted with the pseudonym The Sedema Group, which consists of three retired sisters— Vivian Stephens and her siblings



Barbara and Christina. The siblings wrote this novel to appeal to older people like themselves. *Second Act* relates the love story of Jill Colquitt, a buyer for a specialty shop, and Justin Udall, an artist, living in Texas. With a new emphasis on romance among the older group, the novel captures the desire of elderly people to experience romance and the need for writers to embrace them as a means to recognize their libido and to expand the content in the romance genre.

*Second Act* received a mixed reception. The first printing did not sell well, and reviews are difficult to find. The reason for the lack of success for the first printing may be attributed to an editorial decision that the heroine, at 62, and the hero, at 65, were too old. The second printing, reducing the ages of the heroine and hero, had a better, although mixed reception. According to Amazon's Customer Reviews based on 100 percent, 65 percent of Amazon's readers gave the second printing 5 stars, and 35 percent rated the novel as 4 stars. One reviewer assigning five stars praised the novel as "a charming romantic story about a woman, Jill and a man, Justin [sic] who fall in love and navigate their relationship, while also chasing their individual dreams" ("*Second Act: A Love Story*"). The other reviewer, identified as Chilufiya Safaa, rated the novel with four stars and wrote "a marvelous read!!!!!!!" ("*Second Act: Four Stars*"). A result of analyzing the spread of stars given in the reviews reveals that readers enjoyed the romance. It is possible that the decrease in the ages of the heroine and hero may have appealed more to readers as was expected in the editorial decision. However, Vivian Stephens's declaration that the first printing "was exactly as I wanted it" reveals why the romance industry needed to adjust its requirements for romance-book content once more to admit the aging romantic, an ignored and burgeoning segment of America's population.

While working as editor and author, Vivian Stephens advised several writers who have achieved prominence in the romance field. In addition to Sandra Kitt, other African American writers are Brenda Jackson, Shirley Hailstock, and Beverly Jenkins. Brenda Jackson is distinguished as the first African American to publish a novel, *Duty or Desire* (2010), with the Harlequin Silhouette Desire Imprint; the first African American to publish one hundred novels; and the first African American romance writer to scale the USA Best Sellers List and the New York Times Best Seller List in 2001 (Jackson). Shirley Hailstock garnered the Holt Medallion for her contemporary romance *Whispers of Love* (1994), "won the Utah Romance Writers' Heart of the West Award" for her first historical romance *Clara's Promise* (1995), and has authored more than thirty-five novels (Hailstock). Beverly Jenkins, recognized as a distinguished writer of historical romances, spent more than a decade trying to publish her first novel *Night Song*, and then Vivian Stephens recommended Avon as a publisher. *Night Song* (Avon 1994) became a Waldenbooks bestseller and was chosen as an "alternative book of the month by Doubleday Book Club and Literary Guild" (Moody-Freeman, "Beverly Jenkins"). Jenkins has received numerous awards including the 2016 Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award for Historical Romance and the 2017 Romance Writers of America Nora Roberts Lifetime Achievement Award ("Award Winning Books by Beverly Jenkins"). Brenda Jackson, Shirley Hailstock, and Beverly Jenkins owe their successful start in the romance field to Vivian Stephens, and all were affiliated with Romance Writers of America.

Vivian Stephens founded Romance Writers of America (RWA), a non-profit organization, with booksellers, librarians, romance scholars, writers, agents, and editors. The idea for RWA began at a writing session that Stephens led at Southwest Writers

Conference, held in Houston, Texas, in 1979. At her session, Stephens advised a group of would-be romance writers how to become published authors. She suggested that they “band together” and form their own conference (Moody-Freeman 20). When Stephens was asked to meet the group again, more people had joined, and Stephens suggested that the group call itself Romance Writers of America. The group organized in 1980 and hosted their first conference in Houston in 1981. The original Board of Directors consisted of eight: five whites including Rita Clay, two African Americans (including Vivian Stephens and her sister Barbara), and one Hispanic lady, Celina Rios Mullan. RWA became the voice of romance writers in America. It provides many services as a membership-driven organization. RWA informs about “the best practices” in the romance industry, holds an annual romance conference, and announces annual awards including the Lifetime Achievement Award and service awards.

Stephens distanced herself from RWA in the early 1980s for two reasons: RWA’s engagement in duplicitous activities and the rumors of power plays within the organization. Deceitful actions were in operation at RWA’s 1983 conference. On the one hand, organizer Rita Clay had mentioned to Stephens that RWA needed money to finance a “cocktail party on the *Queen Mary* at the 1983 conference,” and Stephens secured three thousand dollars from Dell for that purpose (Swartz). At the same time and unknown to Stephens, Clay and other organizers started selling movie rights to make a profit in the non-profit RWA organization. Even though a non-profit organization such as RWA has a legal right to make a profit, provided it does so for the good of the organization and its tax exemptions are in order, the organizers definitely undermined and minimized Stephens’s help in securing charitable donations. That is, if RWA could secure its own profit, there was no need to manipulate Stephens to obtain money from Dell to finance its cocktail parties.

The second reason that Stephens pulled away from RWA soon after the 1983 conference is the rumor of power plays within the organization. The organizers never again consulted Stephens about anything; but some members kept her abreast of everything. Some telephoned Stephens to say “Vivian, this is a power group” (“Vivian Stephens Interview”). Stephens had difficulty understanding what that meant because the group was founded on an equitable basis to help individuals write their own books.

Nearly a decade later, Romance Writers of America recognized Stephens’s distinguished career. In 1991, RWA established The Vivian Stephens Industry Award. It is “presented to one or more professionals in the romance-publishing industry, who is not a writer, who has contributed to the genre or to RWA in a significant and/or continuing manner” (“Vivian Stephens Interview”)

In 2018, RWA presented to the Brown Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University approximately 50 books that Vivian Stevens had consulted as editor while working for Dell and Harlequin. Known as the Vivian Stephens Collection, the works included, but were not limited to, various romances, history writing conventions, religion, editing, and bibliography. Published mostly during the 1980s, many of the books were out of print. However, the Collection is testimony to Stephens’s insatiable interest in reading beyond the editing of manuscripts required for her jobs at Dell and at Harlequin. Her intent was to familiarize herself with trends in the romance field. Observing the omission of diversity in romance novels allowed her to revise the direction of the manuscripts she edited to a more inclusive and better represented America.

Two years later, in 2020, Romance Writers of America retired the RITA Award, named after Rita Clay Estrada and “presented annually since 1982” (Maher). RWA introduced The Vivian in honor of Vivian Stephens. In establishing The Vivian, the Board of Directors was “guided by the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access” (“Introducing the Vivian”). The Vivian “recognizes excellence in romance writing and showcases talent and creativity” (“The Vivian”). In accepting the naming of the award in her honor, Vivian Stephens included the following in her speech: “Today, as we move forward into a new world order, Romance Writers of America must be one group, united by the purity of craft that identifies the organization” (“Introducing the Vivian”). Vivian Stephens’s words in 2020 echo her thoughts in the 1980s. She had always wanted “quality” in the romances, and she did not sacrifice quality by choosing one ethnic writer over another.

Editor, co-author, advisor, and founder of Romance Writers of America, Vivian Stephens is an indefatigable legend in the American romance industry. Her editorship launched Dell’s ethnic romance line, introduced more mature and ethnically diverse characters, ushered in the liberated romance in the Candlelight Ecstasy line, and spearheaded Harlequin’s American line. Co-author of *Final Summer* and *Second Act*, Stephens applied the tips that she gave to her writers. In addition, she departed from the one-dimensional setting, added children to the plot, and initiated the unveiling of little known or forgotten Black diasporic cultural facts. Her advice to fledgling writers initiated successful careers in romance writing for authors such as Beverly Jenkins, Brenda Jackson, Sandra Kitt, and Shirley Hailstock. Founder of Romance Writers of America, Stephens laid the foundation for a national forum for instructive discussions, advisement, and networking for writers to produce romance novels. Stephens did not always receive the attention due her in the romance industry, but her foresight, intellect, and determination cannot be ignored. As future scholars embark on more in-depth historical research into Stephens’s contributions to romance, they will recognize Vivian Stephens as the motherlode of Black Romance in the modern mass market paperback industry.

## Works Cited

- Ammidown, Steve. "Final Summer Reviews." Personal email, received by Rita Dandridge, December 2020.
- Beckett, Lois. "Fifty Shades of White: The Long Fight against Racism in Romance Novels." *The Guardian*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/04/fifty-shades-of-white-romance-novels-racism-ritas-rwa>
- Bray, Rosemary L. "Love for Sale." *Black Enterprise*, December 1982, pp. 71-76.
- Castle, Jayne. *Gentle Pirate*. Dell, 1980.
- DeLoatch, Mackenzie. "Black Harlequin Romance: The Closing of Harlequin's Kimani Romance Line." *Duke University: Sites@Duke*, 2020, <https://sites.duke.edu/unsuitable/black-harlequin-romance/>
- de Zavala, Marisa. *Golden Fire, Silver Ice*. Dell, 1981.
- "Footnotes." *Houston Chronicle* [Texas], 28 August 1988, p. 23.
- Hailstock, Shirley. "Bio." *ShirleyHailstock.net*, 2014, <http://ShirleyHailstock.net/bio.html>
- "Introducing The Vivian, A New Award for a New Era." *Romance Writers of America: The Voice of Romance Writers*, 21 May 2020, [https://www.rwa.org/Online/News/2020/RWA\\_Announces\\_a\\_New\\_Award\\_for\\_a\\_New\\_Era.aspx](https://www.rwa.org/Online/News/2020/RWA_Announces_a_New_Award_for_a_New_Era.aspx)
- Jackson, Brenda. "Bio." *Brenda Jackson: New York Times and USA Today Best Selling Author*, n.d., <https://www.brendajackson.net/bio>
- "Jenkins, Beverly 1951-." *Encyclopedia.com*, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/jenkins-beverly-1951>.
- Kitt, Sandra. *Adam and Eva*. Silhouette Books, 1984.
- Koppel, Ted. "Ted Koppel Interviews with Janet Dailey, Vivian Stephens, and Patricia Frazer Lamb in Women and Romance Novels." Uploaded by Mary van Deusen Fan Vids, 6 August 2017 [1983]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7ACIHplck>
- Lorin, Amii. *Morning Rose, Evening Savage*. Dell, 1980.
- Lyles, William. *Putting Dell on the Map*. Greenwood Press, 1983.
- Maher, John. "RWA Retires RITA Awards, Debuts the 'Vivian' after a Winter of Controversy." *Publishers Weekly*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/awards-and-prizes/article/83379-rwa-retires-rita-awards-debuts-the-vivian-after-a-winter-of-controversy.html>
- Markert, John. *Publishing Romance: The History of an Industry, 1940s to the Present*. McFarland, 2016.
- Moody-Freeman, Julie, host. "Beverly Jenkins." Black Romance Podcast, 1 September 2020. <https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/beverly-jenkins>.
- . "Vivian Stephens-Part one." Black Romance Podcast, 8 September 2020, <https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/vivian-stephens-part-one>.
- Osborne, Gwendolyn E. "The Color of Love." *Black Issues Review*, vol. 8, January-February 2006, pp. 14-15.
- "Picks and Pans Review: *Entwined Destinies*." *People Magazine*, vol. 13, no. 25, 23 June 1980, <https://people.com/archive/picks-and-pans-review-entwined-destinies-vol-13-no-25/>
- Safaa, Chilufiya. "Second Act: Four Stars." *Amazon Customer Reviews*, 17 August 2014, <https://www.amazon.com/SECOND-ACT-SEDEMA-GROUP-ebook/product->

- reviews/B00LOYV14A/ref=cm\_cr\_arp\_d\_rvw\_rvwer?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp\_only\_reviews&pageNumber=1**
- “*Second Act: A Love Story of People of a Particular Age.*” *Amazon Customer Reviews*, 8 July 2014, **[https://www.amazon.com/SECOND-ACT-SEDEMA-GROUP-ebook/product-reviews/B00LOYV14A/ref=cm\\_cr\\_arp\\_d\\_rvw\\_rvwer?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp\\_only\\_reviews&pageNumber=1](https://www.amazon.com/SECOND-ACT-SEDEMA-GROUP-ebook/product-reviews/B00LOYV14A/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_rvwer?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=avp_only_reviews&pageNumber=1)**
- Sunita. “Review: *Adam and Eva* by Sandra Kitt.” *Dear Author*, 20 May 2015, **<https://dearauthor.com/book-reviews/overall-a-reviews/a-minus-reviews/review-adam-and-eva-by-sandra-kitt/>**
- Swartz, Mimi. “Vivian Stephens Helped Turn Romance Writing into a Billion-Dollar Industry. Then She Got Pushed Out.” *Texas Monthly*, 19 August 2020, **<https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/vivian-stephens-helped-turn-romance-writing-into-billion-dollar-industry/>**
- The Sedema Group. *Second Act*. The Sedema Group, 2014.
- “The Vivian”. *Romance Writers of America: The Voice of Romance Writers*, n.d., **<https://www.rwa.org/TheVivian>**
- The Vivian Stephens Collection*. Bowling Green State University. Bowling Green, Ohio, 1991. **<https://www.bgsu.edu/library/pcl/named/stephens.html>**
- Vivian, Angela. *Final Summer*. Doubleday, 1988.
- “Vivian Stephens Interview.” Box 10. Historian Committee. Romance Writers of America Archives at Bowling Green State University, 1986.
- Walters, Ray. “Paperback Talk.” *New York Times*, 13 July 1980, pp. 35-36.
- Welles, Rosalind. *Entwined Destinies*. Dell, 1980.