

July 12, 2007

Kathleen Woodiwiss, Novelist, Dies at 68

By [MARGALIT FOX](#)

Kathleen E. Woodiwiss, a best-selling genre novelist widely credited with having founded the historical romance in its modern — carnal — incarnation, died on Friday in Princeton, Minn., where she lived. She was 68.

The cause was cancer, said Carrie Feron, her editor at Avon Books, which published the paperback editions of all Mrs. Woodiwiss's novels.

With her first novel, "The Flame and the Flower" (1972), Mrs. Woodiwiss took a genre formerly known for its slim volumes, gothic settings and comparative chastity and infused it with literal heft, historical sweep and generous billows of steam. (Often the steam was literal: an astonishing number of Mrs. Woodiwiss's characters are shown taking baths. The literal steam frequently leads to the figurative, which in turn leads to more of the literal, and so on.)

If Mrs. Woodiwiss's books did not always find favor with reviewers, they were hugely popular with readers. Her 13 novels have together sold more than 36 million copies, Ms. Feron said, and she was a frequent presence on The New York Times best-seller list. Her work also helped set the stage for other well-known writers in the genre, like Rosemary Rogers and Johanna Lindsey.

Mrs. Woodiwiss's best-known titles include "Shanna" (1977), "A Rose in Winter" (1982), "Come Love a Stranger" (1984) and "The Reluctant Suitor" (2003). Her final novel, "Everlasting," is to be published in hardcover by William Morrow in October.

The periods and settings for her stories ranged from the Norman Conquest through Elizabethan England to the American Civil War. Her characters had names like Adriana, Arabella, Beauregard and Colton. Her men had rugged exteriors that belied meltingly soft centers. Her women tended toward the virginal, a condition usually remedied by novel's end.

Some feminist critics condemned Mrs. Woodiwiss for perpetuating the stereotype of women as submissive objects of male desire. (Her heroines, always ravishing, are sometimes also ravished; some later choose to marry their ravishers and live happily ever after.) Others, however, saw her work as celebrating women's sexual power and capacity for self-determination.

The plots of Mrs. Woodiwiss's novels may include, but are not limited to, many of the following: dark and stormy nights; poisonings and stolen inheritances; waistcoats, buskins and dispensable bodices; switched babies, penniless orphans and heartless relatives; forced marriages, mistaken identity and family secrets; mortal peril, daring rescues and a generous assortment of titled noblemen.

But mostly (here, in a passage from “The Flame and the Flower”) they include things like this:

“Almost immediately he was on top of her, pinning down her writhing body, and it seemed that every move she made only abetted his intent. Her hair came loose and seemed to stifle her in its mass.

“ ‘No!’ she gasped. ‘Leave me alone! Let me be!’

“He chuckled and murmured against her throat. ‘Oh no, my bloodthirsty little wench. Oh no, not now.’ ”

Kathleen Erin Hogg was born on June 3, 1939, in Alexandria, La. At 17, she married Ross Woodiwiss, a United States Air Force officer. As a child Mrs. Woodiwiss adored stories, but as a young wife and mother she found most of the available “women’s fiction” unsatisfying. She eventually began work on “The Flame and the Flower,” meeting rejection from many hardcover publishers before sending it to Avon, which brought it out in a 500-page paperback.

Mrs. Woodiwiss’s marriage ended in divorce. She is survived by two sons, Sean and Heath; two sisters, Evelyn Vanderford and Lynn Feltner; and four grandchildren. Another son, Dorren, died last month.

Throughout her career Mrs. Woodiwiss, a self-described traditionalist, firmly set straight those who would describe her work as racy.

“I’m insulted when my books are called erotic,” she told Publishers Weekly in 1977. “I don’t think people who say that have read my books. I believe I write love stories. With a little spice.”

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