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HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Gasp! Swoon! Smooch! Croon! It's sweet, it's spicy, it's all coo up happily ever after for romance fiction: the once-furtive g that just keeps getting hotter and hotter – and more and n popular. Mel Campbell takes us on a tour between the cove find out why the kiss and tell industry is booming.

by Mel Campbell

@incrediblenak

Mel Campbell is a cultural critic and academic copyeditor who has co-written two romantic comedy novels: *The Hot Guy* (2017) and *Nailed It!* (2019).

Oh my god. It's so big. To think it began as a naughty secret between friends. A furtive glance on public transport. A conversation at a party. A late-night smitten of swoon-scrolling, too restless for sleep. And now here it is at your bedside. You take it all in, inch by delectable inch, says Jodi McAlister, it became a genre of romance novels, promising desire, comfort, hope, intimacy...and happiness.

You let out a breath you didn't know you were holding. No two TBRs are alike, because romance fiction is dynamic and omnivorous, spanning the contemporary, the historical and the paranormal. It flirts with other genres: crime, science fiction, suspense, workplace procedurals. It can be fluffy and cozy, zany and quirky, tender and earnest, dark and amoral, or the spiciest erotica. It can tackle thorny social issues or offer pure escapism.

"Romance is a huge umbrella, and given it really only has two rules – central love plot, happy ending – you can fit basically anything underneath it," says Jodi McAlister, a romance author who's also an academic expert on the genre, and Vice President of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.

McAlister's *Marry Me*, *Juliet* trilogy of romantic comedy novels was fuelled by her scholarly research on reality dating shows like *The Bachelor*. And her previous young-adult series *Valentine* is a romantic fantasy – or romantasy – that brings warring fairy kingdoms to smalltown Tasmania.

What McAlister finds "such an interesting craft challenge, and endlessly fascinating to read", is the way romance fiction

reformulates narrative suspense. "Instead of protagonists who get together, it's *how* they get together," she says. "That, for me, is the most exciting to plot out a romance."

Abigail Nathan is also passionate about romance writing. She's edited commercial fiction for Australian and UK publishers since 2004. A literary agent and publishing consultant with Alex Nathan looks for romance manuscripts who like real people.

"They need to behave in a believable way. There need to be consequences and reactions to their feelings."

Readers agree: Nielsen BookScan Australia romance novel sales doubled from 2019 to 2021. Australian readers spent \$464 million on romance in 2021, an 18 percent increase from 2020.

For fans, immersive reading is the key. "It's bingeable, and romance readers can get their books," Nathan says. That's why ebooks are "because as soon as you finish one you can start the next."

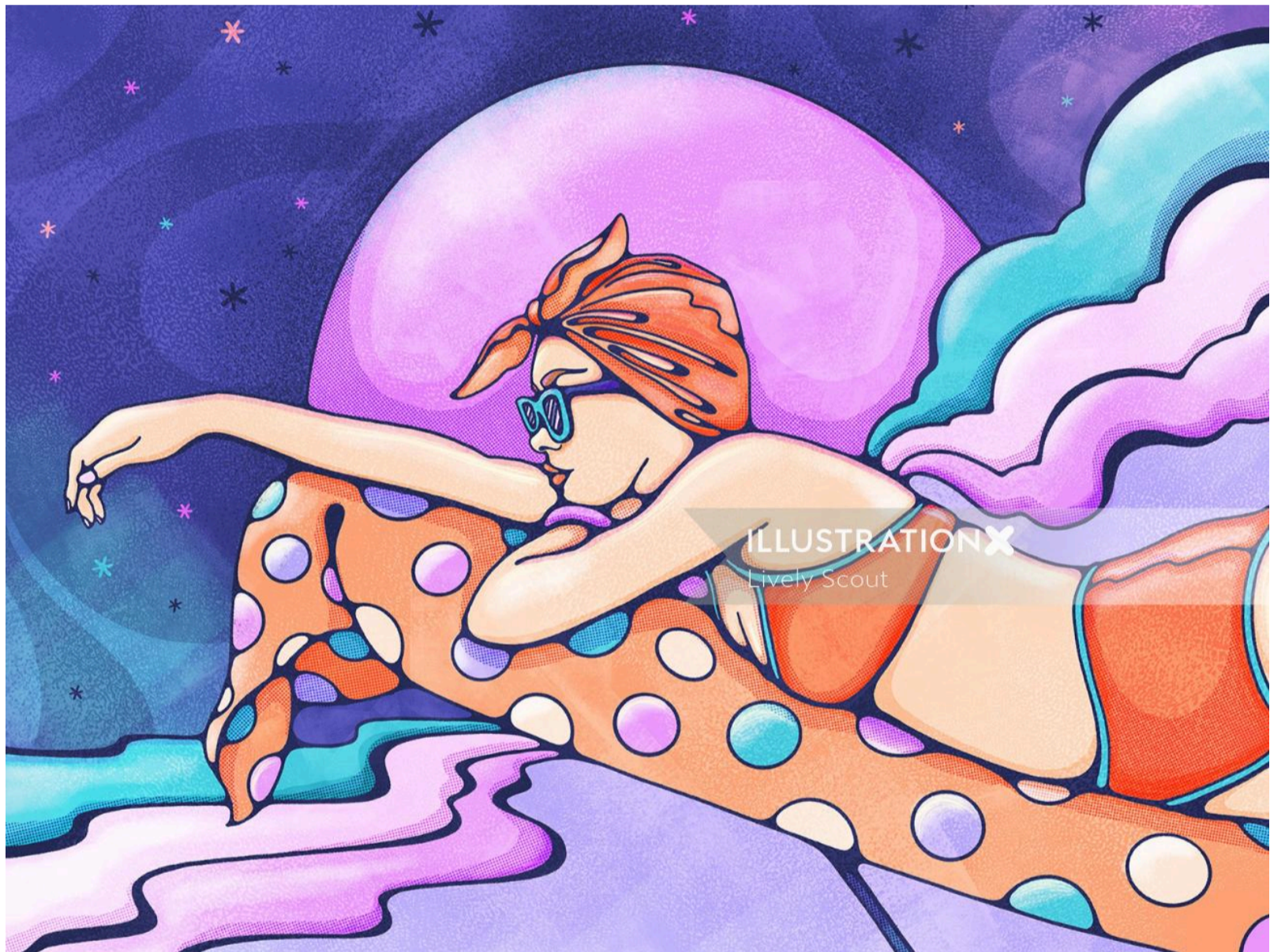
Still, disreputable stereotypes cling to romance. "The lake-damp shirt to a hero's chest. That it's fluffy, shallow, churned out by hack writers to titillate housewives, or as wish-fulfillment for lonely people."

"There are a lot of connotations of repressing something that is furtive, something that's secret, something that's not supposed to be there. It's like, 'oh, you know, they're pulp!' University of Melbourne academic Alice Bo

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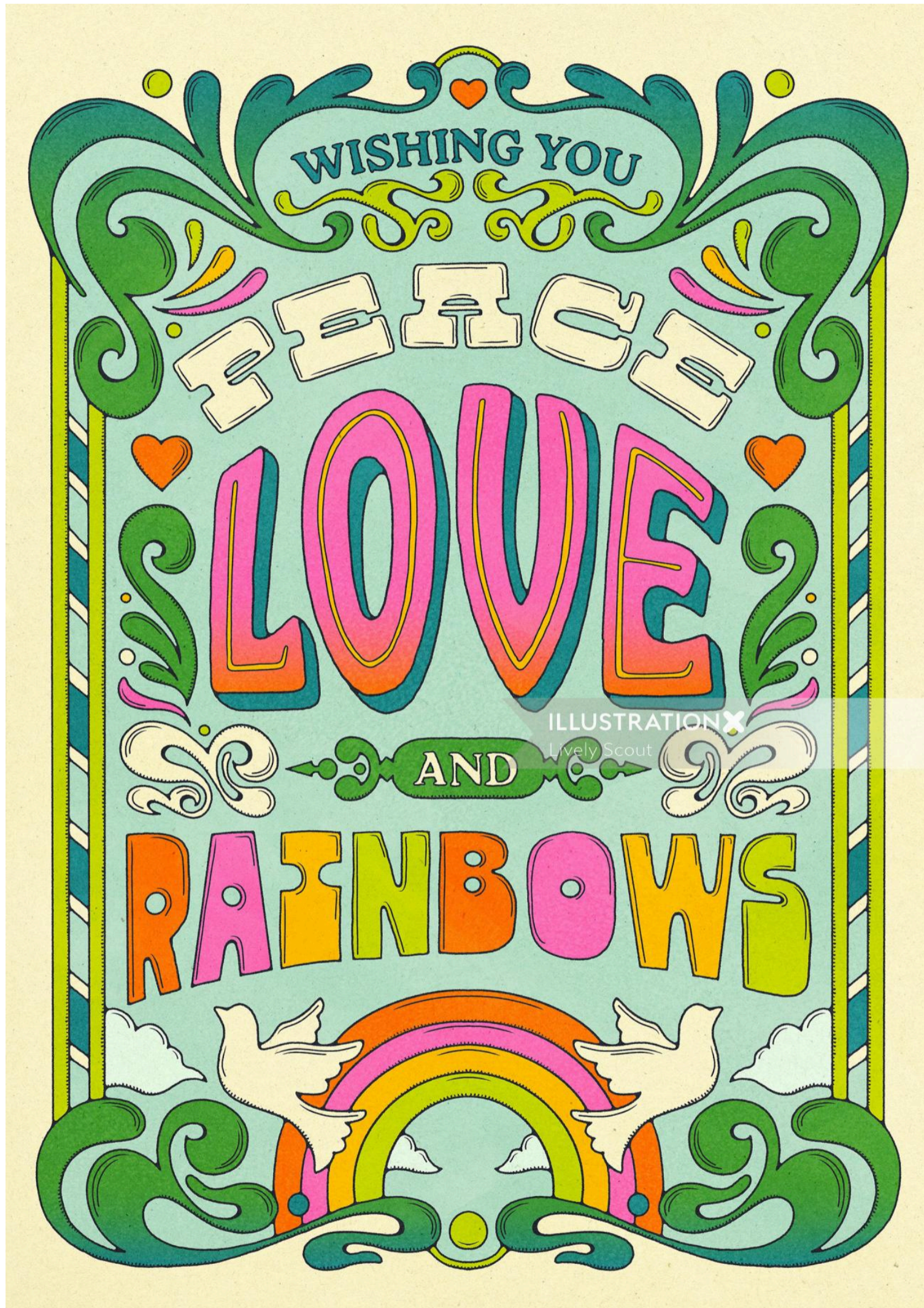
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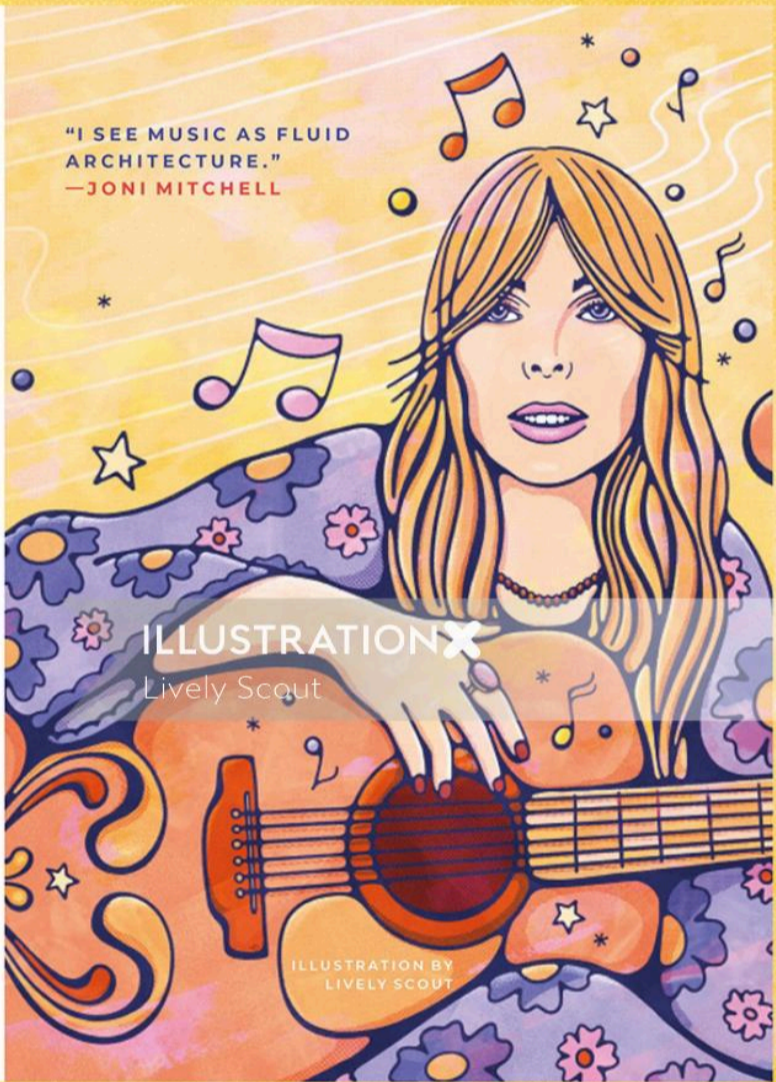
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JONI MITCHELL
SINGER AND SONGWRITER

SCAN TO HEAR MORE!

As a little girl, Joni looked across the sprawling wheat fields and rusty railroad tracks outside her home and dreamed of seeing the world. "My family could only afford to get me the box of eight Crayola crayons, but I craved the one with all 24 colors. I wanted magenta and turquoise and silver and gold," she once said.

Joni had a big imagination, but she got in trouble during piano lessons for making up her own melodies. Then when she was nine, she contracted polio. In the hospital, she sang to other patients, who applauded her creativity.

When she grew up, music helped Joni through another hardship in her life: giving her daughter up for adoption. Joni had just left art school and couldn't care for her baby. To process her grief, she poured her energy into songwriting.

Joni traveled along the East Coast scribbling down lyrics on trains and buses. She plucked her guitar strings and sang in coffee shops and clubs. Fans related to the stories in her songs. In "The Circle Game," she wrote about a boy growing up and going from catching dragonflies to learning to drive to achieving his dreams. In "Big Yellow Taxi," Joni sang about environmental change, writing the iconic line: "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

Soon Joni met other musicians, and her star began to rise. In 1970, her album *Clouds* won a Grammy Award for Best Folk Performance. Joni was just getting started. Over the course of her career, she made folk, pop, and jazz albums and won many more awards. She is known as one of the greatest songwriters ever. And it's all because she was never afraid to use all the colors of her imagination.

BORN NOVEMBER 7, 1943
CANADA AND UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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