

# FEATURES

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 7 2004

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## 21 to die for

These hot romances topped the reading list in 2003

**W**e all can use a little romance in our lives — and some of us make sure of it by reading them. More than 2,000 romances were published in 2003. As much as I would have liked to, I haven't read them all. Of those I have read, some were stand-out reads and deserve to be lauded as among the best romances of 2003.

Some old favorites are included with this year's winners — among them, Elizabeth Thornton, who is unfailingly brilliant; Rachel Gibson, who always makes us laugh; Christina Dodd, who makes us believe in second chances; Madeline Hunter, who knocked our socks off with her regency romances; and Lynn Kurland, who makes readers laugh and cry, sometimes at the same time, and takes our breath away.

Then there's Sandy Hingston, who you gotta love for giving hope to middle-aged readers; Julia Quinn, who creates the most delicious nonalpha heroes; Suzanne Brockman, who creates even more delicious alpha heroes; and Teresa Medeiros, who reminds us why those gothic romances were so popular.

Susan Kay Law has set a new standard for sister trilogies; Jacquie D'Alessandro makes nerds look sexy; Janet Chapman makes living in Maine sound wonderful; Sari Robins knows how to work the angst thing in her masterful plots; and Victoria Alexander ended the year on a glorious note with her funny, steamy, tale.

New-to-us writers include Julie Kenner, who can either make us laugh or scare the heck out of us; Pamela Britton, who remembers that making readers laugh is just as important as the romance; Susan Donovan, who paints the wackiest word pictures; Celeste Bradley, who has bedazzled us; Wendy Wax, who shows us that when it's right the chemistry never dies; and Deborah Smith, who introduced us to a heroine we all want to be.

These are the best of the romances reviewed in The Daily Oakland Press during 2003.

### "Almost a Princess,"

by Elizabeth Thornton, Bantam Books, 367 pages, \$6.50.

A man has been killed execution-style in London's Hyde Park and Casper "Case" Devere, Lord



Castleton, agrees to investigate. His inquest leads him to Jane Mayberry, a friend of the principal suspect's sister. Jane fairly bristles at each question from this too-authoritative fellow. When being his overbearing self doesn't work, he tries charming her, but it is too little too late to impress this very independent woman. Readers will easily fall under the spell of this delicious, captivating romantic historical mystery.

### "Nobody But You"

by Julie Kenner, Pocket Books, 374 pages, \$6.99.

Each chapter in this high-energy contemporary romance begins with a Mickey Spillane-like intro that mirrors events in the story. They are a series of zany treasure that will have the reader chortling for sure. For instance: "I need the best," the dame in the doorway said. She sashayed into my office, her painted-on skirt hugging curves tighter than a Ferrari maneuvering the Swiss Alps. Her hips twitched out a message in Morse Code just for me — a message I considered answering, then thought better of it. You just never know with dames. "Nobody But You" opens with a bang and moves at a riotous clip.



### "See Jane Score,"

by Rachel Gibson, Avon Books, 363 pages, \$6.99.

Rachel Gibson has created perfection in her contemporary romance, "See Jane Score." Jane Alcott is a feature reporter at a Seattle newspaper when she is reassigned to cover the local hockey team. What does she know about the sport? Nothing. The members of the team would rather get puck shot than have a reporter travel with the team and among the worst is aloof goalie Luc "Lucky" Martineau. Plain Janes and jocks are the stuff romances are made of, and when Gibson does the telling, there's humor and heat to add to the mix.



### "Sweet Hush,"

by Deborah Smith, Little Brown and Company, 324 pages, \$23.95.

Hush McGillen is the queen bee in her little community, employing mostly family to help run her 200-acre apple farm.



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### "All Men Are Rogues,"

by Sari Robins, Avon, 370 pages, \$5.99

Justin Barclay is a spy sent to wheedle secrets from distant cousin Evelyn Amherst in this moving historical romance by Sari Robins. He completes his mission, even though it means he betrays

the woman with whom he has fallen in love. Although Evelyn is shocked, she is a heroine to admire as she takes charge. The author excels as she

moves beyond the standard plot and develops her intricate tale.



From "All Men Are Rogues," by Sari Robins.