

In Harlequin-Nascar Romance, Engines Roar and Hearts Race

By CHARLES McGRATH

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla., Feb. 16 — After a year of courtship, Harlequin, the leading publisher of romance novels, has entered into not a marriage, exactly, but what a Harlequin heroine would call a meaningful relationship with Nascar, the stock car racing association.

Last year, with Nascar's approval, Harlequin successfully published three Nascar-theme books, including one in which the heroine, an ex-kindergarten teacher, falls in love with a Nascar driver after first being hit by his car and then driving his enormous motor coach from race to race. The company is now embarking on a 16-book paperback series, all of which will have Nascar settings, and the first and last will feature cameo appearances by Carl Edwards, a real-life Nascar driver who has consulted with the author, Nancy Warren, to help create a suitable fictional representation of himself. [Mr. Edwards finished 23rd in the Daytona 500 on Sunday.]

Booksellers and other publishers are following the Nascar-Harlequin hookup with interest, because romances are a hugely important genre, accounting for some 55 percent of all popular, mass-market fiction sold every year. Here at the Daytona International Speedway, two days before the Daytona 500, Mr. Edwards, who when he is not appearing in novels is probably most



Jonathan Ferrey/Getty Images

THE WINNER IS . . . Kevin Harvick edged Mark Martin by two-hundredths of a second to win a crash-filled Daytona 500. Page D1.

famous for victory-celebrating back flips off the rear of his racecar, appeared at a speed-dating event organized by the publisher.

Some 50 men and women, roughly divided between Harlequin fans and diehards who belong to the Nascar Members Club, sat at a big U-shaped table and, waded on by a checkered flag, moved over every few minutes to talk to someone else. They ranged in age from 20-somethings to people who had possibly begun dating back in the dirt-track era. Most of the men wore caps, and many of them had on racing jackets as well.

It was not clear whether any of

Continued on Page A12

In Harlequin-Nascar Series, Engines Roar, Hearts Race

Continued From Page A1

these participants experienced the same life-changing emotions felt by Kendall Clarke, the mousy-seeming heroine of the first novel in the new series, perhaps not coincidentally called "Speed Dating." Clad only in a demi-bra, high-cut panties and a slip, she finds herself sitting in a sports car next to the fictional Nascar driver Dylan Hargreave on the night when she is supposed to receive the Sharpened Pencil Award given to Actuary of the Year. "She'd never done anything this wild in her life," she thinks. "Oh, it felt good."

But at least a couple of phone numbers were exchanged at Daytona, and after completing the circuit, a few participants repaired to a nearby lounge area to chat some more. Some of them even took away a little booklet called "Ladies, Start Your Engines," with excerpts from the first three novels in the series.

Romance novels are changing these days. Old standbys, like romances set in the Regency period, continue to do well, as do stories set in Ireland and Scotland, but the fastest-growing category now is paranormal romances, books about vampires and werewolves in which the path to true love often entails looking past a guy's fangs and body hair to discover his inner self.

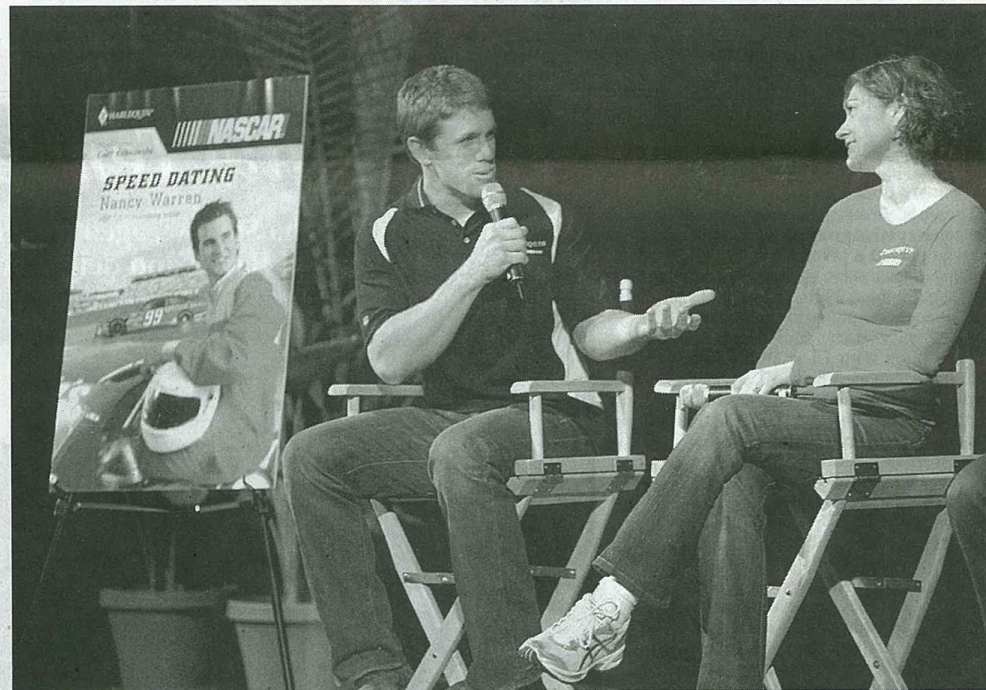
Nascar drivers — heroic, adventurous but, to judge from the books anyway, in need of a down-to-earth woman they can count on — are more in the traditional mold, so for booksellers much of the appeal of the new Harlequin series stems less from its novelty than from the power of the Nascar brand, which commands tremendous loyalty among racing fans.

The new books will be sold in all the places Harlequins are already sold and will also be available at races and on Nascar.com, which has already had considerable success selling licensed works of nonfiction and even a tailgater's cookbook by Mario Batali.

Ann Binkley, a spokeswoman for the Borders chain of bookstores, said: "We're excited about this program. Books about Nascar do very well, and of course romances are extremely important for us, so it will be interesting to see if the crossover happens."

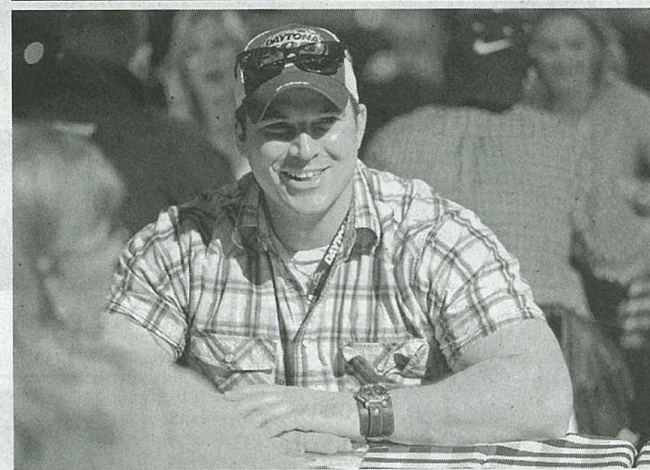
Kate Duffy, the editorial director of Kensington, another big publisher of romances, said she was a little skeptical. "Certain things are hard to translate into romance fiction," she said. "Music and dancing, for example. What I'm concerned about is I don't know a whole lot of romance readers who love Nascar the way they love 'American Idol,' say. Sports is just not something we talk about at our big romance conferences."

On the other hand Michelle Renaud, a public relations manager for Harlequin, said of the matchup between racing and romance, "We know it's working, for sure," and



Photographs by Chris Livingston for The New York Times

The Nascar driver Carl Edwards with Nancy Warren, author of the new Harlequin title "Speed Dating."



Chad Gillam, a Nascar fan taking part in a speed-dating event in Daytona Beach, Fla., to promote a Harlequin series with Nascar settings.

added, "Harlequin has a book for every woman's mood."

Mark Dyer, vice president of licensing for Nascar, said: "Look at our stats. Forty percent of our fans are women, and among younger fans it's trending toward 50-50." He added that according to Nascar surveys 72 percent of female fans enjoy reading and are more likely than nonfans to purchase books.

"It's probably more of a brand-building and P.R. bonanza for us than a financial windfall," Mr. Dyer said of Nascar's marketing efforts. "But that's O.K.," he said, adding: "We like going places we've never been before, and we think this could spring off into other media plat-

forms. I'm not sure there isn't a TV series in this."

Speed dating is actually a misnomer for what happens in the Nascar novels, where the course of love is bumpy, and it typically takes an entire Nextel Cup season for a couple to commit to each other. In these books there is also a good deal more engine-revving, so to speak, than actual clutch-popping or rubber-burning. "Nascar is a family sport," said Ms. Warren, the author of "Speed Dating," and so the writers have to abide by certain rules: no crashes, no drugs or alcohol, no sex.

The characters do get to kiss a lot, and in the supercharged, Harlequinized world of Nascar these are not

ordinary kisses. Here, for example, is how Pamela Britton's "In the Groove," the 2006 novel about the kindergarten teacher, describes a lip-lock between the heroine, Sarah Tingle, and another Nascar star, Lance Cooper: "It wasn't gentle, it wasn't passive, it was a kiss that instantly proved the two of them were like high-octane fuel, their flesh sparking off each other in such a way that Lance felt the purely caveman urge to pick her up and carry her to bed."

Art does not always imitate life of course. There are no caveman moments for Mr. Edwards, 27, who with a winning smile and eyes that a romance writer would surely call pools of sapphire blue, is actually far handsomer than the model, barely out of driver's ed apparently, who appears on the cover of "Speed Dating."

Mr. Edwards's role in that book is to offer sage counsel to both main characters, at one point telling Dylan, his fellow Nascar competitor, "I'm guessing that what we all look for deep down is a woman we can be our true selves with." After the speed-dating event on Friday, Mr. Edwards said that his own taste in reading ran more to nonfiction, and especially writers like Stephen Ambrose and Robert Wright, and added that first he didn't entirely recognize this fictional version of himself.

"If I were really that knowledgeable about the ways of women," he said, "I wouldn't have so many girlfriends."