

*Ahhhh...romance.*

If we've been lucky, we've experienced a brain-scrambling, heart-palpating passion at least once in our lives. If not, we want to. Or we want to again. Or we are happy to live vicariously, voyeurs observing someone else's romances found within the pages of books, whether through solid paper in our hands or blue light emanating from our screens. Love. Just a swipe away.

It's easy to dismiss the romance genre as non-serious writing. But, think again. It's a billion-dollar industry populated with international best-selling books and well-known authors. The modern-day queen of romance by far, is Nora Roberts who brings in \$20 million in revenue each year from her 225 published novels. And aren't we still making movies out of Jane Austen's stories more than 200 years after her death?

Fictional Romance writing is partially uncomplicated, meaning it follows some basic rules. For today's publishers, there must ALWAYS be a happy ending (known in the business as an HEA, or happily ever after.) Without that, a novel would more likely be categorized as Women's Fiction or Historical Fiction or Contemporary Literature. The heroine (h) and the hero (H) must meet early on—by the third chapter at the absolute latest—because people getting together passionately is the whole point. Romance readers don't want to guess at "who" will fall in love or "if" their love will prevail. Readers want to know the players. And because they know those characters will end up together, they want to get to know the characters deeply, to learn their fears, hopes, insecurities, problems, successes, deficits, and accomplishments in a never-ending hope that love will heal, and surely triumph in the end.

At the same time, the Romance genre is deeply rich with the complications of subgenres and sub-subgenres, of well-known tropes or newly fantastical plots. As such, the subgenre of Historical Romance will include European and American historical settings, but, as an example, there is a sub-subgenre of American Western Historical, rife with—you guessed it—wagon trains and Stetson-wearing cowboys and gingham-clad mail-order brides and HEA's happening on remote, wind-blown ranches or in the clapboard cattle towns of the Old West.

Even Erotic Romance has sub-subgenres, from BDSM stories, to menage (such as male-female-male or vice versa), reverse-harem, (meaning a woman with a whole lot of guys), kidnapping-turned-into-love, and plain old contemporary office romance sex in graphic detail among them.

Paranormal Romance is a subgenre as is YA Romance geared to readers young enough to try to make sense of their new, burgeoning feelings. LGBTQ+ is growing in popularity and publishers are hungry for books to satisfy that readership. Romantic Suspense has a gamut of sub-subgenres including one where very specific Heroes—US Navy SEALs—always save the day.

Gothic Romances span time from the Middle Ages to the 16th century. But one of the most beloved subgenres is Regency Romance, set in England from 1811 to 1820. Why is so much

romantic literature written about a few thousand rich people during less than a decade's time? Ah, well, the costumes, the castles, the liveried servants, grand ballrooms, gorgeous grounds, and a very rigid, restrictive society strata that allows characters so, so many ways to break the rules, especially sexually.

Contemporary romance is generally considered any love story from the 1970's on to present day. Lots of sub-subgenres. Boss and employee. Billionaires. Single dads and nannies. Biker clubs and babes. Modern cowboys. From sweet to steamy.

Which brings us to tropes. Well-known are fake engagements that end in the real deal. Enemies to friends is quite common. Escape from the "friend zone" and second chance romances which may or may not have an unknown pregnancy lurking about. (From one hot night years ago?) Forbidden romances, love-reformed bad boys, sports-related hookups (with a sub-sub-subgenre of hockey players?!?)...and so many more.

Despite the genres, subs, tropes and HEA's; despite plot twists from money to mayhem to murder; despite every angst-y misunderstanding that keeps our lovers apart (until the end,) there is one abiding constant great Romance authors perform: they make their readers *care*.

The best Romance authors create characters who enthrall us, or annoy us, or enchant us, but mostly reflect all of the terrible and wonderful parts of ourselves. The heroines and heroes feel real. From the first pages, we readers fall into the story wholeheartedly and we are invested in just who these people are and just how on earth they will make it to that swoon worthy moment we know will come to pass. We laugh with them, cry for them, get a little or a lot hot and bothered, slam the book down from their stupidity, or re-read the ways, means and the lines that express tenderness and affection so well they take our breath away.

It's my greatest challenge. To write so that my readers care. To write words that capture life's disappointments and struggles. To walk my characters through the quicksand we are all mired in and help them find the strength and courage to get themselves to solid footing. To show these fictional people how to find moments of pure enchantment, snippets of staggering astonishment, hours that banish loneliness, nights and days of passion, and finally, enduringly, help them find great, great joy.