

Chapter 5

Contemporary Romance

The life of every woman is a romance!

Mme. de Genlis

Love is life. And if you miss love, you miss life.

Leo Buscaglia

Love is a game that two can play and both win.

Eva Gabor

Definition

Contemporary Romance—Romance novels with contemporary settings (currently any time after World War II), these novels usually focus on the attempts of the characters to find success and fulfillment professionally, personally, and romantically.

The largest and possibly the most inclusive of all Romance subgenres, the Contemporary Romance is what most people have in mind when they refer to the generic Romance novel. Essentially love stories with contemporary settings (currently any time after World War II), these novels usually focus on the attempts of a woman to find success and fulfillment professionally, personally, and romantically. Usually by the end of the book, the heroine has happily attained these goals. Although there are certain exceptions, a committed, permanent, monogamous relationship—one that often includes marriage and possibly a family—is still the ultimate goal for this type of romance. However, in line with current social trends, many recent heroines do not retire to hearth and home but continue in their careers, not only after marriage, but after childbirth, as well. Novels written prior to 1970 often do not feature this particular trend, and in those written during the early part of the twentieth century, the heroine is typically not employed. Most likely she will be doing volunteer work, helping her family at home, or pursuing some other properly genteel occupation.

It is worth noting that the term "contemporary," as it is used in this book, is not merely a synonym for "modern-day." Although by far the majority of Contemporary Romances read today are both contemporary and modern-day, there are a number of novels of this kind written well before World War II that are still in print. These novels, while now exhibiting a historical flavor, were actually written as contemporary love stories and had as their purpose the telling of modern-day love relationships, relevant to the then-current times. Many works by prototypical authors such as Grace Livingston Hill and Faith Baldwin are examples of this. Eventually, of course, these works (if they remain in print) will be classified largely as Historicals, or as Inspirational in the case of Hill, in much the same way as are the works by earlier writers of Contemporary Romances such as Jane Austen and Samuel Richardson.

It is also interesting to consider that the Contemporary Romances of today that survive may well become the Historicals of the future. Of course, romances written as Historicals and romances that endure to become historical are actually two different things, varying both in purpose and in the amount of background information supplied to the reader. Most Contemporaries will not make the transition; they will merely become dated and irrelevant and will eventually go out of print. Only those with exceptionally well-drawn, believable characters involved in basic human conflicts have even a chance for survival.

The settings used in Contemporary Romances are diverse and vary more widely than ever. Ranging from a peaceful Midwestern suburb, busy inner-city business district, or busy Texas ranch to a steamy tropical island, battle-torn third world country, or isolated mountain retreat, the choices for settings are endless and limited only by the real possibilities of the current time period. Typical settings include rural or small town domestic, social, or local business or ranch situations; urban work, business, apartment/condo, or community organizational settings (both upscale and inner city); suburban domestic, school, or social situations; and exotic foreign or romantic domestic vacation or job situations (e.g., isolated mountain retreat, beach house, cruise ship, ski resort, Mediterranean or Caribbean island).

The plots are also varied, dependent to a large extent upon the physical settings and occupations of the main characters; however, the basic boy-meets-girl, boy-misunderstands-and-therefore-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl structure (or its reverse) tends to remain more or less the same. In a typical plot, the heroine (either young and relatively innocent or older, independent, and more experienced—but always intelligent and attractive "in her own way") is trying to get on with her life, either by setting off to "seek her fortune," picking up the pieces of a broken past, or trying to accomplish some other goal. She soon encounters—or reenounters, if this is a reunion story—the hero (traditionally, but not always, handsome, self-assured—even arrogant—and successful or rich), to whom she takes an instant dislike; however, she is usually "strangely attracted" to him despite this initial aversion and can't understand why. Through a convenient set of circumstances (they share a common goal or interest, they must work together, they live next door to each other, they have children the same age, they are staying in the same resort, they are stranded together in the same jungle, etc.), they are thrown together and eventually fall in love. Inevitably, of course, conflicts arise and the lovers spend a good portion of the book trying to work things out. The conflict can be external (other people or situations keeping the protagonists apart) or internal (the feelings, values, and past histories of the hero and heroine causing the problems), and misunderstandings, both real and imagined, often play a large part in keeping the pair at odds. However, by the end of the story, all differences are resolved, the hero and heroine reconcile, and their happy future is generally assured. Although the main plot in

all romances is the love story line dealing with the protagonists, subplots of various kinds appear in many of the longer romance works. These subplots are rarely as well-developed as is the main storyline, but they do add interest and depth to the story as a whole. Also, in the case of trilogies or other linked books, some type of subplot usually continues throughout the series and is resolved in the final volume.

While this basic romance plot pattern is relatively constant (just as the pattern for the Mystery genre will always revolve around the sleuth, the crime, and the solution), the past decade continues to bring new developments in the way in which it is applied. Situations and issues that were once seen as either taboo or too serious for Romance (e.g., substance abuse, child or spousal abuse, terminal illness, homosexuality, prostitution, illiteracy, infidelity, mental illness, impotence, interracial relationships) have become commonplace and characters who were considered unacceptable or too realistic for the genre (e.g., the hero or heroine deeply wounded by abuse, war, rape, torture, or other devastating tragedy; the ex-convict or alcoholic hero or heroine; the unwed mother heroine; the variously disabled hero or heroine; the bad girl heroine; the gay friend or couple) now rarely raise an eyebrow. This continuing trend toward more contemporary relevance, as well as more complex plotting and realistic characters, is no doubt one reason that the lines between the Romance and other types of more mainstream Women's Fiction are blurring. The boundaries between them are more fluid than ever and, while this continues to make it more difficult to neatly categorize the genres and the subgenres within them, it also is an indication that Contemporary Romance is coming of age and maturing into a genre that is socially pertinent, reflects current trends, and connects with today's readers.

Characters in Contemporaries will be as varied as the settings and the plots, and they will differ according to the type of romance. Nevertheless, most protagonists have several characteristics in common, whatever the romance style. Key among these are self-motivation, resilience, honesty, and above all, a highly developed sense of honor. The characters' actions may be suspect, but they are always performed for the "right" reasons—reasons that are usually selfless and have to do with helping or saving others (e.g., the hero kills his father because the father was molesting his sister or the heroine lies about her job qualifications so she can support her younger siblings). Approval of these characters is critical for reader identification, and while they have imperfections, they must be able to generate enough respect and admiration (along with likability, if possible) for the reader to care.

In addition, the Contemporary heroine often displays a high degree of independence, intelligence, initiative, and determination, relying more on herself to solve her problems than on the hero. She also may be wary of emotional relationships because of being hurt in the past. While at one point it could be generalized that the more daring heroines dominated the sensual romances and the less adventuresome women populated those romances of the innocent (or sweet) variety, this is no longer necessarily the case. Strong, independent, capable heroines appear in Contemporaries of all types, regardless of the sensuality levels. Heroines are also no longer necessarily pure and virginal. Changing societal patterns have paved the way for a more sexually experienced heroine—often one who has been widowed or divorced, but more recently, one who has simply had an earlier serious relationship that didn't work out (usually through no fault of her own). As a result, the sensuality levels of the Contemporary Romance have been rapidly rising, and while these vary widely and range from sweet to explicit, it is generally agreed that romances across the board are steamier and more sexually graphic than in the past. The innocent

heroine, of course, still exists and is, in fact, practically mandatory in most traditional Regencies and Inspirational as well as in the few remaining Innocent or Sweet category and single-title lines. However, the current trend in both publishing and in reader demand has been toward heroines of the more modern, sexually experienced variety.

Like heroines, heroes in Contemporaries come in all shapes and sizes. Often they are strong, take-charge men, handsome and possibly wealthy, who have already achieved success in their business or professional fields. However, this classic, dominant, alpha-male type hero is not the only choice available. The beta hero, who has a gentler, softer, more sensitive side has been part of the mix for some time, and while he currently takes a back seat to the more popular alpha hero—especially with the stellar success of action-oriented romances and their super alpha protagonists—his sympathetic nature and quiet strength has great appeal and is perfect for some situations. Although “pure” heroes of both types exist, the trend now is toward blending of some of these characteristics and in reality, the most successful heroes combine elements of both (e.g., the strong, take-charge hero with a well-hidden, surprisingly compassionate side or the unassuming, quiet, almost nerdy hero who takes on the town bully and wins). Whatever their types, heroes at first often appear reserved, even aloof, and somewhat mysterious, and are typically unwilling to become emotionally involved with anyone. Nevertheless, they are attracted to the heroine “in spite of themselves,” and eventually must come to terms with the reasons for their feelings. (Typically, they have been hurt by a woman at some point in the past and assume that “women are all alike,” or they have their own past or secret issues and consider themselves unworthy of love. The insightful, perceptive, caring heroine, of course, changes all that.) Of course, the reverse of this can also be true, with the heroine being the wary party and the hero knowing exactly how he feels.

Supporting characters also appear in these stories, and in the longer romances they are often described in a fair amount of detail. (The best friend, the other woman, the other man, the toxic boss, and the villain are examples of typical supporting characters.) Nevertheless, in these stories the emphasis is on the hero and heroine, and rarely are the additional characters developed more than is necessary to provide background for the main story line. The longer and more complex the story, of course, the more subplots there are and the greater the chance for more thorough development of the minor characters, especially if this story is part of a series and these characters will reappear in subsequent books. However, in most cases, these secondary characters are not as fully delineated as the protagonists.

Wide-ranging, and often murky, the Contemporary Romance subgenre essentially consists of two broad, primary groups—the Traditional Contemporary Romance, which is comprised primarily of single titles, and the Category, or Series, Contemporary Romance, all of which are part of the series lines. These are supplemented by several other separate, but closely related and often overlapping, fiction types—in particular, Women’s Romantic Fiction, Chick Lit and its derivatives, and Soap Opera—all of which can further be blended or broken down into a number of diverse subsets of varying types.

Traditional Contemporary Romance

(Note: In earlier editions of this guide, Traditional Contemporary Romance was called Basic Contemporary Romance, primarily because the more appropriate term, “Traditional,” had been used within the industry to indicate a sweet or innocent, usually category, romance. However, as times have changed and this is no longer the common perception, it now makes sense to make the switch.)

The most enduring and encompassing of all the Contemporary Romance subgenres, the Traditional Contemporary Romance, is simply a nonformula love story with a contemporary setting. This subset includes within it most contemporary romances that are not subsumed within the other contemporary groups, and most are single-title romances, an industry term used to distinguish them from the various category romances and indicate the way in which they are published.

Unbound by certain restraints inherent in the other types of Contemporary Romances, especially the Category Series Romance, the Traditional Contemporary Romance makes use of a wide variety of characters and settings, occasionally employing plot patterns that are both unconventional and unpredictable. The way in which sex is handled also varies greatly in these stories, ranging from the innocent to the erotic, with the majority falling somewhere in between. As might be expected, older novels, especially those written prior to the 1970s, are generally of the more innocent variety, while many of those written in the decades since can contain much more sexually explicit material. Thanks to the influence of the Hot Historicals of the 1970s, the Traditional Contemporary steamed up in the 1980s, and with the advent of Erotic Romance, sensuality levels spiked even higher. The interest in Erotic Romance that began well over a decade ago, possibly with the release of Red Sage’s first *Secrets* anthology in 1995, continues to flourish, gradually bleeding over into most other subgenres and ramping up the sizzle factor across the board. What began with several smaller print and online publishers (e.g., Red Sage Publishing, Ellora’s Cave) now touches the entire industry and many of the major publishers have launched Erotic Romance lines of their own. (See chapter 14, “Erotic Romance.”) The Traditional Contemporary Romance subgenre is, and always has been, one of the most popular and widely read of the Romance subgenres and is exemplified by the works of writers such as Nora Roberts, Debbie Macomber, Cathie Linz, Barbara Freethy, Jill Marie Landis, Jennifer Crusie, and Susan Elizabeth Phillips. However, popularity is not limited to just the *current* materials within the genre. Many bestselling authors of past decades are either still in print or have been reprinted (in either digital or hardcopy format) and are still read occasionally by today’s romance readers. Among these authors are Grace Livingston Hill (now read primarily as an Inspirational writer), Faith Baldwin, Elizabeth Cadell, and, more recently, LaVyrle Spencer, who retired in 1997.

Category, or Numbered Series, Romance

The Category Romance, typified by the numbered series romance lines published by Harlequin and Silhouette, is essentially a love story written to a particular pattern. These patterns are determined by each publisher and are series-specific. Most series follow a variation of the boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl plot pattern, with the specific requirements of each series being spelled out in the writing guidelines available online from the publisher. These guidelines outline the overall focus of the line, the degree of sensuality allowed or required, the acceptable word length, character types, and other information useful to the would-be author; however, they also help readers and librarians understand the differences among the lines. (As of this writing, guidelines for all the lines published by Harlequin Books, including both series and single titles, are available at eharlequin.com. Choose the “Writing Guidelines” link at the bottom of the page.) Although many category authors are well-known in their own right and are sought out by readers, most series are still marketed on the basis of their series appeal. Nevertheless, differences in