

31. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, *Saint-Germain Cycle*, beginning with *Hotel Transylvania* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978).
32. Barbara Hambly, *Those Who Hunt the Night* (New York: Ballantine, 1988).
33. Simmons cited above.
34. Andrei Codrescu, *The Blood Countess: A Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).
35. Brian Stableford, *David Lydyard Trilogy*, beginning with *The Werewolves of London* (New York: Carrol and Graf, 1992).
36. Koji Suzuki, *Ring* (New York: Vertical, 2003).
37. Preston and Child, *The Pendergast series*, beginning with *Relic* (cited above).
38. Anne Rice, *The Vampire Chronicles*, beginning with *Interview with the Vampire* (cited above).
39. Brooks cited above.
40. Rice cited above.
41. Koontz cited above.
42. King, *The Shining* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).
43. King, *Bag of Bones* (New York: Scribner, 1998).
44. Robert McCammon, *Boy's Life* (New York: Pocket Books, 1991).
45. Rice cited above.
46. Susan Krinard, *Prince of Wolves* (New York: Bantam, 1994).
47. Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Cadavers* (New York: Norton, 2003).
48. King, *The Cell* (New York: Scribner, 2006).
49. Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005).
50. Dennis Lehane, *Shutter Island* (New York: Morrow, 2003).
51. Nora Roberts, *Sign of the Seven Trilogy*, beginning with *Blood Brothers* (New York: Jove, 2007).
52. Scott Sigler, *Infected* (New York: Crown, 2008).
53. Michael Norman and Beth Scott, *Haunted series*, beginning with *Haunted Wisconsin* (Sauk City, WI: Stanton and Lee, 1980).
54. Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson, *Ghost Hunting: True Stories of Unexplained Phenomena from the Atlantic Paranormal Society* (New York: Pocket Books, 2007).
55. Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: Morrow, 2001).
56. Anthony J. Fonseca and June Michele Pulliam, *Hooked on Horror: A Guide to Reading Interests in Horror Fiction* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), xv.

8

ROMANCE

Imagine the following familiar scenario. On one side of the service desk we have a Romance reader, who is looking for a new book by her favorite author. Or perhaps she has read everything by that author, and she's looking for some new authors. She is a little wary of approaching library staff, because many people, and perhaps especially the librarians she has encountered, seem to deplore her reading taste. She knows, in a general way, what she likes about Romances: the independent heroines, the happy ending, and, especially, the feeling of satisfaction she gets from the Romances she reads. However, she may not be able to put these emotional responses into words. She may be embarrassed to ask about Romances and describe the kind of Romances she likes—perhaps the ones with explicit sex—and is certainly uneasy about asking for assistance.

On the other side of the desk, we have the librarian. Unless we librarians are Romance readers as well, what we feel when faced with a fan of the genre has been put succinctly by one of my staff: genuine fear. It's not just Romance, of course; every time we seek to assist readers in genres in which we are not well read, we feel uncomfortable and inadequate. How on earth can we help readers if we know little or nothing about the genre they love?

Unfortunately, a patron's discomfort plus a librarian's fear do not produce a satisfactory readers' advisory interview, no matter what the genre. All too often, this scenario reflects reality, although an increasing number of librarians have discovered the appeal of this vast genre and have more success working with readers.

A DEFINITION

It's no easy task to define a genre so large and diverse that it accounts for the largest share of the consumer book market.¹ This immense genre covers a wide range of books—from contemporary to historical, racy to gentle, realistic to paranormal, and much in between. Still, definitions help us focus our energies, come to terms with the genre, and better understand its fans.

In *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*, Kristin Ramsdell defines Romance as "a love story in which the central focus is on the development and satisfactory resolution of the love relationship between the two main characters, written in such a way as to provide the reader with some degree of vicarious emotional participation in the courtship process."² These are the two keys to Romance fiction: first, the plot revolves around the love relationship and its happy ending; all else that happens is secondary. Other genres certainly rely on romantic themes, and Romance readers may enjoy those too. In books that fall within the Romance genre, however, the romantic relationships are the focus of the novels. Secondly, these stories are told in such a way that the reader is involved in the outcome of the Romance; the reader participates on an emotional level and experiences genuine satisfaction at the emotionally satisfying conclusion. Certainly we may feel an emotional involvement with the characters in books in other genres, but here the reader's participation in the story is essential. We experience the story emotionally, and this makes our satisfaction in its outcome hard to explain to someone unfamiliar with the genre. In school we are neither taught nor expected to appreciate stories on this emotional level. The satisfaction that fans experience with Romances (as well as the others in this Emotions group) depends so heavily on the emotional connection that the appeal is hard to explain to nonfans and difficult even for fans to acknowledge and verbalize. See figure 8.1 for characteristics of the genre.

CHARACTERISTICS AND THE GENRE'S APPEAL

Tone/Mood

Romance appeals first to our emotions. This is one of the reasons fans find this genre (as well as Women's Lives and Relationships, Gentle Reads, and Horror) so difficult to talk about: it is almost impossible for them to characterize what it is that they enjoy. How does one describe the effect of that

Figure 8.1 Characteristics of Romances

1. The evocative, emotional tone draws readers in, and they participate in this love story and read toward the emotionally satisfying, happy ending.
2. Characters are easily identifiable types. Men are rugged, strong, distant, and dangerous; women are strong, bright, independent, and often beautiful.
3. The story features either a misunderstanding between the protagonists or outside circumstances that force them apart, followed by the satisfactory resolution of their romantic relationship. Social and moral issues may play a role in the story lines of Romances, although they are always secondary and do not interfere with the happy ending.
4. Engaging details of time and place attract readers, and these historical, cultural, and social particulars often frame the stories.
5. Although Romances usually can be read fairly quickly and are called fast-paced by their fans, they can also be stopped and started easily, without losing the story line.
6. Language plays an important role in setting the stage. The language of a Romance is instantly recognizable, with extensive use of descriptive adjectives to delineate characters, setting, and romantic or sexual interludes.

satisfyingly evocative, romantic tone? Readers expect to be drawn in, to identify with the characters and their relationship, to experience these stories, and it is this tone that prompts the vicarious emotional participation on the part of the reader. The tone may be upbeat throughout or may include darker moments, but the end always produces a satisfactory resolution.

This emotional pull provides the foundation for the success of many Romance writers. These are stories about the creation of families, and readers feel the power of love on all levels: parents to children, among siblings and friends, and with lovers. This tone may be difficult to define, but fans recognize it and respond to the atmosphere it creates. Readers tell us they get a special feeling from reading Romances, that they read these books to experience that emotional satisfaction of being part of a love story.

Certainly the tone in Romances may vary from book to book. Some are lighthearted, like Cathie Linz's romantic comedy series set in Rock Creek and Serenity Falls and featuring quirky and sometimes flamboyant characters, small town atmosphere, and sizzling sex (*Good Girls Do* is the

first).³ Others, like Jennifer Crusie's laugh-out-loud *Faking It*, combine a lighthearted tone with an insightful yet poignant look at families and relationships.⁴ In others, especially some of the Paranormal Romances, the mood may be dark and dangerous, even though the conclusion provides the requisite happy ending. Christine Feehan's popular Dark series as well as her tales of the Drake sisters feature ominous secrets and deadly adversaries which create this dark mood.⁵

Characterization

Characters rather than plot twists drive Romances. In a Romance the lovers must come to understand themselves and their relationships with each other. As readers, we see interior as well as exterior aspects of these characters, and we respond to them and their developing relationship. In her Contemporary Romances Susan Elizabeth Phillips explores complex family relationships and the difficult concepts of guilt, forgiveness, and grief. Although these affect the protagonists and force them to mature, these themes do not detract from the power of the Romance. In fact, it is because of the environment the Romance creates, one in which the characters feel safe sharing their deepest emotions, that healing finally comes.

This growth, however, is not limited only to Romances with a serious side. In almost all, the characters are forced to change, to relinquish preconceptions about themselves (often their lack of self-worth) and their partners before they are able to embrace the romantic union readers demand. For example, in Loretta Chase's *Your Scandalous Ways*, heroine Francesca Bonnard was divorced by her husband, now an English lord but in reality a traitor.⁶ Shunned by society and forced to leave England, she has created a new career as an elegant courtesan. When world-weary spy James Cordier is sent to steal the letters that will incriminate her ex-husband, he must accept his love for her, a fallen woman, and she must learn to trust a man despite the betrayal that ruined her.

That characters are written to a pattern is important, too, as it is in most genres from Adventure to Women's Lives and Relationships. The women are bright, independent, strong, and, perhaps surprisingly, not always beautiful but certainly interesting and articulate. The men must be strong, distant, and always dangerous, because the stronger the hero, the greater the victory when the heroine brings him to his senses and his knees. Conquering a gentle, affectionate, mild-mannered, sensible hero simply is not as satisfying, either for the heroine or for the reader.

The best also include well-developed, interesting, and often quirky secondary characters. For example, Feehan focuses on one Drake sister in each of the series titles, but the others appear throughout, their pre- or post-stories interwoven into the fabric of the current sister's dilemma. *Magic in the Wind* is the first.⁷

One last important point about characterization is that we almost always get the point of view of both protagonists. This allows us to experience their inner dilemmas and follow their thoughts as they work out their relationship. This is not just her story; it is his as well. Romances are almost never written first-person; the reader and author require the third-person perspective to create the full picture, to reveal easily the inner thoughts and struggles of both characters. For example, Mary Balogh's *Simply Magic* offers the perspective of both teacher Susanna Osbourne and wealthy nobleman Peter Edgeworth, thus providing an intimate look at the thoughts of both characters as they evaluate their feelings and their relationship.⁸

Story Line

The focus of the story line in the Romance is the romantic relationship and its happy conclusion. All else that happens may be interesting, but it is secondary to this resolution. By the way, we can always identify a Romance by that first kiss, which is like no other. The hero awakens passions in himself and the heroine that they have never experienced before. We may know earlier that they are destined to fall in love, but the kiss confirms their connection—for us and for them. If you read Romances, you know what I mean.

Marriage does not always occur within the story itself; however, hero and heroine recognize and affirm their love, and the suggestion of marriage at some point is almost *de rigueur*. If this recognition and affirmation of love do not occur, the book is not a Romance—or certainly not a satisfying one. Many of Nicholas Sparks's and Danielle Steel's titles are romantic, but not Romances. Robert James Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* is the classic example of a romantic book that is not a Romance.⁹ Although critics and reviewers called this popular title a Romance, fans of the genre did not agree. In Romances the lovers are not separated at the conclusion of the novel, and that ending gives Waller's book a completely different feel.

This is not to say that Romances are limited to this narrow story line. Many add elements of adventure, intrigue, or mystery to their stories. Lauren Willig develops Romance story lines in both the present day and late eighteenth century in her popular series featuring a researcher studying a

group of English spies who were contemporaries of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Linda Lael Miller adds action and adventure to her popular Western Historical Romances. Other authors offer intriguing insights into occupations (chocolatier in Jennifer Greene's *Blame It on Chocolate*, children's book author and illustrator in Susan Elizabeth Phillips's *This Heart of Mine*, and futuristic zombie hunter in Linnea Sinclair's *Down Home Zombie Blues*).¹⁰ These details are, however, pleasant extras. The point of the story line is the culmination of the romantic relationship. In the Romance, the hero and heroine will resolve their difficulties and discover their love. We read Romances because we find it so satisfying to participate in the courtship process. We read them for the emotional high they provide.

In her scholarly study of the Romance genre, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, Jayne Ann Krentz writes in an essay with Linda Barlow that "her future happiness and his depend on her ability to teach him to love."¹¹ The plot is structured around this process, although in more recent titles, it may be the hero providing the instruction, or the teaching may be mutual as both hero and heroine learn to love and trust in their love. In Stephanie Laurens's racy Regency-set Romances, the hero is almost always placed in the role of persuading the heroine to accept his offer, although she may be the one who ultimately teaches him how to love.

Although Romances guarantee a happy ending, with the love relationship resolved, many also explore provocative moral and social issues. Kathleen Eagle addresses abuse as well as American Indian issues, while Virginia Kantra tackles a range of controversial topics from child and spousal abuse to alcoholism and racial discrimination. Even Regencies, including Mary Jo Putney's *The Rake* and several titles by Mary Balogh and Carla Kelly, address the social ills of that time (early nineteenth century), from alcoholism and other addictions to the difficulties facing returning veterans and the problems of workers and factories.¹² In addition, countless Romances deal with the role of women in society and efforts throughout history to improve their plight. Social issues and taboos have long found a forum in all types of Romances—Historical, Contemporary, Paranormal, and Inspirational.

Frame/Setting

Readers often have decided preferences for the time frame in which romances are set. Whether the background details writers provide are just wallpaper or elaborate and authentic, they attract particular readers simply because they portray the past, the present, the future, or some alternate reality that involves multiple time periods and travel between.

For example, in Regency Romances the setting among the *ton* (the elite upper class) in London with the parties, clothes, and carriages is as important for fans as is the witty banter between hero and heroine and the Regency jargon that fills the pages. Readers of Contemporary Romances appreciate the emphasis on heroines and their professional lives, reflecting the importance placed on this dual role for women by society today. Alternate Reality Romances cover a broad spectrum of Romances: Futuristic (set in future times with the feel, if not the detail, of Science Fiction), Paranormal (featuring supernatural and magical elements, including vampires, ghosts, etc.), and Time Travel (with protagonists who move to and from time periods, sometimes transporting other characters as well). Fans look for trademark characteristics of each type, with the classic Romance story line set against that frame.

Other writers place their novels in particular recognizable areas—Debbie Macomber's Pacific Northwest, Eagle's contemporary and historical western landscapes, Dorothea Benton Frank's low country of South Carolina. For some the setting is a generic urban, small town, or rural area, but in all cases these details add to the mood the author creates with her story and underline the character's progress toward that happy ending.

Still others employ the career and hobby frames popular in many genres. Protagonists may be involved in the art world, or crime (as thieves and detectives), business, medicine, and journalism. Hobbies, too, provide interesting backgrounds that intersect with occupations and attract readers with the details that range from the more common (cooking, needlecrafts) to the obscure (belly dancing).

Pacing

Fans tell us that Romances are fast reading. Because they are character-centered, Romances rely more on dialogue than description. This affects the reading experience, and the books feel as if they read quickly. Although a variety of events may take place, the stories are constructed so they can be put down when a reader is interrupted. When that reader picks it up again, she falls right back into the story.

Style/Language

Writers use language to create the romantic tone and emotional attraction readers seek. One can identify a Romance in the first few pages, just by observing the way the story is constructed and the language used.

Romances are descriptive, and writers rely on adjectives to describe characters and places, as well as to set the mood. The vocabulary sets the tone and the stage for the Romance. In fact, writers such as Nora Roberts and Sandra Brown, who now write harder-edged Romantic Suspense instead of the Romances that established their reputations, have kept much of their Romance-reading audience, in part because they have retained the language of the Romance, even though their more suspenseful books no longer fit within the Romance genre. In their novels of Romantic Suspense, the descriptions of character and place pull the readers into the story, allowing them to "see" the action, to participate fully in the story. The books feel and read like Romances, even though the focus is different and the action more violent.

KEY AUTHORS

Among current Romance authors every librarian—and reader—should know are Susan Elizabeth Phillips (Contemporary), Julia Quinn (Historical), and Sherrilyn Kenyon (Paranormal).

Award-winning and *New York Times* best-selling writer Susan Elizabeth Phillips is one of the foremost writers of Contemporary Romance. Interesting heroines with more depth than may at first appear, unexpected heroes (often active men involved in sports with as much brain as brawn), sparkling dialogue, a heartwarming tone, explicit sex, and a generally lighthearted approach—even if controversial issues are introduced and resolved—characterize Phillips's writing. Her recent award-winning title, *Natural Born Charmer*, exemplifies her passionate, tender, and insightful style.¹³ It opens with down-home football star Dean Robillard driving his flashy sports car down a back road in Colorado when he comes upon a very irritated but attractive young woman—in a beaver costume! Sparks fly between the two, as they work out their differences, shed their emotional baggage, and accept their future as family. These romantic resolutions may be rocky, but they are also humorous and touching.

Julia Quinn also writes award-winning Romantic Comedy, but with a historical setting. She is best known for her series featuring each of the eight Bridgerton siblings and their romantic entanglements. Intelligent conversation and wicked banter, explicit but always joyful sex, and close relationships among family and lovers characterize these stories, filled

with dangerous yet vulnerable heroes and bright heroines. Set in the early nineteenth century, these novels use Regency society as a backdrop, and the mysterious Lady Whistledown's society papers, an intriguingly anonymous but accurate gossip sheet, frame the story and add to the humor. But they are romances above all and offer intelligent but not always beautiful heroines matched with handsome heroes, who possess an unexpected softer side. In *The Duke and I*, the first title in the series, Daphne, who has always been a friend to men of the *ton* yet never sought as a romantic interest, traps a duke who harbors a dark secret into a loving relationship and marriage.¹⁴

Representing Paranormal or Alternative Reality Romances, Sherrilyn Kenyon projects a darker tone. With a doctorate in history, she draws on her knowledge of ancient Greece in creation of her universe in her enormously popular Dark-Hunter series. But there is also humor: one hero is a were-leopard and the corresponding heroine is allergic to cats. Complex characters, brooding heroes and strong heroines, a rich universe of linked characters who appear in titles throughout the series, verbal battles, satisfying relationships, edgy story lines with steamy passion, a strong sense of place, and deadly dangers fill these novels. The first in the Dark-Hunter series, *Fantasy Lover*, provides a good introduction to Kenyon's style and themes.¹⁵ Julian of Macedon, a former Greek general, has been cursed to remain a love slave for eternity—or so it seems until he falls in love with Grace Alexander, the only woman who might be able to free him.

What happened to Nora Roberts, you might ask? Once the mainstay of Romance readers and library collections, Roberts now writes contemporary and paranormal Romantic Suspense almost exclusively. As one of the first authors to make the move to Romantic Suspense, she has carried many of her fans with her. Her new titles continue to employ Romance themes. There is a clash between the resourceful, passionate heroine and the strong man who listens and protects but who also respects her independence. These are fast-paced stories with a full measure of sexual tension and often, explicit sex. Relationships among family members, friends, and lovers form the core of her plots, with secrets and treasures often adding an interesting frame. However, since Suspense now rivals Romance for primacy in her novels, she is covered in chapter 3, "Romantic Suspense," with the Adrenaline genres, as are Jayne Ann Krentz (who also writes Historical Romantic Suspense as Amanda Quick), Sandra Brown, and other former Romance stalwarts.