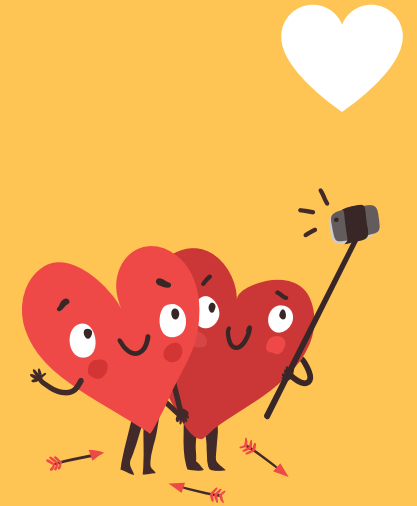


10

COMMON *romance* TROPES



*...Plus, how
to write them.*

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN

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No matter if it's a closed-door, wholesome love story or provocative erotica, every good romance has a central theme, or "trope," as the foundation. A trope is the basic premise around which the story is centered. At first glance, tropes can seem problematic: Who wants to write a predictable plotline? But the truth is that tropes work – and romance readers love them. Readers *like* to have that framework to guide them through the story. It provides anticipation to see how the author will make this particular trope unique while still leading to that happily ever after – or happily for now – that every story must have to be considered romance.

Jennifer Probst, bestselling romance author and author of *Write Naked: A Bestseller's Secrets to Writing Romance* & *Navigating the Path to Success*, says that tropes have been used throughout history as a concrete, smart way to hook the reader immediately and set up the conflict. "This is true for both movies and books," she says. "From second-chance love to enemies-to-lovers, marriage of convenience, and, yes, even secret baby, readers are familiar with the formula and can anticipate certain beloved ideas and themes woven into the story."

Why do readers like tropes?

Some may say romance stories are all the same because the couple always gets together at the end. Yes, the couple does have their happy ending, but all genre fiction, not just romance, brings with it certain expectations, especially regarding the ending. In a mystery, readers expect the mystery to be solved in a satisfying way, and in a thriller, the hero/heroine makes it out alive despite the harrowing circumstances, etc. These are conventions set up by the genre, and readers appreciate them. "This deliberate unfolding of story can be a source of great comfort and excitement to readers," Probst says.

Keeping it fresh

While a trope provides you with some guidelines for how a story plays out, it *doesn't* mean you shouldn't get creative as an author. You still need to consider what you can do to make the story different while still staying within the parameters of reader expectations. Utilize your own unique writing voice to add your special touch to the story. Probst adds that the key to effectively writing a trope is to infuse the story with emotion and try to put a fresh spin on a familiar formula: "Some examples of creating unique content would be: flipping gender roles, combining multiple tropes instead of one, instilling dynamic secondary characters, updating traditional tropes into a modern environment – anything that invigorates a story by thinking outside the box."



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10 OF THE MOST COMMON TROPES SEEN IN MODERN ROMANCE

1 Enemies to lovers

It's been said there is a fine line between love and hate, and that's exactly what this trope relies on. In this story, the two love interests start out with an intense dislike for each other. They're constantly at odds, arguing with and annoying one another. This fuels their emotions – making them one tiny step from either falling passionately in love or throwing each other into a pit of scalding lava.

Kristen Callihan, author of *Dear Enemy*, says this trope is one of her favorites because there is so much potential for incredible romantic and sexual tension. "Going deeper, there is also so much room for character growth – either with the character(s) changing into someone kinder, more open, more accepting, or they realize that their ingrained prejudices about their 'enemy' were wrong. As an author, you have to give the reader a reason to believe that these people are ultimately good for each other and that they are stronger together than apart. You can't do that successfully if one or both characters are cruel, bullying, or there is an uneven power balance. So, you have to come up with a scenario in which not everything is as it seems – the main characters misinterpreting certain situations, for instance – or, as in *Dear Enemy*, the strife was in the past,

and the characters have grown since then. Finally, at some point in the narrative, these characters, who have been at odds, must somehow lock together and hold each other up. It's a delicate balance, but one that pays off if done correctly."

2 Different worlds

When two characters from vastly different backgrounds fall in love, plenty of problems can arise. Usually, those problems have to do with the other people in the main characters' lives – family members, friends, bosses, etc. – as well as societal norms. Iconic romance movies like *Pretty Woman*, *Dirty Dancing*, and the recent book-turned-blockbuster *Crazy Rich Asians* all illustrate the nuances of this trope. In *Pretty Woman*, a sex worker and a rich businessman end up falling in love; in *Dirty Dancing*, our main characters are a young woman from a privileged background and a dance instructor at a summer resort; and in *Crazy Rich Asians*, it is an American university professor and a wealthy bachelor from a well-known family in Singapore. In all of these examples, the biggest tension comes from the expectations of the main characters' family and friends, who don't approve of the pairing. These external pressures push the lovers to examine what they really want in a relationship and to decide if they are willing to fight for it.

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the biggest threat to the relationship between Rachel and Nick is his mother, who wants him to find someone with the same social and financial status as their family. The mom spells out her objections in no uncertain terms, and it's a perfect example that illustrates the conflict at the core of a different world trope:

Rachel: ... You didn't like me the second I got here. Why is that?

Mom: There is a Hokkien phrase "kaki lang." It means our own kind of people, and you're not our own kind.

Rachel: Because I'm not rich? Because I didn't go to a British boarding school, or wasn't born into a wealthy family?

Mom: You're a foreigner. American – and all Americans think about is their own happiness.

Rachel: Don't you want Nick to be happy?

Mom: It's an illusion. We understand how to build things that last. Something you know nothing about.

Rachel must decide what is best for her – and how much she is willing to fight for Nick. In these examples, one person is wealthy and the other isn't, but there are other scenarios that can be used as well: neurotic scientist and a creative artist, city boy and a farm girl, or lovers from different races and religions.

3 Second-chance romance

In a second-chance romance, the main characters already know each other because they had a relationship at one time that ended. A large span of time passed, and now they are in each other's lives again. Their past relationship comes with past feelings and emotions, which makes for great tension in a story.

Priscilla Oliveras, author of *Resort to Love*, says, "Whenever I'm writing or reading a second-chance romance, the motivation and conflict behind the breakup, continued time apart, and the reunion are key to making the story believable for me." For Oliveras, the conflict that either initiated the initial breakup or came as a result must be both internal and external. These factors kept the lovers from reuniting, not just a simple miscommunication that could have been easily resolved with a simple conversation. She says, "With Sofia and Nate in *Resort to Love*, his desire to meet his family's expectations and her personal values are key motivators for the decisions they have made. Nate's father looms as a major external conflict for the couple, but the lovers also deal with internal, emotional battles that interweave with their motivations. All of these elements help the reader understand why Nate and Sofia broke up and why it seems impossible for them to be together when they first reunite."

4 Forced proximity

Stressful situations can fuel emotions: Being under a deadline on a project that will make or break your career, being trapped in the snowstorm of the century, and the ultimate in stress – being in (or heavily involved in) a wedding. Add a need to get through this

event with someone you can't stand being around, and you now have the makings of a page-turning, forced-proximity romance filled with anger, frustration, desperation, and, in the end, love. Remember the popular girl, Claire (Molly Ringwald), and the bad boy, John Bender (Judd Nelson), in *The Breakfast Club*? They were stuck together in detention, and they made it quite clear that they didn't like each other right away. After spending the day together in close quarters, their feelings changed, and they shared a heart-swooning kiss at the end of the movie.

Lauren Billings and Christina Hobbs, who have collaborated on several *New York Times* bestsellers under the pen name Christina Lauren, say this trope works great when there is an external tension that the couple has to contend with, like a storm, a difficult work trip...or a pandemic. "Although there is built-in tension from the proximity itself, it will become claustrophobic if that is the *only* conflict, so broadening the world as much as possible outside of the setting gives the protagonists something to come together around with a common goal...and then realize that they want to kiss," they say.

5 Opposites attract

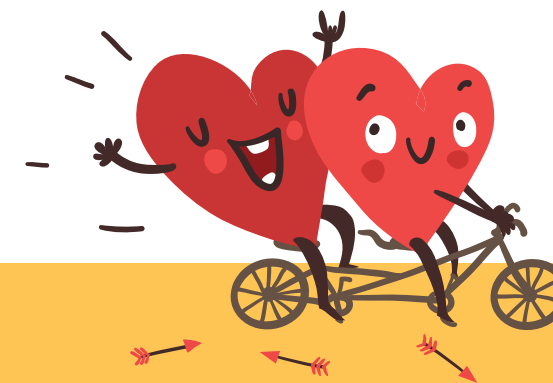
When two characters who are polar opposites are dropped into each other's lives, the results can be filled with sparks (both good and bad) and lots of opportunities for tension. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, we see this with Bridget and Mark Darcy. He comes across as very

proper and refined, and she drinks, smokes, and has no filter for what she says. They constantly seem to be at odds with each other every time they are in the same room together, until Darcy says to her, "I like you just as you are." Then we watch as these two opposites navigate their differences toward their happily ever after.

Award-winning author Marie Sexton believes opposites attract works so well as a romance trope because both characters get to explain themselves, but both also have to *listen* – and to re-evaluate their priorities and see the other character's point of view. "It's about breaking down assumptions and biases and finding a compromise (something we see way too little of in the real world)," she says. "The pitfall I often see with this trope (more in movies and TV shows than in books, but it still applies) is equating bickering with conflict. The two characters spend most of the story snapping at each other, then magically sweep all those differences under the rug without resolving them. Two people snapping at each other isn't entertaining, nor does it show growth. It's important to keep those conflicts real – to make them deeply personal for the characters – and to show both protagonists revising their position/beliefs/actions for the other."

6 Secret billionaire or celebrity

There are definite perks to being a billionaire, celebrity, or member of royalty, but living a life outside the spotlight is typically not one of them. In a secret billionaire/





celebrity trope, the famous person is usually a man who connects with a love interest who has no idea he is famous and rich. This character lives a life of luxury, but what he craves is to be treated as a “normal person” – at least for a little while. The two begin to fall for each other and she still has no idea who he really is. The moment of truth comes when she finds out his true identity, bringing up feelings of betrayal and questions about trust that they must work through to get their happily ever after.

In Ruth Cardello’s novel *Hollywood Heir*, the plot centers around Eric, who is famous for playing a superhero on television but was just released from a rehab program and is going incognito in London. He wants time to think about his life, and he wants to do it alone. Sage, a plant psychologist, meets him but doesn’t realize he is a celebrity: All she sees is a nice-looking loner who seems to need help, and she wants to be the one to provide it. Initially, he finds her irritating, but that shifts as he begins to see her as sweet and irresistible. Cardello believes the heart of any billionaire/celebrity romance is the hero. “Make him flawed but redeemable,” she says. “Show readers what he yearns for, what internal conflict stops him from getting it, and then introduce him to someone he’s willing to overcome his demons for. If you make his struggle real, readers will be all in for whatever wild ride you write for him.”

7 Marriage of convenience
With this trope, two people get married, but love is nowhere in the equation. The arrangement is more like a business deal, with each character gaining something from the agreement. In her historical romance *The Duchess Deal*, author Tessa Dare builds the story around a marriage of convenience between the Duke of Ashbury and a local seamstress. The Duke needs an heir, and he decides Emma will do as the mother of his child. After setting some

ground rules, they get married, setting the foundation for a great unexpected romance. For Dare, the unavoidable physical proximity makes this trope fun to write. “Whether they’ve had a long courtship or are perfect strangers, the protagonists have to be in one room for the wedding! From there, the author can invent a thousand ways to keep them within arm’s – or lips’ – reach of each other.”

Because the couple has a goal other than love, a marriage of convenience has built-in stakes, like producing an heir in *The Duchess Deal*. “This means they have to sleep together,” she says, “no matter how much they clash outside of bed. Or maybe the two parties have an agreement *never* to sleep together – which becomes increasingly difficult as their attraction grows. Perhaps the marriage of convenience needs to appear genuine to outsiders, which means the characters must pretend to be in love or risk exposing the truth. Obviously the pretense becomes the truth along the way!”

Dare says the big challenge in writing a marriage of convenience is maintaining the tension and conflict throughout the story. “The protagonists are already married. Once they fall in love, what’s keeping them apart? It’s up to the writer to create internal and external obstacles to keep that happily-ever-after uncertain until the end.”

8 Love triangle
Love is complicated enough when there are only two people in the mix – imagine upping the ante with a third. Love triangles require plenty of feelings being tossed around. The classic ’80s movie *Pretty in Pink* sets up a great love triangle trope between three high school seniors. Andie and Duckie are best friends. Duckie is smitten with Andie, but she has fallen for popular rich boy Blane. As feelings between Blane and Andie heat up, Duckie’s hopes of a relationship beyond friendship with Andie begin to sink, but he won’t give up without a fight. This causes tension between the two of them, pushing Andie to dig deep to decide what she wants in a relationship.

A solid love triangle shows both suitors as viable choices for the main character, which adds to the tension for the reader. In *Pretty in Pink*, it is clear to the audience that Duckie adores Andie, they enjoy each other’s company, and are good for

each other in many ways. With Blane, we see he is different than the other rich popular guys at school, and that’s what attracts Andie to him. Another key element to this trope is showing what is at stake for the main character with each choice. If Andie chooses Duckie, she risks their friendship; if she chooses Blane, she risks getting hurt and possibly humiliated because they are part of different circles at school.

With a love triangle, someone inevitably is going to get hurt. But once the main character makes the choice, the author must drive the reader to that great happily ever after they have been waiting for.

9 Fake relationship
Picture this: A family wedding is coming up, and the perennially single main character is tired of showing up to family functions alone – and getting the third degree about why she isn’t married yet. Out of desperation, she talks a friend into being her date (or even fiancé) for the out-of-town wedding. In a fake relationship trope, it’s all about creating a believable situation that forces the main characters to pretend they are dating or even engaged (think of the ’80s classic *Can’t Buy Me Love*, where Patrick Dempsey’s nerdy character hires a popular cheerleader to pretend to be his girlfriend for a month in order to help his social status in high school).

Probst says that each character must gain from the agreement. “Each of them must have a growth arc and change due to this relationship,” she says. “Forcing them together creates conflict and an opportunity for change within each of them. The second part of the story is the flip – the moment when the relationship begins to become real. This is a huge investment for the reader and must pay off. Their problems haven’t disappeared – in fact,



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conflict has now risen because the couple is now trying to find a way they can be together and make the relationship work. A writer needs to dig deep into the two characters for this trope and create obstacles to their relationship that are real – then find a way for one or both characters to make a sacrifice to be together or a compromise. Love may overcome all, but usually it’s because the characters have grown, changed, and made choices to get them there.”

10 Friends to lovers
This trope involves an established friendship between the two main characters. They already know each other’s habits, likes, dislikes, dreams, and aspirations. We skip past the “meet cute” moment and start setting up the story to show that these two could be more than friends.

Jillian Dodd, author of the *That Boy* series, loves the friends-to-lovers trope because she finds it so relatable. “Realistically, a reader is probably not going to meet a prince, but more than likely, they either have or have had a friend who they have crushed on.” She advises that when writing this trope, an author needs to consider the consequences for their specific characters. The big questions are, what will happen if they do decide to be more than friends? What if it doesn’t work – can they stay friends? Also, what if one wants more than friendship and the other one doesn’t? “Knowing your character’s personalities and how they deal with life in general will help you determine their individual reactions, which in turn helps shape your plot,” Dodd says.

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Like a cozy blanket on a wintry day, tropes wrap readers in a comforting structure that fulfills their expectations. A skilled writer can use that framework but still create a unique story that is engaging and draws readers all the way through to the happily ever after. 📖

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