

LOVE

language

Romance is one of the most lucrative genres on the planet – and the authors who write it are some of the smartest, savviest, and most creative minds in the industry. Here’s everything you need to know about writing (and publishing) your own happily ever after.

By *Terrie Flanagan*

Romance continues to be one of the hottest-selling markets in publishing, bringing in over a billion dollars in sales each year. Yet despite being such a popular genre, there’s still this stigma that romance storylines are basic and formulaic, making them easy to write. But good romance novels go beyond following a simple “boy meets girl” formula. By understanding the genre, the language of romance books, and the publishing options available, you will have the tools and knowledge to write a love story of your own.

Jennifer Probst, the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Marriage to a Billionaire* series and the nonfiction book *Write Naked: A Bestseller’s Secrets to Writing Romance & Navigating the Path to Success*, disagrees with critics of the genre and believes romance authors are powerful, smart, educated, and working in a market driven by women, the most innovative, savvy readers on the planet.

“Do you know what drives the world?” she says. “Love, not sex. Love, not money. Love for our children, our mates, our friends, and our family. Romance novels examine, detail, and explore all aspects of this

world – including sex. What’s wrong with sex? It is the most vulnerable, intimate act in a relationship and important to women. But the sex in romance novels is just one element in a romance novel.”

In her books, Probst tackles many important issues that people face, such as bullying, sexual and emotional abuse, stuttering, eating disorders, animal rescue, fertility, and other topics. She believes that organizations such as Romance Writers of America (RWA) and amazing bookstores such as the Ripped Bodice help elevate the genre. In addition, she feels that with enough fearless women defending and writing

BRING ON THE HEAT

There’s certainly a wide range when it comes to “heat” levels in romance. From the very “clean” Amish romances, affectionately known as bonnet-rippers, to the more erotic BDSM category, there are levels that fit every type of writer and reader. In some novels, the whole story is a buildup to a knee-buckling kiss. In other books, there may be multiple and even explicit sex scenes. Regardless of the type of story, there is more to writing these passages than just describing the physical act. The emotions involved and the buildup to that moment are just as important, because a good romance is all about the relationship and feelings between the main characters.

I asked the three authors I spoke with to share the type of books they write along with their advice on writing great sex scenes:

PROBST: My books range from sweet to sexy to erotic, depending on what book a reader picks up. My job is to make a first kiss just as swoon-worthy as an open-door sex scene. The three components I find critical in building up to a good sex scene [are] dialogue (think witty banter), sexual tension, and emotion. This allows the reader to become completely invested in the hero and heroine’s relationship and help build the foundation of a satisfying love scene. A writer needs to always be aware of the intimacy and vulnerability of the characters. It’s so much more than inserting part A into B – a well-crafted sex scene can take the hero and heroine’s relationship to a much deeper level.

MADSEN: I have small-town romances that are sweeter, and I also have sports romances that are steamier. On a scale from 1-5, I’d say the sweeter are about a 1-2 and the sports romances are like a 4. There are a lot of components to a sex scene, and there are different kinds of sex scenes. I have friends who write erotic romance and have very detailed,

blow-by-blow (*wink, wink*) scenes. I tend to focus more on the emotions and how the characters are feeling, with enough detail so that the reader knows what’s going on physically. I do think that showing instead of telling is always a good thing to think about while writing them. And if they don’t get your heart pumping as you’re writing them, you might also want to step back and ask yourself what’s missing.

DAYTON: My books are pretty spicy! Part of the reason for the heat level was the publishing imprint I was originally targeting featured really steamy books, and part of the reason was that I just really love a super-hot scene. No matter what the spice level, though, I think the components of a good sex scene are essentially the same. The scene needs to include an emotional tone. No one just wants to read about body parts...readers want to know what’s happening in the mind and heart of the participants as physical stuff occurs. Don’t just tell me WHAT is happening; tell me what the characters are thinking and how they’re feeling about what is happening.

about romance, plus the work of the thousands of creative authors working within the genre, the stigma will eventually disappear.

If you are considering writing romance, the great news is you don’t have to do it alone. Romance writers are a tight-knit bunch. When I speak to successful romance authors, they all say the same thing: The romance-writing community is incredibly supportive.

“I’ve felt so much support from other romance writers, and I wish I knew so many were out there when I first started, just so I wouldn’t have felt so alone or nervous,” says best-selling contemporary romance author Cindi Madsen says.

Michelle Dayton, who also writes contemporary romance, agrees with Madsen and says all authors in the genre should belong to Romance

Writers of America and take advantage of its resources, which include workshops, conferences, and contests.

Probst adds that romance writers are one of the most organized groups in the industry, who have incredible skills in marketing, editing, social media promotion, branding, networking, and more.

“In today’s time, writers cannot just write the books,” she says. “They need to be the CEOs of their own company in order to make a career. But, oh, how it’s worth it.”

THE BASICS

Like all fiction, romance needs a compelling storyline and intriguing characters. But there are other nuances that make this genre unique – and that need to be understood before you begin.

Probst confirms romance novels

aren’t easy to write. “In order to write them well, you must be able to write naked – to dig deep with your characters, explore all of their most intimate secrets, force them to struggle with conflict, and give them a growth arc,” she says. “These stories revolve around emotion. They must be well researched, because our readers are so smart, they’ll be the first to tell you what you did wrong with a career, setting, quote, etc. You need to love and respect this genre with your heart and soul before you consider writing romance.”

Another important element of good romance is the HEA, or “happily ever after.” Madsen believes this is what defines a romance. “Some books have romantic elements, but if they don’t end up happily ever after or happily for now (HFN), I’d argue they’re not a straight romance book. Romance

readers expect that happy ending. It's why they buy romance novels. If your reader doesn't get that happy ending they've been flipping the pages for, you risk them not picking up another book of yours ever again."

PUBLISHING OPTIONS

Romance readers can be described in one word – voracious. While the average adult reads five books per year, 46 percent of romance readers will go through one book per week. This is great news if you are interested in writing in this genre because these readers need novels to consume.

I have recently entered the world of romance writing with a co-author, publishing under the name C.K. Wiles. This year I attended my first Romance Writers of America conference. Like the other authors mentioned, I immediately noticed how welcoming and supporting the romance-writing community is. I also noticed they were way ahead of the game when it comes to self-publishing. In fact, the community as a whole seems to value self-publishing as much as traditional – a rarity in the industry.

Dayton is a hybrid author who has self-published and traditionally published books. She says there are some great traditional publishing options for romance novels: "If you do get a contract, you can be assured that your book will benefit from top-notch editing and some marketing support. But there's no guarantee that you'll get a contract or find a home for your book, and the querying process can take a long time. With self-publishing, everything is under your control – which is both good and bad."

Here's a look at both options romance authors can pursue.

The self-publishing route

Indie publishing is a great option if you want complete control over your content and the finances. You decide the storyline, length of the book, formatting, pricing, and cover design. It is also up to you to cover all the costs, market the work, and make the book available

on all the platforms. How and when the books come out is your decision, and because you invested your money into the book, you get all royalties.

As the publisher, you have all the power, but with that also comes big responsibility. You owe it to your

reader to take your time and put out the best book possible.

"I cannot stress enough how important having critique partners and/or a developmental editor is," Dayton says. "You WILL have blinders on when it comes to your own book. Don't rush to

ROMANCE SUBGENRES

According to the Romance Writers of America (RWA), a romance contains two basic elements: a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. Under this broad category are a variety of subgenres that each have their own conventions. RWA breaks them down in the following way:

- **Contemporary romance:** Romance novels that are set from 1950 to the present that focus primarily on the romantic relationship
- **Erotic romance:** Romance novels in which strong, often explicit, sexual interaction is an inherent part of the love story, character growth, and relationship development and could not be removed without damaging the storyline. These novels may contain elements of other romance subgenres (such as paranormal, historical, etc.).
- **Historical romance:** Romance novels that are set prior to 1950.
- **Paranormal romance:** Romance novels in which fantasy worlds or paranormal or science fiction elements are an integral part of the plot.
- **Romance with religious or spiritual elements:** Romance novels in which religious or spiritual beliefs are an inherent part of the love story, character growth, and relationship development and could not be removed without damaging the storyline. These novels may be set in the context of any religious or spiritual belief system of any culture.
- **Romantic suspense:** Romance novels in which suspense, mystery, or thriller elements constitute an integral part of the plot.
- **Young adult (YA) romance:** Romance novels in which young adult life is an integral part of the plot.

ROMANCE PUBLISHERS WHO ACCEPT UNAGENTED MANUSCRIPTS

Here is a list of publishers open to manuscripts from new and unagented authors. Be sure to read the submission guidelines carefully before sending in your work.

Carina Press: carinapress.com

Harper Impulse: harperimpulseromance.com

Loveswept & Flirt: randomhousebooks.com/loveswept-flirt

Forever Yours: forever-romance.com

Spencer Hill Press: spencerhillpress.com

Boroughs Publishing Group: boroughspublishinggroup.com

Decadent Publishing: decadentpublishing.com

Riptide Publishing: riptidepublishing.com

Tule Publishing: tulepublishing.com

publication just because you can put your book on Amazon in 20 seconds. The last thing you want is for someone to leave a scathing review that demeans the quality of your work. Take the time to make your book the best it can be."

Traditional publishing

If you aren't interested in carrying the full weight of publishing your book, finding a traditional publisher is going to be the perfect choice for you. The great thing about the romance genre is that even within the traditional publishing world, you have plenty of options. If your goal is to get a book deal with one of the big five publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster), you will need to find a literary agent once your manuscript is complete. Research different agents to find the ones who represent the type of romance you write before querying them.

In addition to the big five, there are also many publishers who accept unagented manuscripts, meaning you can pitch your work directly to the publisher. Read their guidelines carefully to find out what they are seeking and only pursue the ones who publish novels like yours.

For both traditionally and self-published authors, the romance genre continues to be a driving force in the industry. Readers have an insatiable need for more books, and they need writers like *you* to provide stories. If this genre interests you, connect with your local romance writing community, join the RWA, and get writing. You'll soon be on your way to your own happily ever after. 📖

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THE LANGUAGE OF ROMANCE

Romance writers and readers have their own love language. There are unique terms and phrases that get used in industry conversations and articles that may seem like a foreign language to an outsider. Here are some basic words and definitions to help you navigate this world.

Romancelandia – The supportive community of romance writers and readers.

HEA (Happily Ever After) – The happy ending that is expected in romance, where the reader knows this couple will stay together forever.

HFN (Happily For Now) – A hopeful ending in romance that is also acceptable. In this case, there isn't a guarantee the couple is going to stay together forever, but for now, everything is good.

Hero and heroine – The two main characters in your romance who eventually end up together.

Alpha hero – The confident, strong male character who takes charge and is not overly emotional.

Beta hero – Like the alpha hero but is more open emotionally and has no problem being on a level playing field with the heroine.

Alphahole – An extreme version of the alpha hero, in which the character is rude and domineering.

TSTL (Too Stupid to Live) – A heroine who is wimpy, clearly not very smart, and relies on the hero to save her. She's the kind who goes alone into a dark basement knowing there is someone dangerous down there.

Bodice rippers – A term originally used to describe the historical romances popular in the 1970-'80s that had the dramatic Fabio-type covers, and the women were seen as helpless damsels in distress.

Book Boyfriend – The fictional hero you dream about being with in real life.

The Grovel – When the hero has made a huge mistake and has to grovel to show the heroine he is sorry.

Grand gesture – Something the hero or heroine does to prove his/her love to the other person. As the name suggests, it is usually something big and requires some emotional risk on the part of the hero/heroine.

Meet cute – A charming or amusing first encounter between future romantic partners.

Mary Sue – A female character who comes across too perfect, with no flaws.

Category romance – Think Harlequin/Silhouette. These are books published under an imprint name and are part of a series that are released at regular intervals.

Single-title romance – Longer romances released individually that are not part of a series.

M/M – Male/Male fiction, where two men are involved in a romantic relationship.

F/F – Female/Female fiction, where two women are involved in a romantic relationship

MFM – Male/Female/Male fiction, which features a threesome with two men and one woman, but there is no sexual activity between the men.

MMF – Male/Male/Female fiction, which features a threesome with two men and one woman where everyone is involved in the action.