

Sandra Marton Defines a Romance

Why is a Romance a Romance?

–by Sandra Marton

At first glance, this sounds like one of those questions that rates a "Well, duh!" for an answer. Think about it, though. Is your book a romance simply because it's the story of two people who are in love? I Love Lucy was a sitcom, not a book, but, basically, the storyline was about two people in love... but it wasn't a romance. Ally McBeal is a sitcom, too. Ally's not married to the man she wishes she'd married. She dances with a, uh, a life-SIZED, inflatable doll. She sleeps with that doll, too... and maybe we should just leave it at that. Still, at heart, Ally McBeal is a romance. More specifically, Ally is a heroine in search of a romance.

Are you with me, or am I out on a limb here?

What does the word romance mean? If you're looking for a dictionary definition, the word is simply a synonym for a narrative, story, or saga. Dip back into history and you'll find that romance as a specific type of literature dates to the fifth century and referred to legendary tales, to stories of the supernatural and to stories of love. By the middle ages, romances were most often tales of courtly love, chivalry, and knighthood. They were exciting stories of knights embarked on dangerous quests, and of knights caught in conflicts between love and duty. In other words, a romance was a story about larger than life characters in larger than life situations. Many were tales of brave heroes beset with great problems which they had to overcome in order to rescue fair maidens from fire-breathing dragons.

The best novels in our genre are still about knights and dragons and maidens in need of rescue, even if today's maidens live in apartments instead of castles and have nine-to-five jobs. Our heroines are not usually maidens, either. We write about women of the millennium. They're single, divorced, widowed and married. They're moms, teachers, waitresses, doctors and lawyers. They're as different from each other as real women are. Each heroine also has some difficulty to overcome. It might be a straightforward, internal problem, like putting an end to her loneliness. It might be external and complicated, such as escaping a killer. Whoever the heroine, whatever her problem, our heroines all share one desire. Each is longing for a guy with a warm heart, a great smile and sexy good looks to turn her everyday life into the stuff of romantic fiction, even if she doesn't realize it when her story begins.

Our job, as writers, is to take the Everywoman we create and give her a man who is not Everyman. What we give her, when you come down to it, is a knight.

He doesn't wear armor. He doesn't ride a horse. He doesn't carry a lance. But he's a knight just the same, seeking out the dragon that's been terrorizing the heroine, confronting it and slaying it and, in the process, laying claim to the heroine's heart. He's as brave and fearless as any knight of the middle ages, whether he rides the range, races cars, or manages corporations. And our heroine knows it. She's no delicate princess; she'd never be content to sit placidly within the walls of a castle and wait for her man to return to her, but she recognizes a hero, and a good deed, when she sees them.

How we create this fictional hero varies from one writer to another. Some of us write home-grown heroes. The boy next door, who the heroine never really noticed until the day she realized he wasn't a gangly fifteen year old anymore but a handsome, responsible man. Others of us love to write the bad boy, untamable until he meets the right woman. Some of us prefer to create a hero who's definitely larger than life, a fantasy male powerful enough to dominate his world but completely vulnerable to the woman with whom he falls in love. That last man is my preference as a writer but my special take is that he's self-made and very often, life hasn't been kind to him.

One of these men is the guy Ally is searching for. A knight, who'll rescue her from the mundane world she lives in, who'll make her feel safe and loved within his arms. He's the same man our readers are searching for, too. Think about that, when you sketch out the hero for your book. Take a moment and consider what would happen if he were suddenly whisked back in time and found himself a knight in the middle ages. Can you imagine him riding off on the back of his charger to do battle on behalf of his lady? If you can, you're definitely on the right track.

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| Sandra Marton | has been a Romance Writers of America RITA finalist in Short Contemporary Fiction and in Romantic Suspense, and she's won the Holt Medallion in Single Title. Two of her books have been honored with Romantic Times Readers' Choice Awards for Best Harlequin Presents. Be sure and visit Sandra on the internet at <http://www.sandramarton.com>.