

# Chapter 1

## Romance Writing at a Glance

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting to know the romance market and figuring out your place in it
- ▶ Perfecting the craft of writing a romance
- ▶ Submitting your manuscript successfully
- ▶ Knowing what follows a sale

**T**he world of romance writing and publishing is exciting. Being part of a business that's all about making people happy is wonderful: The writers get to tell their stories, and the readers get to read them. At the end of the day, it's great going home knowing that because of my efforts, a lot of people are going to smile. But romance publishing can also be complex — even daunting — especially when you're approaching it for the first time. So, I've taken up the challenge of demystifying this world for you. Whether this book marks your first foray into writing romance novels or you've been hard at work honing your skills for years, I'm glad you're here. As you read, you'll find lots to interest you and, most of all, help you write a winning romance novel.

In this chapter, I provide you with a snapshot of the romance-writing process and the romance industry as a whole. By extension, the information I present also provides you with a sneak peak at the subjects I cover elsewhere between these yellow and black covers. I start by talking about the market, defining romance novels in general, and then talk briefly about some of the different types of romances you find on the shelves.

I then move on to the heart and soul of the matter at hand: the elements that every romance novel needs to be a success. Without sympathetic characters, an interesting plot, compelling emotional conflict and, of course, a happy ending, you don't have a romance novel (much less one that's going to leave readers eager to find your next book the minute it comes out).

I finish up by taking you for a quick behind-the-scenes tour of the business end of publishing romance novels, because no matter how good your book is, you'll never get anywhere as a writer if you can't master the submission process. And knowing what's expected of you *after* you make a sale, as your novel goes from manuscript to store shelves, never hurts, either.

## *Tuning in to the Market*

Many aspiring writers sit down to tell a story without a clear idea about what kind of story they're writing, whether (and where) a market exists for it, or what they'll do with the manuscripts when they're done writing. Now, I won't tell you that an unplanned approach to writing never works, because a lot of books get published every year, and some of them undoubtedly follow that path.



But if you want to write popular fiction in general and romance novels in particular, you can cut down the time you spend on both writing and submitting, as well as increase your odds of success, by researching the marketplace and paying attention to what readers and editors are looking for.

### *What makes a romance a romance?*

A large portion of the fiction books that you find on store shelves — from mysteries, to science fiction, to horror, and pretty much everything else — have romantic elements in them. But they're not romances. If you want to define your book as a romance novel, you need to keep certain things in mind.

At its heart, a *romance* distinguishes itself from other forms of fiction because the romantic relationship is the focus of everything that happens — it's the driving force behind the story, the one thread that makes the entire tapestry fall apart if it's removed.



Romance readers are knowledgeable. They're very aware of the elements in a book that make them happy and the elements that make them *unhappy*. Romance readers have very specific expectations for every book that they pick up. They want to identify with the heroine and love the hero. They want to root for the relationship to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles in its path, and at the end of the day, they want an interesting plot that delivers a happy ending. When you meet these expectations and focus on the central romantic relationship, your book becomes a romance novel. (See Chapter 2 for more details on meeting readers' expectations.)

Contrary to popular belief (a belief you've probably run up against, if you've been a romance reader for a while), romance novels do *not* follow a prescribed formula. You just have the reader's basic expectations, which means that, as a writer, you have a lot of freedom in what you write and how you satisfy those expectations.

## *Subdividing romances for fun and profit*

Approximately 50 percent of all mass market paperbacks sold are romance novels, making romance the single most popular genre. But not all romances are the same. Within romance publishing in general, all kinds of distinctions exist. Each type of romance comes with its own set of reader expectations that you must meet. In Chapter 2, I go into great detail about the different types of romances. But every writer needs to know the two big distinctions:

- ✓ **Contemporary versus historical romances:** The first big decision you need to make — one that affects every page of your novel from first to last — is whether to set your book in the past or the present.
  - **Historical romance:** Your readers expect your research — into clothes, everyday life, occupations, social structure, language, and everything else — to be accurate and your characters to behave in ways that are appropriate to their world and its society. (I devote Chapter 13 to research specifics.) Certain story lines and plot twists work perfectly in a historical context, while others are completely out of place — and it's your responsibility to know which is which.
  - **Contemporary romance:** These novels are set in your reader's own time, so they're often subject to even closer and more knowledgeable scrutiny. Slang that's even slightly out-of-date or characters who feel like they're from the 1950s (when women were expected to cook, clean, and do just what the man said), will turn a reader off faster than you can type "Chapter 1."
- ✓ **Category versus mainstream romances:** This concept is based on the ways that books are packaged and marketed to the reader.
  - **Category romance:** Also known as *series romances*, these novels are published on a monthly schedule in groups, which usually consist of four or six novels. The groups are referred to as *lines* or *series*, and all the books in a given series are similar in certain basic ways such as length, editorial focus, and cover design. Series books appear together on store shelves and are marketed to readers as part of a series rather than as individual titles. Most series are contemporary romances, but that's always subject to change.
  - **Mainstream romance:** These novels are also known as *single titles*, which is an accurate description of how they're perceived and sold. Each book stands alone and fits its own individual vision, though that vision often identifies the book as belonging to a sub-genre like romantic suspense, western, or Regency. A single title has unique packaging and is placed on the bookracks separately, usually in alphabetical order by the author's last name. Single titles almost always have larger page counts — sometimes substantially so — than series books, which allow them to have more complex plotting and a bigger cast of characters.

Beyond the basic distinctions I list above, the romance genre is also divided into all kinds of more specific *subgenres*. Subgenres can include romantic suspense, inspirational, western, romantic comedy, and the others I detail in Chapter 2, where I also help you figure out where you — and your novel — fit into this spectrum.

## *Practicing Your Craft*

After you know the marketplace and what kind of romance you want to write, you have to take care of a few everyday matters before you start hitting the keyboard. Writing's a creative profession, and after you and your muse get in "the zone," the last thing you want is to be yanked back to reality because your printer needs ink, your kids are fighting over the remote, or you have a question about grammar or British history and have no idea where to go for the answer. Here are a few suggestions (I include many more in Chapter 3):

- ✓ Set up a workspace for yourself, even if it's only a corner of your bedroom or family room.
- ✓ Get your family invested in your writing so that they're happy to pitch in so you can succeed.

Only after you have the mundane under control can you sit down, face that blank screen and blinking cursor, and start telling your story.



No one can make you a storyteller or magically inject you with talent, but if you have the drive and creativity to be a writer, you *can* hone your craft so you make every book as strong as it can possibly be. Writing has many practical aspects, and the bulk of this book focuses on helping you master them. Here's a quick look at just a few of the topics I tackle.

## *Everything starts with characterization*



Without compelling characters to win over the reader, a romance novel simply won't succeed. The heroine, in particular, is key, because she becomes the reader's alter ego. Your heroine needs to be strong, smart, and attractive, but also vulnerable and emotionally accessible. She needs to be an interesting and admirable woman who your reader enjoys sharing time with. Your hero needs to be just that: heroic. But that doesn't mean he has no flaws. He definitely needs to be vulnerable, otherwise he won't have a place for the heroine in his life or his heart. Your hero has to be a man that your heroine — and your reader — can fall in love with. (Chapter 4 covers creating characters, making it one of the most important chapters in this book.)

Both your hero and heroine should be fully realized human beings, with complete and complex inner lives. They need to have more going on than just sexual attraction — although, as I discuss in Chapter 11, sexual attraction and emotionally involving love scenes are important, too. Every character also needs an individual voice. Chapter 9 sets you on the right path to creating unique ways of speaking — ways that are also distinct from your *own* voice — for all your characters, especially the star couple.

## *It's all about emotional tension*



Emotional tension is the driving force of every romance. Your hero and heroine are more than just pretty faces. Make their relationship the driving force of your novel, because your reader's main reason for picking up a romance novel is to experience the roller-coaster thrills of falling in love.

To keep that roller coaster going, you need to create emotional tension between your hero and heroine, something that comes from who they are that can believably keep them apart for the course of the book. Maybe your wealthy hero has a hard time believing that the heroine's not just like all the other gold diggers. Maybe the heroine thinks no man can be trusted to stay for the long haul because her father left her mother, and her own relationships have never lasted longer than six months. In every book, the emotional tension is unique to that heroine and hero, grows out of who they are, and is enhanced by their situation.

I explain how to use emotional tension to propel your plot and create momentum in the hero and heroine's relationship in Chapter 5. Compelling emotional tension gets your reader involved even more deeply in your characters, and the more deeply involved your reader feels, the more quickly she'll turn the pages to see what happens next. Best-selling novels aren't referred to as page-turners for nothing.

## *Plotting, pacing, and point of view*

Once you have your characters and their conflict down, your job is to plot out, and then tell, their story. Think of your novel as the context in which the hero and heroine can work out their issues. But plotting is more than just figuring out what happens in the story. You need to structure events in a way that keeps your reader's interest. You need an *external conflict* — something that gives your hero and heroine something to argue about and deal with when they can't talk about the emotional conflict that's *really* bugging them.

In Chapter 5, I give you tips on how to use conflict to build the reader's involvement as the action escalates. In Chapter 10, I focus on pacing, especially achieving the all-important balance between showing and telling: knowing when to let your characters show the readers what they're doing and thinking, and when using narrative is the most effective tool for getting the reader from Point A to Point B.



When you're telling your story, guard against letting *your* voice call a lot of attention to itself, which can overshadow the characters, their voices, and their points of view. I provide strategies for finding your own voice and using it for greatest effect in Chapter 8.

Finding the right spot to begin your book and knowing how to start and stop every chapter and every scene for maximum effect are crucial aspects of structuring your plot. As you work on these mechanics, creating cliffhangers, and knowing how to resolve them, is likely to become one of your most effective strategies. For more information on beginnings and endings, not to mention on how to leave your reader dangling (but in a good way), go to Chapter 12.

## Submitting Your Manuscript

Submitting your manuscript, and then waiting to hear its fate is generally considered a lot more nerve-racking than the writing process. Although you can't control the process after your manuscript's out of your hands, you *can* take steps beforehand to weight the odds in your favor.

## Choosing the perfect publisher



You can give your book its best shot at being published by targeting the most appropriate publisher and, when possible, a specific editor whose taste runs to books like yours. You can't ensure a sale, but finding an appropriate publisher helps you on two fronts:

- ✓ Doing so obviously increases your chances of success.
- ✓ If your manuscript is going to sell anyway, you can save yourself — and your book — a lot of time.

Once again, you need to research the market. This time, you look past what's out there to see who's publishing it. I provide tips on how to compare what you're writing to what each house is publishing, how to figure out what a particular editor likes to see, and other helpful strategies in Chapter 15.

## *Do you need an agent?*

Authors are always asking, “Do I need an agent?” which is frequently followed by: “How do I get an agent?” You may need (or at least want) an agent for two main reasons:

- ✓ **Your publisher of choice requires one.** Most mainstream publishers don’t accept *unsolicited manuscripts* — manuscripts that are unagented and haven’t been specifically requested (perhaps as the result of an author/editor appointment at a conference).
- ✓ **You want someone else to handle the business details.** Finding an agent for this reason is based on preference rather than necessity. Agents perform a whole host of services for their clients, and many authors especially rely on agents during contract and advance negotiations.

I discuss getting an agent in more detail in Chapter 15. I also give you tips for finding an agent because that can sometimes be — or at least feel — as difficult as finding a publisher.

## *Putting together a selling submission*

Every publisher has its own rules about submissions, what they look at, and what they buy. Those rules often vary based on whether a project’s agented and whether an author’s brand-new or has been published elsewhere, even if in a different genre. Whatever you submit, you want it to be as perfect as possible to increase your chances of making a sale.

You can submit your manuscript in three types of formats: complete manuscript, partial manuscript, and query letter. A complete manuscript is self-explanatory, but the latter two require some explanation. Query letters and partial manuscripts both involve a synopsis of your manuscript (I discuss them in greater detail in Chapter 15). In a query letter, your synopsis has to be brief, and it’s all an editor sees of your novel. The good news is you don’t need to convince her to buy your book based on your query; you only need to convince her that she wants to see more of it. And in the scheme of things, it’s easier to get an editor to invest her own time, rather than the company’s money. A partial manuscript consists of a longer synopsis and chapters — usually three chapters, always starting with the *first* chapter. This manuscript gives an editor a fuller look at what you’re capable of.

In most cases, an editor likes to see a complete manuscript before going to contract with a brand-new author. Getting a request for a complete manuscript, based on your query letter or partial manuscript, is no guarantee that you’re going to make a sale, but you’re that much closer.



Submitting a *complete*, as it's called, also means that you have to make sure every possible detail of your manuscript is perfect. For tips on formatting and advice on grammar and spelling — two aspects of writing and manuscript preparation that every author thinks she has under control (and which many authors are wrong about) — check out Chapter 14. My biggest suggestion on that score? Use or ignore spell-check — whatever makes you happy — but *always* proofread by eye.

Somewhere along the way, you're almost certainly going to deal with rejection, because very few authors sell the first books they write — but possibly rejection leavened by a request for revision. Dealing with rejection can be the hardest time in a writer's career, but forewarned is forearmed. In Chapter 16, I talk about the different kinds of rejection letters — and how to revise and resubmit your manuscript, because getting a request for a revised manuscript is the next best thing to making a sale.

## *You sold your book — now what?*

It's finally happened. An editor made an offer on your book, and you're about to become a published author. But before that can happen, you still need to negotiate a contract. Every publisher has its own boilerplate contract, but you're likely to run up against certain common terms and clauses, no matter what publisher you're dealing with. I help you close the deal in Chapter 17.



You and your editor-to-be both want the same thing: to see your book published and sold to as many readers as possible. Don't be afraid to ask her questions so that you understand what you're agreeing to and are happy with your deal. To help you achieve the goal of signing your name on the dotted line, I give you strategies for win-win negotiating and questions you need to make sure you get answers to.

Last, but far from least, understanding what happens to your book after you've sold it is helpful, because your role's far from over. Your editor and publisher will expect input from you as your book passes through the various stages from manuscript to bound book. Chapter 18 covers what comes next.



My ultimate advice for you? If your book is rejected, don't lose heart. You're a storyteller, so start telling the next story, and then the one after that. Work on your craft, get all the input you can and factor it in. And *keep writing and keep trying*. And if the best happens — as I hope it will — and you get published? My advice isn't very different. Don't sit on your laurels. Go back and do it all again, because editors aren't looking to buy single manuscripts — we're looking to build authors, book after book to greater success.