

# The Essential Elements of Writing a Romance Novel

BY LEIGH MICHAELS

Even if you're a seat-of-the-pants, explore-as-you-go sort of writer, there are a few things you need to know about your story before you start seriously writing chapter one. Unsuccessful romances—especially the many that writers start but never complete—stall out because the writer didn't know enough about the basic framework that holds every romance novel together.

Though it's nearly impossible to have every detail worked out ahead of time, if you don't have a pretty good idea of your framework, you'll be apt to wander in frustration with a story that goes nowhere. Or you'll write chapter one over and over, trying to make it work, until you're heartily sick of your characters.

So what are the basics you need to know up front?

Let's review the definition we established for the romance novel: A romance novel is the story of a man and a woman who, while they're solving a problem that threatens to keep them apart, discover that the love they feel for each other is the sort that comes along only once in a lifetime; this discovery leads to a permanent commitment and a happy ending.

This definition summarizes the four crucial basics that make up a romance novel:

1. a hero and a heroine to fall in love
2. a problem that creates conflict and tension between them and threatens to keep them apart
3. a developing love that is so special it comes about only once in a lifetime
4. a resolution in which the problem is solved and the couple is united

These things are the girders that hold up your entire story. Like the steel skeleton of a skyscraper, each piece depends on the others. If one is weak or flawed, the whole structure is apt to fall down.

What your hero and heroine have experienced in their pasts will influence how they react to the problem they face in your story. The nature of the conflict between them will influence their relationship and how the

sexual tension develops. The traits that make this couple fall in love will influence what the happy ending will be. If the conflict has no satisfactory resolution, it's not going to be a truly happy ending, even if the hero and heroine fling themselves into each other's arms on the last page.

Knowing the basics up front will keep you from reaching the middle of the book with a limp conflict, no sexual tension, and two characters who have absolutely no reason to want to be together.

## **HERO AND HEROINE**

Without two people to fall in love, there is no story. Since you're asking readers to spend several hours with your characters, it's important to create a hero and a heroine they want to know more about. That means the characters have to be both real (so readers can relate to them on a human level) and sympathetic (so readers feel the time they spend reading the characters' story is worthwhile).

If the readers spend several hours reading the story, most of that time will be in the company of the heroine. So your heroine must be someone the readers can understand, like, and respect—someone they want to hang around with. Someone who seems like a real person.

The hero must be someone the readers can picture themselves falling in love with. But you want them not just to fall in love with him—experiencing that dizzying, glorious rush of emotion—you want them to stay in love with him and believe that the heroine will be truly happy with him forever.

The next chapter, which goes into detail about heroes and heroines and how you can develop your main characters, may be the most important chapter in this book. If your hero and heroine don't come to life for your readers—if they aren't people they care about, root for, and want to be happy—they're not likely to spend their precious time reading a book about them.

Knowing your characters is extraordinarily important. If you don't know these people almost as well as you know yourself, then how will you know how they would react to the problems you've created for them—or to each other? You will sometimes hear an author say something like, "I wanted my heroine to be shaken up by the bad guy making a pass at her, but she just rolled her eyes and said, 'Yeah, right, like that's going to upset me.' So I had to figure out another way to make her turn to the hero for help."

Your reaction might be to wonder if the writer is having a hallucination. After all, the writer creates the character—so how can the character simply refuse to cooperate? What the writer is really saying is that she

created a character so believable—so real—that she knows how that person would act or react in a given situation. When she then tries to write a situation that is inconsistent with the character's values or personality, the character just won't go along with the plan.

## **CONFLICT**

While the developing relationship between the hero and heroine (which we'll address next) is at the center of the story, it is not the entire story. If the main question in a romance novel is simply whether and when the hero and heroine will admit they love each other, then the story will be unsatisfying. Readers know from the beginning that they will, because they're reading a romance. Watching two people date, get to know each other, and slowly explore their growing attraction isn't terribly exciting.

It's the difficulties that surround this couple falling in love at this moment—the difficulties that threaten to keep them from reaching a happy ending—that keep the readers' attention. The way in which these difficulties impact these particular characters, putting pressure on them and bringing out their good points and their flaws, is what makes their story exciting.

That's the main way in which romance novels differ from real life—in real life, most of us prefer a calm and peaceful period to get to know each other. But calm and peaceful don't make a gripping book. It's the tension between the characters, caused by the problems they face, that makes the story exciting and unforgettable.

Tension between the characters is conflict, the second of our important framework pieces.

In the excitement of creating your hero and heroine and developing your story, it's easy to confuse plot with conflict. The plot is what happens while your two characters are falling in love; it's simply the sequence of events. Conflict is the difficulty between the hero and heroine that threatens to keep them from getting together. It arises because of the problems the characters face.

Most romance novels have two types of conflict: the short-term problem and the long-term problem. The short-term problem (sometimes called the external conflict) revolves around the initial situation that brings the couple together and keeps them together so they can get to know each other. The long-term problem (sometimes called the internal conflict) is the deeper difficulty each character faces—the difficulty that threatens to keep the couple from finding happiness together.

In many beginners' stories, the hero and heroine have plenty of problems. He's having trouble with his business; she can't get along with her

father; he's got custody issues; she's in debt. But unless these problems cause tension between them, there's a shortage of conflict in the story.

The hero and heroine don't have to be at each other's throats all the time. In fact, it's better if they aren't always disagreeing. But if they agree on everything, if their relationship is calm and peaceful, then what's keeping them from recognizing and admitting they're in love?

On the other hand, if they can't get along, why doesn't one or the other just walk away? Why can't they avoid each other?

## **THE ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME LOVE**

The need for a romance in a romance novel seems so obvious. After all, the romance novel is a love story—the hero and heroine have to fall in love. But if you stop and think about it, this important aspect is trickier than it first appears.

It's easy to write in a synopsis, "As they get to know each other, they fall in love." But showing that love growing is an entirely different proposition. If it happens too quickly, the readers will be bored. If it happens too slowly, the readers won't believe the happy ending.

Each event in the story helps your lovers see each other differently, discover new traits (good and bad), and get to know each other on a deeper level.

It's much easier to focus on action or to detail the bad guy's plans than it is to portray, step-by-step, the slow flowering of a caring relationship. As you develop the framework of your story, keep in mind the importance of the characters' reactions to each other. What events will best allow each to see new aspects of the other's character? What is there about each person that causes them to fall in love? What makes this couple so perfect for each other (even though it doesn't appear that way at first) that their love story will remain in the readers' minds forever?

## **THE RESOLUTION**

How is your story going to end? I'm not suggesting you have to know every detail—before you start writing—about how your characters solve their difficulties and live happily ever after, but it pays to have a good idea. Having your destination in mind makes the journey easier.

And if your book is to be a romance novel, then the story must finish with a happy ending—a positive, upbeat, hopeful resolution, which in most cases will involve a permanent commitment between the two main characters.

As you're thinking in terms of framework, you don't have to know your characters' street addresses or how many kids they end up hav-

ing, but do look hard at any big issues you've raised. If your characters' conflict has involved their lifestyles (he loves the country, she wants the excitement of the city), will they compromise or will one of them give in? If he hates her job, how do they resolve the problem so both can be satisfied? If she's had trouble trusting him, how does he prove himself (or how does she convince herself he's trustworthy now)?

The most important thing about the resolution is that the issues—big and small—that have separated the characters are settled in a way that is logical and satisfying to the readers. Each issue is handled rather than avoided; the solutions are plausible and fitting for the situations and the characters, so the readers can believe that this agreement will last and will continue to be acceptable to both main characters. A satisfying ending comes about because of the actions of the characters themselves, not through the interference of others.

## **THINKING THROUGH YOUR FRAMEWORK**

You may not be ready to put on paper all the ideas for your hero and heroine, conflict, once-in-a-lifetime-love, and happy ending. After all, you've just started to find out why these things are important to your story.

However, you need to be thinking about these separate elements and how they interrelate as you develop your story.

The questions in the exercise below are good ones to keep in mind as you write. If you find yourself feeling bogged down as you think about your story, go back to these questions. The time you spend in quiet reflection early in the writing process could save you dozens of hours in revising.

If your idea is not yet developed enough to address these questions, that's okay. Keep them in mind as you read the next three chapters, and you'll be pleasantly surprised to find the answers taking shape.

## **IN REVIEW: STUDYING THE ESSENTIALS**

1. Look back at the romance novels you've been studying and pick out the essential ingredients of each story—hero and heroine, conflict/problem, developing love story, and resolution.
2. What qualities make each hero and heroine heroic? Real? Sympathetic?
3. What makes each hero lovable? What makes each heroine someone you'd like to know better?
4. What is the problem that causes tension between the two main characters and threatens to keep them from reaching a happy ending?
5. How does this problem affect both hero and heroine? Why can't

one or both of them simply walk away?

6. What makes the love between these two characters special? Why is this relationship perfect for them, the best love story they could possibly have?

7. How does the author resolve the big issues that have been raised between the characters? Is the resolution surprising? Satisfying?

## THE FRAMEWORK OF YOUR STORY

1. Who is your heroine? What makes her sympathetic? What will the readers like about her?

2. Who is your hero? What makes him someone the readers can fall in love with?

3. What is the initial problem that brings the hero and heroine together?

4. What forces them to stay in contact? Why can't one of them just walk away?

5. What do they see in each other? What features about each one attract the other?

6. What larger difficulty, character flaw, or past experience threatens to make it impossible for hero and heroine to be happy together forever?

7. How do they solve those difficulties?

8. What is the happy ending? Does one of them make a sacrifice? Do they compromise?