

romance

For those of you who are too young to remember *Moonlighting*, it was a groundbreaking TV show in the 80's because it created a new television genre, the comedy-drama, or "dramedy." If you're wondering why the footage was so fuzzy, it's because everything was actually *like* that back in the 80's. *Moonlighting* was also famous for the romance between David and Maddie – Bruce Willis and Cybil Sheppard.

I've sort of always believed that romantic love makes the world go round and life worth living and is a many splendored thing. When I fell in love with my husband, I realized that love songs were repository of all the world's most profound truths.

And maybe that is why I am *ever* looking for and hoping for a touch of romance in the books I read. If you've ever been in a workshop with me, you will know that if you give me two fictional characters in one room, and even the slimmest possibility of romance between them, even the hint of a moment – I'm going to go there. Sometimes the writer of the workshop piece is surprised to learn that their workshop piece has romance in it. They didn't know until I told them so.

All of my books but one have at least a touch of romantic love in them. Even my middle-grade novel, *Blue Mountain*, about bighorn sheep, has a bighorn-sheep-kind of romance in it.

And I am not the only one who likes a little love in her reading. Although I have no intention of persuading you to write genre romance, these statistics about romance genre novels are quite revealing:

- In 2010, romance genre novels did \$1.4 *billion* in business. According to the *Atlantic Magazine*, they far outsell other genres, and more than sci fi, fantasy and mystery combined.
- *Huffington* says that more than 70 million people in the USA alone read at least one romance genre novel per year, and most of them read many more.
- There is a surprising range within the romance genre: You'll find paranormal romance with vampires and shapeshifters, time-travel romance, historical romance, contemporary romance, and romantic suspense. There are growing romance subgenres for LGBTQ love stories, a large community of writers who specialize in African-American romance, and even a popular Amish romance subgenre.
- You can take courses about romance genre fiction at Princeton, Harvard, and dozens of other universities. A group of literature scholars, cultural historians, and popular culture studies professors founded the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance five years ago. They hold annual conferences, and I wouldn't mind attending one, and they've also started the peer-reviewed online *Journal for Popular Culture Studies*. It's a growing interdisciplinary field.

- Seven percent of men read romance genre novels. Or at least, 7% of men *admit* to reading them. I'm guessing that 7% would make rather nice husbands...

So yes, people like romance. I like a little romance in my stories. I have discovered, however, that just because I have loved a time or two, does not mean I am necessarily qualified to write a convincing romance story. So I've put some thought into this for the benefit of my own work. Furthermore, when you mentor aspiring writers, it makes you want to come up with some sort of narratological algorithm. This lecture is as close as I could come to such a thing.

Before I share what I've learned, I want to compare some of the tropes of the *genre* romance novel, and how they may differ from what fine arts students want to write, which is a great story with romance in it, which is different:

1. We are told by those who write about how to write genre romance novels that endings must always be happy. In a genre romance novel, love, apparently, must conquer all. As a little girl, I read "Beauty and the Beast" and learned that if I just stick with it, I can change a man who behaves like a beast into an adoring prince. Life taught me that this happens not to be quite true, or even a little bit true. Of course, love does not always conquer all, and we are not obligated in our stories to make them end that way if the story doesn't call for it. In John Green's *Fault in Our Stars*, love does not take away the pain and suffering of having cancer, and the characters do not live happily ever after. In genre romance stories the rule is that the lovers always get together, and the ending is always happy. Perhaps this is

one reason why genre romance stories are accused of being formulaic. In good stories with romance in them, the ending is not always happy.

Having said that, I personally love happy, or at least hopeful, endings. I think some part of me is beginning to feel that the anti-happy-ending thing has becoming sort of cliché in itself. Does the love story really have to poke fun at itself, or have dysfunction or perversion or death to legitimize it? Does somebody have to die at the end for the story to be considered serious literature? Because most of the time in real life, when you have a romance, you live, you know.

Ursula K. LeGuin wrote, "We have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain." End quote. (And may I indulge myself and say here that the world is a much poorer place for the passing of Ursula LeGuin whose Earthsea trilogy are among a handful of books that I read over and over again.)

So, while there is no rule about happy endings in good stories with romance in them, and while the lovers may not be together at the end, keep in mind that American romance writer Nora Roberts, who apparently does only happy endings, is translated into 33 languages and distributed on six continents and since 1999 every one of her books has been a New York

Times bestseller. I'm only suggesting there may be something the fine artist can learn from her.

2. Genre romance writers say physical intimacy is the ultimate prize. I would say that seems like a somewhat limited view of the many expressions of love. Wouldn't emotional intimacy be the true ultimate prize? There may be other prizes, such as physical intimacy, but in the best stories, emotional vulnerability leads to some rare understanding between two people. The reader is persuaded that two people have achieved some kind of uncommon meeting of the mind and heart.

3. In the genre romance novel, I learned, reading *Writing Romance Novels for Dummies*, that all scenes should further develop the love plot. Of course, we know that is not necessarily true for the kinds of books we want to write. The love plot can further develop the main plot. In my mind, a character who has more on his or her mind than mere romance makes for a more rounded and interesting character, after all. On the other hand, I have to admit that I skimmed many pages of George Elliott's books just so I could get back to the romance. I felt *War and Peace* was only readable because of the love plot. And I feel that I may be misunderstanding the universe entirely when I consider that romance writer Barbara Cartland sold about a billion dollars worth of books in her lifetime.

So. Now that we know we're talking about stories with love in them, and not romance genre novels, I'll talk about *my* take on the structure of story and how I

believe romance fits into that structure. Please keep in mind this is just one writer's approach and is not intended to be taken as gospel for everyone and every book there ever was. As working writers, we share everything we can with our students, and this is what I've learned and what works for me.

Many of you have listened to Louise Hawes lecture on desire. If you haven't, you'll do yourself a great service by listening to it. She talks about desire as the engine of all story, that passion and the trajectory of longing creates the forward movement of a story. She wasn't talking about romance here, but the character's desire line. I'm going to start with that notion and build from there. We'll drift away from romance to begin with and then come back to it.

So! Stories, the way I see them, with or without love, are built first of all on the principle of desire.

- Ann Lamott from *Bird by Bird*: "Find out what each character cares about most in the world."
- Ray Bradbury: "First, find out what your hero wants, then just follow him!"
- Kurt Vonnegut: "Every character should want something, even if it's only a glass of water."
- Robert McKee:

“Story begins when an event, either by human decision or accident in the universe, radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life, arousing in that character the need to restore the balance of life. To do so, that character will conceive of what is known as an "Object of Desire," that which they feel they need to put life back into balance. They will then go off into their world, into themselves, in the various dimensions of their existence, seeking that Object of Desire... That, in the simplest possible way, defines the elements of story - an event that throws life out of balance, the need and desire to restore the balance, and the Object of Desire the character conceives of consciously or unconsciously that they can pursue against the forces of antagonism from all of the levels of their life that they may or may not achieve.”

- Robert Olen Butler:

“Any Buddhist will tell you -- this is one of the great truths of their religion - that as a human being with feelings, you cannot exist for even thirty seconds on Planet Earth without desiring something. That's their word. I prefer yearning; it suggests the deepest level of desire... It's the dynamics of desire that make stories go.

I'll be using *Pride and Prejudice* to illustrate, which I choose for the following reasons: a) pretty much everyone has read it, b) it qualifies in my opinion as something young adults might read, especially since I read it as a young adult, c) it has stayed in print for 200 years, and has sold over 20,000,000 copies, d) it is a

truth universally acknowledged that it is one of the finest books written in the English language, and e) if I had to choose a favorite book of all time, this one would be it.

1. emotional desire/need/lack

The way I see it, story begins when the main character has an emotional need or lack in her life. The emotional desire or need or lack is something she feels, consciously or subconsciously. It may be explicit or implicit in the story. She can be doing the emotional desire if she is alone in a dark room sitting on a chair. It is completely internal. I am not talking here about romance yet – your character is a person who will have a whole interior life that has nothing to do with romance, if she is to be at all interesting to us. Who is she? What has happened to her? What is her emotional brokenness?

In some stories, the emotional story is quite thin, like in Louis Sachar's *Holes*, and in others, the emotional story is pretty much all there is, like in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. But it is always there. The character's emotional landscape is foundational in building the fictive world.

When *Pride and Prejudice* opens, Elizabeth Bennet's emotional lack is having something to be proud of. Although she is of the gentry class, she is poor. She is attractive, but not the beauty her older sister is. Her mother is a source of embarrassment to her, as are her younger sisters. Her father won't acknowledge social niceties. Lizzie has a dismissive attitude and even a certain shame toward her family in general, and only her older sister Jane, a beautiful and socially aware

young woman, is a source of pride for her. Lizzie has some *natural* pride, but she needs to have something substantive to support that natural pride. This is her emotional desire, need or lack.

Take literally one minute to jot down your main character's emotional desire, need or lack. We'll assume that if you're going to write a romance into the story, your character will also have an implied need for love. But we're not talking about that yet.

2. concrete desire/physical or external desire

Out of the character's emotional need, grows what I call a concrete or physical or external desire. The character takes some kind of action, or engages in some kind of struggle, to fulfill her emotional need. This concrete desire line motivates the action of the story. It involves the character saying things or doing things, making decisions. Plot, by my definition, is the events that play out as the character pursues her concrete object of desire. As she does, she may grow emotionally. She may or may not get her concrete desire, but in the effort, she fulfills in some way her emotional desire, need or lack. By the end of the story, the character has changed emotionally or internally in some way.

The concrete desire is not the same as a romantic desire. A reviewer commented about my book *Calvin* that it was "deeply romantic," but romance is not Calvin's concrete desire. Calvin is diagnosed with schizophrenia, and his *emotional desire* is to be healthy again. His *concrete desire* is to get Bill Watterson to make another Calvin and Hobbes comic, without Hobbes in it, which he believes will make him

well. The action he takes to get his concrete desire is to go on a pilgrimage. The plot are the things that happen on the pilgrimage. He has a whole life and a whole story without Susie, important as the romance is.

What is Lizzie's concrete desire? Although *Pride and Prejudice* is a true romance, she also has a concrete desire that is not romantic love: She must make an advantageous marriage, of course. But she has little control over this. Instead, she pursues a reason for pride by investing in Jane's happiness. Jane's happiness is Lizzie's concrete desire. Seeing to Jane's happiness is the main thread of Lizzie's actions: she walks to Netherfield Park to take care of Jane while she is ill; she is kind to Mr. Bingley and his snobby sisters for Jane's sake, and polite to Mr. Darcy, up to a point; she attends balls, encourages and counsels Jane, and tries to make up for the faux-pas of the rest of her family. Besides, it is well known that, if Jane should make an advantageous marriage, the prospects of all her sisters will vastly improve.

Take one minute and write down your character's concrete or physical or external desire. We're still not yet talking about the romantic desire – we're going to talk about that next.

So romance. Where does it fit in these categories of desire? It's not strictly an emotional desire – it doesn't happen only in one character's head. Romance is not exactly a concrete desire line either – you can't pursue romance obsessively like a goal, at least not without becoming something of a stalker. Romance sort of lives

in a space of its own – definitely emotional, and also sort of physical or external. It involves two characters. Outside the romance genre novel, it may not be the main action of the story, but it does involve some kind of action and reaction on the part of the main character and the love interest, but what and how? A progression is made as the story unfolds, but how does that progression happen? I'll come back to that shortly. To answer, I need to talk about two more elements of story.

3. obstacles

The character will have a compelling concrete desire, but unless the desire comes with obstacles, it won't be a story.

It is equally true of the romantic desire line that it needs obstacles to hold the reader's interest. Nicholas Sparks says, "Don't make it easy on your characters. What makes a love story a story are the hurdles the characters encounter on their paths." Louise Hawes put it this way: "What holds us is the yearning, not the getting. Romances are never about a couple's wedding day and the years of blissful marriage that follow." End quote.

If in chapter one the girl meets the love interest, and in chapter two they're sleeping together, it isn't romance, even if we suspect they'll have a nice life and a cute baby and one day buy a duplex and a dog. If you want a true romance, something has to keep the characters apart. This often done with love triangles –

the author creates another romantic interest who is almost as good as the first, which keeps the reader guessing. There are lots of other ways to create obstacles.

Julian Fellowes came up with all manner of obstacles to keep Lady Mary Crawley and cousin Matthew Crawley apart in *Downton Abbey*: her snobbery, his disdain for her aristocratic ways, her missteps, his integrity, she discovers he may not inherit the title after all, he won't have her if she won't have him the way he is, she's afraid to tell him about Mr. Pamuk, and she won't marry him based on a lie, he goes away to war, he falls in love with Lavinia, she agrees to marry Sir Carlisle if he'll keep her family from scandal. When Lavinia dies, Matthew must honor her memory and feels he and Mary deserve to be unhappy. So many delicious and inventive obstacles.

By contrast, the only obstacle to her marrying Henry Talbot, her second husband, was that he was a race-car driver. We were just never as invested in her second romance as we were with her first.

"Lunar Eclipse" is the final episode of *Moonlighting*. In this show, David and Maddie break the fourth wall and run around trying to figure out why their show got cancelled. Finally they decide to go ask the producer of the show. He tells them it's because when you fall in love, you can't fall forever. Eventually you land. In other words, eventually it isn't romance anymore.

So yes, you may wish to make a statement by having your characters jump into each others' arms in chapter two, but it won't be a romance. A romance requires obstacles, something that keeps the two lovers apart.

In the case of Lizzie and Mr. Darcy, as we have discussed, the obstacles are class, Lizzie's family and the machinations of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. What actions does Lizzie take to overcome the obstacles? She is witty and bold when she is around Darcy, showing she is his intellectual equal. She attempts to school her mother and sisters when they are around Mr. Darcy. She distinguishes herself in her manners and behavior from her parents. She tries to bring Darcy down a notch by bringing up Mr. Wickham. None of this rectifies the problem of her poverty and station, which are the biggest obstacles.

Even after Mr. Darcy does propose, around the middle of the book, the obstacles are enormous, and Lizzie is deeply disturbed. Here is a match she could be proud of, but it is in conflict with the only thing she's wanted, and that is the happiness of her sister Jane. Out of love for Jane, she must reject the man who separated Jane and Mr. Bingley. More importantly, however, Mr. Darcy's proposal makes it clear that he thinks he is taking a step downward to love her. This is unacceptable to Lizzie. First of all, it wounds her pride. And second, perhaps she realizes that Mr. Darcy himself would be unhappy with a wife whom he believes is his inferior. The only way to make herself his equal and assure his undying respect would be to reject him. If Lizzie doesn't consciously understand this, Jane Austen does. So even though Darcy proposes, the obstacles are formidable.

Nicholas Sparks says, “If the obstacles confronting the lovers define the love story, then what makes a great love story is their willingness to go to almost any lengths to overcome them - whatever the cost.”

Take one minute and jot down the obstacles that may be in the way of your character’s desire, both romantic and otherwise.

4. stakes

Every story requires stakes – meaning what the main character stands to lose if she doesn’t get her concrete or emotional desire. Some people use the word stakes interchangeably with tension, but they are different. Stakes increase the tension. The more the character stands to lose, the higher the stakes, the greater the tension. The same thing goes for the romance kind of desire. The draw to the romantic other has to be based on much more than looks. Physical attraction is low stakes – your character could meet someone even more attractive tomorrow, so why should we invest in this relationship? The reader has to understand why it’s deeply important, even essential, that these two characters get together. If the high-school-aged girl is longing for someone who doesn’t long back, the inclination is for the reader to think, “Honey, you’re sixteen. You’re going to like a dozen people between now and the time you’re grown.” No, no, no! You have to convince us that if the two don’t end up together, she will grow up to be a lonely old cat lady. Otherwise it’s hard to care.

The stakes involved in *Pride and Prejudice* are outlined in the first chapter or two: a) the girls belong to a class that offers them two choices in life: a fortunate marriage, or dependence, spinsterhood and poverty; b) these girls are particularly vulnerable because their father's estate has been entailed and when he dies they will be completely without protection and evicted from their home; c) an unfortunate marriage will mean a lifetime of quiet desperation. Her friend Charlotte and Mr. Collins exist in the story to reinforce the reader's understanding of what is at stake: Lizzie must marry or become a desperate spinster like Charlotte and marry, not someone she can be proud of, but someone ridiculous. Mr. Collins, sadly, has too little pride and too little reason for it.

In the first two seasons of *Downton Abbey*, Mary Crawley must be with Matthew because in fact, if you think about it, the real main character of the story is *Downton Abbey*, and we need it to survive in all aspects – we need the tradition and old values that Mary brings to the equation, and we need Matthew to provide a modern approach so *Downton* can survive a changing world. *Downton* needs Mary's toughness and blue blood, but also Matthew's vision. Isn't it interesting that we can't bear that Edith or Sybil inherit? It must be Mary. Why is that? Because Mary has a snob factor the other two don't – she and *Downton Abbey* go together. *Downton Abbey* is a great house, and it needs a great soul, a great love story at the heart of it. When I went to England, the trip was not complete without a tour of *Downton Abbey*, which has to be booked a year in advance, by the way. I watched a TV program about the real and living Earl of Grantham and learned that he and his wife are nice, ordinary sort of people,

wearing frumpy clothes who let people walk through their house so they can fix the roof. It was sort of crushing.

What is at stake for David and Maddie? He is dysfunctionally irresponsible and she is dysfunctionally type A. Neither one really has friends, both are stuck in life for opposite reasons. We sense that they need each other to sort of knock off the rough edges, that they could become themselves only better through association with one another. It's an extreme case of opposites attract.

In my book Calvin, why should Calvin and Susie be together? Well, for one thing, they've known each other all their lives, and Calvin has been in love with her all their lives. Susie says to Calvin, "You're never boring. You aren't afraid to ask hard questions and find out there aren't any answers. And you – you also know me in a way nobody else knows me."

Take one minute and write down what is at stake for your character – or in other words, what your character stands to lose if he or she don't get what they want, for the main plot and also the romantic plot. Write what is at stake.

so what should happen in a romance desire line?

As I've said, the romance plot does not live strictly in the emotional elements of the story or strictly in the action line of the story. It's not something the character merely feels alone in a dark room, but must in some way contribute to the forward movement of the story. On the other hand, it's difficult to let your character actively and obsessively pursue his or her love interest, as they might for some other goal or desire, without making them into some kind of stalker. It

would be creepy! So then what are the actions or events that build a romance story?

As I thought about this and examined some of my favorite books, I found that the answer is this: characters in love make gestures of good will, devotion or sacrifice. Instead of **pursuing** something they want, they **give up** something they want. They break down their defenses or make themselves vulnerable to the other.

- In *The Princess Bride*, when Buttercup asks Westley to help her with something, he always replies, “As you wish.” After a while, that “as you wish” becomes irresistibly sexy. Westley sacrifices everything, including his own life, for Buttercup.
- In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie has to sacrifice her own personal pride, or some of it, by accepting that she has made errors in judgment, and by accepting a man who initially found her unacceptable. Mr. Darcy wants a woman who is his equal or better. He would only be attracted to a woman who thought herself better than him. The colder Lizzie is toward him, the more he warms to her. When he proposes and she rejects him, we know he will love her forever. He has to give up his pride, or some of it, to marry a woman who would have the nerve to reject him. They both sacrifice their most prized possession, their pride.
- In the *Fault in Our Stars*, Hazel requires Augustus to read her favorite book *An Imperial Affliction*. Augustus joins Hazel in pursuit of the book’s author

to find out the end. He uses his wish from a wish foundation to fly her to Amsterdam where the author lives. When Augustus learns he is filled with cancer, Hazel spends his last months caring for him and loving him. They make sacrifices for each other.

- *Twilight*. I know not everyone wants to write like Stephanie Meyer, although my mother wishes I would. She likes to remind me that Meyer earned over \$100 million for her book. Edward shields Bella from a speeding van with his bare hands. Bella accepts his shortcomings, which is that he is a vampire. He refuses, on the other hand, to suck her blood. She decides that she wants to become a vampire. They both make compromises and conciliatory movements.
- Season after season of the *Gilmour Girls* goes by, and we know that, no matter how many romances Lorelai has, Luke is the one. And how do we know that? Because Luke is the one who takes her to the hospital when her Dad has a heart attack. Luke is the one who fixes her house. Luke is the one who gives her the best advice. Luke is the one who makes her coffee and breakfast and tries to get her to eat healthy. Luke is the one who is always there for her no matter what. We watch episode after episode only because we have to make sure the Luke and Lorelai get together!

The question becomes, not what the characters want, but what are the characters **willing to give up** for the sake of the beloved. This may sound like a simple concept, but it took me forever to figure it out.

Take one minute and jot down ideas for gestures of good will, devotion or sacrifice your character can make for the beloved.

Just as a footnote and a caution, here are a few errors I commonly see in student romance stories:

- disappearing act: The girl falls for the love interest on page eight and the story carries on. The love interest doesn't reappear again until page 80. If it's a romance, you have to find a plot that throws the main characters together. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy go away, but Lizzie is brought back into Mr. Darcy's world when she visits Charlotte and Mr. Collins.

The girl is rude to the romantic interest over and over again, or vice versa, and yet he or she falls deeper in love with every chilly encounter. I object on three counts: first, it's sort of unbelievable; second, it's become cliché; and third, I think of my young self reading romantic stories that modeled unhealthy constructs, and I take pity on my impressionable young readers. As a teenager, I read *Wuthering Heights* and learned that an abusive man like Heathcliff is the epitome of the virile romantic lead. Taking these stories and others to heart could well explain some choices in my life.

- cliché physical descriptions: It's like, one day a long time ago it went out of style to write about beautiful heroines, and now all the heroines announce as soon as possible that they're plain or unattractive. Still, for some reason the boys all fall for her. It's even worse when she complains that her large eyes are set too wide apart and her nose is too small and her lips are too

full and her cheekbones too high and her legs are too long... I wonder if making an evaluation of appearance is at all necessary. Give us a unique and telling feature for your character, and we'll paint the rest of the picture for ourselves. And remember not to base the romance on looks.

- cliché emotional descriptions of romance: Beating, pounding, fluttering, sinking and stopped hearts, gasping and stopped breath and all manner of breathings, thrills and chills and goosebumps and blushes and anything you've read a hundred times before – all is suspect. Avoid ooey-goey and gushy. Use restraint. Use your metaphor.

Stacey D'Erasmus, in the *Art of Intimacy*, says, "Questions a writer might ask herself as she struggles to bring a sense of intimacy onto the page are, What assumptions am I making about what intimacy is? What received ideas about intimacy am I perhaps unwittingly reproducing?" (Thank you, Linda Urban, for recommending this book to me.)

And then the author lists – a long list – of the myriad clichés and assumptions that are part of our daily cultural diet and, in my opinion, are almost always wrong. She asks why even bother reading and writing about love and intimacy if we've already decided what the intimacy looks like, feels like, what people say to each other in the dark. It's like a coloring book – here are the lines, just fill in.

Most images of intimacy I see in movies feel like they have nothing to do with me. I never believe any of those first kisses because they all look the same. They never show an awkward moment, or a confusing or disappointing moment, or a moment so thrilling the characters have to stop being slick, professional love-makers and just have their minds blown. And you know, that may be fine for stories for adults, but I don't believe it's fine for young adult stories. Writers for the young surely walk on sacred ground when they portray romantic love and intimacy. I think we search for radical authenticity. I think we find it in ourselves.

I usually end my lectures with a pithy quote that seems to encapsulate the meaning of my lecture. But this time, as you can see, there is no quote. I spent many hours trying to find a quote that wasn't silly or cliché or despairing or effusive. I found a quote by Joyce Carol Oates which seemed like it might have potential, but decided after a time that I didn't understand it. Why was it so hard to find a lovely quote about love? I wondered. Why do we tend to either disparage or worship it? Perhaps it is so big, so universally essential, so indefinable and elusive, that it refuses to be stuffed into a pithy quote. And so we shall end quoteless.