

Romance 101: Novels offer tips to romantically challenged

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ThisWeek Contributor

Valentine's Day is just around the corner and the annual pressure to think of yet another creative, romantic gesture has arrived.

No wonder so many people -- with the exception of florists, card shop owners, and chocolatiers -- dread Feb. 14.

What if there existed an inexpensive, never-ending resource for ideas to dazzle a loved one? Last year, more than 50-million Americans accessed this rich storehouse of amour: romance novels.



Too bad Valentine's Day doesn't come with instructions

The next best thing to instructions is "insider information" from Valentine pros in romantic prose. According to statistics, one in five women enjoyed a romance novel in 2002, and more men as well as women are discovering these feel-good books each day.

Despite the tenacious misconception that romances feature weak female characters and perpetuate anti-feminist and politically incorrect ideas, these pro-relationship novels have evolved with the times. Romance heroines have professional careers, assertive personalities and modern values and opinions. Sometimes, they even take the initiative in planning romantic Valentine Day surprises.

Romances incorporate elements of many types of fiction, with something for everyone. Romantic suspense/mystery is the most popular subgenre; however, the industry offers love stories that range from the spiritual, G-rated inspirational books to the push-the-sensual-envelope "romantica."

Romance readers enjoy contemporary happily-ever-after stories, historical novels set in eras such as Regency England, and paranormal romances featuring vampires, time travel and science fiction. The number of multicultural romances published annually is growing, and chicklit wins the genre new fans daily. And in each of these novels are Valentine's Day-worthy romantic words, gestures and insights just awaiting the savvy reader.

More than 2,000 print romances -- and many electronic, or e-books -- are published each year, generating close to \$1.5-billion in sales. In addition, there are foreign language and large-print versions of many novels, and audiobooks in cassette, CD and MP3 formats from companies such as Recorded Books. This allows busy people in search of the perfect Feb. 14 idea to access wooing suggestions in the privacy of their cars.

For those who think outside the box ... of chocolates

Whose fertile imaginations are behind the hardbacks, trade-sized novels and paperbacks that comprise more than 33 percent of all print popular fiction sold?

There are New York Times bestseller list regulars, such as Nora Roberts and Ohio's own Jennifer Crusie, as well as many other talented authors with legions of loyal fans. Romance Writers of America (RWA) boasts a membership of 9,000, with most being "pre-published."

Lured by the dream of penning their own romances, determined aspiring authors join RWA chapters, such as Columbus' Central Ohio Fiction Writers (www.cofw.org), to learn the basics and research the industry.

"RWA is a great organization that offers practical help for authors at every stage of their careers," Tami Cowden, a Las Vegas-based lawyer and romance writer, recently told ThisWeek. With co-

authors Caro LaFever and Sue Viders, she penned a substantive how-to writer's book, *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes*. (See related story.)

"I've always loved to read romance," she said, appreciating the benefits of reading as well as writing this upbeat genre. "I love books that show strong women taking charge of their lives, and romance is ... where you find them."

So the next time a significant other complains she/he just doesn't know what to do for Valentine's Day, steer the romantically challenged person toward the romance section in your nearest book store.

Then wait to reap the benefits.

The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes

Co-written by Tami Cowden, Caro LaFever and Sue Viders, *Heroes & Heroines* grew out of a discussion in Cowden's writing critique group concerning the motivations of fictional characters.

"After some research -- watching more than 500 movies, for example -- we discovered there were patterns of world views that drove characters," explained Cowden.

"Those world views emerged time and again, across millennia and cultures," she said. "We found the same archetypal patterns in the Sunday funnies as could be found in ancient Greek literature, in Shakespeare, in Asian myths. The long and short of it is that humans seemed to be hardwired to recognize and empathize with these 16 character patterns."

Published by Lone Eagle, *Heroes & Heroines* is a user-friendly how-to book, offering examples from classical literature and mainstream films. A staple in many college screenwriting classes, the guide is also popular with aspiring authors in all fiction genres.

As a tie-in to her nonfiction work, Cowden presents online and on-site classes -- with topics ranging from using archetypes to craft memorable protagonists and antagonists to understanding the anatomy of a scene. She also provides articles on writing-related topics on her Web site, www.tamicowden.com.

Cowden, a past winner of RWA's competitive Golden Heart award for aspiring authors, just sold a novel to Avalon Books. *Cruising for Love* is her first full-length romance. In addition, the author has written four romantic anthologies for Dream Street Prose.

"Romance isn't just fun; it is life-affirming," she said. "The average romance reader has more education, healthier relationships and more sex than the non-romance reader. Knowing that, who wouldn't want to read romance?"