

Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."

Lecture I. The Romantic Suspense Market

Defining Romantic Suspense

For Lecture I we must stop being artists. For Lecture I, we are businesspeople. Yes, we aspire to write romantic suspense novels, but before we can start down the road of crafting engaging characters and tautly honed plots, we must back up a step. We must ask ourselves, What is this product we are trying to write? What *is* romantic suspense?

As a general rule, romantic suspense is book that has both a romance element and a suspense element. Ah, you say, she is brilliant now. But believe it or not, there's a lot of confusion out there. I consider my second novel, *The Other Daughter*, to be romantic suspense as it has a love story between the hero and heroine and includes sex scenes. Plenty of people, however, consider it to be simply suspense, given the intricate plot. In contrast, I consider my third novel, *The Third Victim*, to be mainstream suspense, as the romance element is very small. Others, however, do consider that one romantic suspense as it introduces the beginning of a relationship between the hero and heroine. Go figure.

Readers aren't the only ones who fret the label. Publishers and marketing departments routinely hem and haw over how to position a novel. On the one hand, calling something romantic suspense implies providing the best of both worlds—a wonderful relationship story as well as an intriguing mystery. On the other hand, it can also mean jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none. Where do you even shelve a romantic suspense novel? Does it go in the romance section? Does it belong in mystery? How are readers going to find this book?

So right away, calling something romantic suspense introduces a bit of baggage. That's why you hear so much angst on the subject. Readers say they love romantic suspense but

publishers tell you they can't sell them. You thought you'd written a romantic suspense, but the kind editor you queried considers it otherwise. In other words, you've entered a very murky world where there is no one definition or description for the sub-genre.

Personally, I consider a romantic suspense novel to be a book that focuses on developing key relationships as well as advancing some kind of intrigue (whether that's mystery, thriller, action/adventure, on-the-run, or woman-in-jeopardy—see, even suspense has a lot of faces). By this wide definition, most books are romantic suspense. That doesn't bother me. Most readers, even male readers, enjoy some aspect of romance in their suspense/action/mystery/adventure novels. For example, the movie *Speed* has a very nice romance element and it was clearly marketed as an action movie. Did action-loving moviegoers mind watching Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullocks swap witty barbs and heated looks? Not at all.

So the key issue becomes defining how much romance is in your novel, versus how much suspense. Think of it as a spectrum. On the left-hand side, you have 100% suspense, a book that focuses solely on intrigue, e.g., Sherlock Holmes. On the right-hand side, you have 100% romance, a book that focuses solely on developing a relationship, e.g., Danielle Steele. Now, of course, you have everything in between.

For example, maybe you like books that settle in the middle—a perfect balance of character and plot. Harlequin Intrigues are generally a 50/50 split, and you could probably put such authors as Merline Lovelace and Janet Evanovich in this category. Maybe you like your books heavier on the romance—you're really reading for the love story, but you don't mind some kind of intrigue as a subplot, say a 30/70 split. Then you probably enjoy Silhouette Intimate Moments, as well as such mainstream romantic suspense authors as Nora Roberts, Heather Graham, Maggie Shayne, Suz Brockmann, Rachel Gibson, Jayne Ann Krentz/Amanda Quick and Linda Howard. Finally, maybe you really want a good, nerve-wracking thriller, and if the hero and heroine happen to fall in love on their way to saving the day, more power to them, say a 70/30 split. Then you probably enjoy such authors as Tami Hoag, Iris Johansen, Lisa Gardner, Tess Gerritsen and Catherine Coulter.

Now what does this all mean? It means there are many definitions of romantic suspense, so what matters is *your* definition of romantic suspense. If you have a preference as a reader, then you should have a preference as a writer. And understanding this preference will guide not only crafting your novel, but marketing it as well.

Marketing Romantic Suspense

To market your completed romantic suspense manuscript, preferences definitely come into play. Just as you know which end of the spectrum you like best, so do publishers. *This is a very important distinction for a romantic suspense writer!* You don't want to promote your fantastic mystery plot to a publisher who prefers the romance angle, and you don't want to push your mostly-romance romantic suspense novel to a publisher who prefers straight thrillers. When you start getting those rejection letters saying your brilliant novel just isn't the right "fit," this is often what an editor means.

For example, it was no accident that I sold my first suspense novel, *The Perfect Husband*, to Bantam books. They said right up front that the book was reminiscent of Tami Hoag and Bantam knows how to sell Hoag. Their art department knows how to package her, their sales force knows how to sell her, and their editors know how to edit her. Thus, the publisher could confidently justify the sale, the same way Mattel can confidently buy a new model of Barbie. All of which my agent knew when she mailed the manuscript to them. I write dark, gritty novels with more intrigue than romance. My agent understood my interpretation of romantic suspense, and she looked for a publisher with a similar take on the sub-genre. She judged the market correctly when she targeted Bantam.

Overall, Bantam, Pocket and Warner seem to prefer darker, thriller-based novels, while Berkeley, St. Martin, Kensington and Avon go with the more romance-oriented tales. Mira, interestingly enough, has done well with both. This is a general rule, of course, and as publishers are constantly swapping senior editors, philosophies can change at any time. One of the best ways of picking a good target publisher is to pick up a novel by an author whose work you feel is close to your own and check the publisher's name on the spine.

Forecasting Romantic Suspense

The last concern in the romantic suspense market is the constant rumor that the sub-genre is dead. For the record, *Publishers Weekly*, November 19, 2001 article, "The Year of Books 2001," states that romantic suspense sales declined in 2001. The article goes on to say, however, that books of exceptional quality did just fine. In fact, *PW*'s highly recommended paperbacks of 2001 were nearly all romantic suspense novels, Luanne Rice's novel, a straight romance, being the lone exception. Here are the books *PW* mentioned, in the order that they appeared:

- Suz Brockmann, *Over the Edge* (Ballantine)
- Heather Graham, *Night of the Blackbird* (Mira)
- Olga Bicos, *Heat of the Moment* (Zebra)
- Maggie Shayne, *The Gingerbread Man* (Jove)
- Patricia Cabot, *Educating Caroline* (Pocket)
- Lisa Gardner, *The Third Victim* (Bantam)
- Rachel Gibson, *True Confessions* (Avon)
- Bentley Little, *The Association* (Signet)
- Karen Marie Moning, *Kiss of the Highlander* (Dell)
- Luanne Rice, *Firefly Beach* (Bantam)

If you want to understand romantic suspense better, obviously these books serve as excellent references for the market. Also, these books cover a broad assortment of romantic suspense, from my own dark, gritty tale to Rachel's Gibson's very humorous

book to Karen Marie Moning's historical saga. We are all interpreting romantic suspense differently, and we have all found publishers that are a good match for our visions.

Finally, for more information on the fate of the romantic suspense market, here is a fabulous article by Barbara Wallace, "Has Romantic Suspense Peaked?" This article originally appeared in the October 2001 edition of the New England Chapter of Romance Writers of America newsletter, *Imagination in Flight*. It is reprinted here with permission from Barbara Wallace, whose first romantic suspense novel, *Harry's Return*, is available through Neighborhood Press (www.neighborhoodpress.com).

Romantic Suspense Article

HAS ROMANTIC SUSPENSE PEAKED?

by Barbara Tanner Wallace

Can you get too much of a good thing? Over the past few years, a large number of authors have made the jump from romance to suspense with financial and popular success.

Clearly the sub-genre is thriving. However, as with any trend, at some point growth turns into overkill. How far can this thriving market go? Is it still the greener pasture or are we beginning to see signs of saturation with too many authors and too much similarity?

"I think there is starting to be a glut," says Sylvie Kurtz who writes for Harlequin Intrigue. "I know that personally I've been looking for something different to read because romantic suspense stories are starting to blend into a certain sameness."

Most people concur, seeing this "blandness" as a result of the genre's popularity.

"A few great romantic suspense novels come out, do well, and it becomes a 'hot' genre," notes *New York Times* bestseller, Lisa Gardner. "Of course, when a genre becomes hot, editors started buying up lots of books and in their buying frenzy they may focus less on how good of a story it is, and more on what kind of story it is."

And writers, eager to break into the burgeoning market, begin imitating the books that blazed the trail ahead of them.

"Unfortunately, most of it results in what Jennifer Enderlin so rightfully calls 'generic writing'," notes literary agent Damaris Rowland. "The work in question has no distinctive voice, and the writing in general seems flat. And that's because authors are imitating instead of writing from some original, fiery creative center."

And so as with all popular genres, fall out will occur. Editors will become choosier, making entry into the market more difficult. And, unless they

demonstrate strong, original writing, some authors who've broken might not see a second sale.

However, romantic suspense is far from waning either in lucrativeness or popularity. In fact, just the opposite.

“Before the attack on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers, I would have said, yes, the romantic suspense market is becoming saturated, even somewhat monochromatic,” notes Candace Irvin, who writes military suspense for *Intimate Moments*. Ironically, the attack on our country will probably serve to boost the popularity of romantic suspense.

The September 11 tragedies may have an even more direct impact on romantic suspense, changing the direction of the entire genre. “We've been going through a ‘cult of the villain’ phase—people have been buying for Hannibal Lector, not Clarice Starling,” notes Gardner. “Now, I think that’s going to change.

“I think we’re going to see a huge emphasis on heroes and heroic behavior, given the tragic events of Sept. 11. Given the heroic actions of the firefighters, police, and military personnel following the tragedy, I think we are all feeling renewed respect, pride, and appreciation for people in uniforms. We want to honor these people.”

Irvin agrees. “One of the ways our culture addresses and works through its collective fears is through the arts. Look at how the cold war affected the writings of Tom Clancy—and how receptive the rest of America was to his work.”

And so, while works like Suzanne Brockmann’s *Over the Edge*, which deals with a hijacking, are unsettling at the moment, expect more and more books where terrorists and their plans are thwarted.

“We want reassurance that there are good, strong, determined people out there serving as a front line between us and them. And these people can and will prevail over evil,” says Gardner.

Which means, romantic suspense may actually become more popular. Pat Van Wie, who after fourteen years in romance is writing a straight suspense novel for Ballantine, says, “Thanks to Harlequin and Silhouette there is a huge reader base out there, and these readers are now looking for bigger, more in-depth stories. These stories and the authors who produce them will continue to expand and explore all the sub-genres of fiction.”

Bottom line, we apparently haven’t gotten enough of a good thing, when it comes to romantic suspense.

At least, not yet.

Conclusion

The romantic suspense market is a large, complex sub-genre. Determining your personal definition of romantic suspense can help you focus your manuscript, then target the proper publisher.

Next up, how to utilize research to make your novel stand out in a crowd...or on an editor's overcrowded desk!