

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 VIII. End with a Bang

Your heroine and heroine have now been together for at least 60,000 words. They have conquered inner demons, uncovered deep secrets, faced down old foes and realized the redemptive power of love. And your reader has been with them every step of the way. She has laughed, she has cried, and she has stayed up much too late even though she has work the next day. Now, it's time for the grand finale, which will start with the Black Moment.

The Black Moment

In plotting terms, the Black Moment is when all seems lost. It occurs right before the final action sequence and is the ultimate collision of internal and external conflict. The villain has set a bigger mousetrap, the protagonists can't think of way out of it, and they are terrified that they are failing not only themselves, but each other. This is when your characters' mettle is truly tested. In the beginning, your hero had weakness, doubt and mistrust. Now, after an incredible journey that also introduced him to budding love, he must earn his final place in the sun (same goes for the heroine). The hero must overcome his inner demons, face down your wonderfully diabolical villain, and save the day.

Black Moments are extremely important in romantic suspense. It's the emotional moment when everything comes together. Hope and despair, love and hate. Black Moments also can't last too long. By this stage, you have built up the suspense plot to require immediate action. So everyone gets his or her angst, and then it's time to charge forward.

Lights, Cameras, Action!

Resolution in romantic suspense should always involve plenty of action. You want to end with a bang. Think big, bigger, and biggest. Even a mystery requires more than a simple “parlor” scene. Remember, by this stage of your novel, your heroine and hero have reason to believe their very lives are at stake. This must get played out in the final showdown, providing compelling emotional drama as well as a truly heroic finish. This big showdown, in turn, provides the reader with a satisfactory emotional release, a regular entertainment catharsis. After following your character’s anxiety for an entire book, the reader gets the thrill of victory, the taste of conquest.

Also, most readers prefer death to the villain rather than jail time. I’m not sure if it’s a lack of faith in our legal system, or that readers are bloodthirsty, or both, but to provide a genuine sense of closure, you need to kill off the villain. Violently, of course. Then the characters—and the reader—are happy.

To be or Not to be...Happy

Finally, you have some choices regarding your ending. If you’re writing pure suspense, the ending can be unhappy or ambiguous. While I’m not a big fan of unhappy endings in commercial fiction, others certainly do it. In all honesty, I don’t like to leave anything open, unless I’m planning on writing a sequel.

If you’re doing a true romantic suspense, definitely provide a happy ending and sense of closure. After you have wrapped up your plot, defeated the bad guy and explained the plot twists, then end with your hero and heroine. Let them laugh, cry or love. Tell the reader how they will continue their lives together, stronger, healthier, and happier. This will provide the final warm glow so that your reader can lean back against the headboard and feel satisfied.

Conclusion

Writing a romantic suspense novel involves a lot of juggling—characters with plot, romance with action, light with dark. When done properly, however, a romantic suspense novel delivers the best of both worlds to the discerning reader—an engaging love story as well as a suspenseful thriller. In other words, you have one helluva good read.

Once you’ve gone down this road and sweated out a great plot with compelling characters, don’t lose steam at the ending. In an ideal world, you’ve created a great deal of tension and now you need to bring it all together for a big-bang showdown that reveals the best of your characters and the worst of your villain. Light will battle dark, good will save the day, and the reader will breathe a huge sigh of relief. Phew, what a ride!

Then revisit your characters for they are what your reader truly cares about. Strive for a final grace note, then let the words simply fade away.