

# THE *BAG*

# OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



## **This is my debut column for the *Bulletin*,**

which will focus on expanding opportunities for science fiction and fantasy writers—from crossing the boundaries of genre fiction; to exploring brave new markets and ways to make a living; and moving past surviving the writing life to thriving because of it. Here are some of the topics I'll be covering: paranormal romance; urban fantasy; writing tie-in material; teaching; time management; editing; revision; struggling with the need to attach meaning to life, both mundane and artistic; and how to discern between being flexible and diversifying your writing “portfolio” versus diffusing your energy (and defusing your results.)

I come to this column after many years as a freelancer, writing in a number of genres. I've been a columnist; an editor; a trustee for the Horror Writers Association; and a member of the Clarion Foundation Board. I teach, and I have mentored newer writers, some of whom have gone on to publication.

This column will be like any bag of holding—you're welcome to take what you like, and leave the rest for the next adventurer. I would be happy to hear from you at [nancyholder@san.rr.com](mailto:nancyholder@san.rr.com). If for any reason you get a bounce, please try [buffinan@aol.com](mailto:buffinan@aol.com).

Today's column is about writing paranormal romances, an easy and timely subject for me. My latest PR novel (as we say in the business) is on the shelves for August. It's titled *Son of the Shadows*, and it's out from Silhouette Nocturne. I also have an August Nocturne Bite titled *Son of the Sea*. And “Vampire Unchained,” a paranormal romance short story in *The Mammoth*

*Book of Vampire Romances*, from Running Press.

It's crucial to understand that in the romance side of publishing, romance as a genre and all its subgenres are well-defined, each with specific guidelines and requirements, and editors expect their authors (and authors' agents) to know what those definitions, guidelines, and requirements are. The author needs to know if what she or he has written is appropriate for Harlequin Intrigue, Silhouette Nocturne, Cerridwen Press, Signet Eclipse, Berkley Sensation, or any of the other markets for paranormal romance. Hand a stack of romances to a romance writer and s/he will see six or seven different books, each with a separate “narrative text,” as we say in the academic world, and nod to herself as she checks where they were published. (Sexist usage apology: there are male romance writers. I know three myself, and I'm sure there are more.) A non-romance writer will see...a stack of romance novels—at least until s/he does her homework.

But backing up a moment, the author needs to know if what she or he has written is actually a romance novel in the first place.

Lori Devoti writes both paranormal romance and urban fantasy. Her most recent novel is *Wild Hunt*, a June offering from Silhouette Nocturne. She says:

“...[M]y advice is to read a whole bunch of romances by different authors—paranormal or otherwise. I have talked with authors going [in] new directions who hear there is a boom somewhere and decide they want their piece, but aren't really readers of the genre, and don't bother reading the books once they decide to write one, or read just one. You have to read enough to get a feel for the heart of the book, which with romance is, well, romance. If you don't, you just aren't ever going to get it.”

## **Paranormal Romances**

“Getting it” is probably what separates romance writers from authors who have heard some of the statistics –that in 2006, over 25% of all books sold were romances, generating over \$1.37 billion in estimated revenue (figures courtesy of the RWA website), and want to get in on the action. Briefly, there are two basic requirements for a novel to be considered a romance:

1. A central love story focused solely on the developing relationship between two people (or vampires, or aliens. This is usually a heterosexual couple if you are working with a mainstream company, such as Harlequin, but other presses are more flexible.
2. An emotionally satisfying ending. Sometimes this is more sharply defined as an HEA (Happily Ever After.)

In romance novel parlance, the unfolding romance between the two characters is the story. The exterior story serves to dramatize the sweep of emotion the two grapple with as they learn how to love and to be loved by each other. It is perhaps this central theme, played and replayed in endless variation, that causes the most confusion (and subsequent) rejection of writers attempting to break into the field. This is what aspiring romance writers must get. This is the beating heart of all romance novels and without it, a novel might be romantic, or, as RWA terms it, a novel with strong romantic elements, but it is not a romance.

More problematic for some is the required HEA of the romance novel. In the past, the HEA directly translated as marriage between the hero and heroine—she can relax; she got her man. But contemporary romances can also end with the assurance that the two lovers have committed to each other—that their relationship will last beyond the thrill of the quest and mature into a partnership between kindred spirits/companions/soul mates/amused best friends/former enemies or current rivals. Sometimes the stated convention of an HEA is framed as an “optimistic” or “upbeat” ending, implying that there is hope that the relationship will continue, and serve as a vehicle for happiness and fulfillment in the lives of the lovers.

Critics of romances point to this necessary outcome as the weakness that reduces romance novels to a lesser literary form. Romance writers present a counter-argument that the supporting structure of a sonnet is predictable, and the success or failure of the poet lies in her ability to serve the form to express her thoughts.

### Works Cited

Mussell, Kay, and Johanna Tuñon *North American Romance Writers*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 1999.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Wainger, Leslie. *Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2004.

**All successful genre publishing is based on knowing what the reader wants and then providing it. And that expectation is never truer than it is in romance.**

The romance writer’s skill is brought to bear in how well she executes the supporting structures of the romance form—a central love story and an optimistic resolution of that story.

Read the following statement from romance maven Leslie Wainger, an Executive Editor for Harlequin, and the author of *Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies*:

“All successful genre publishing is based on knowing what the reader wants and then providing it. And that expectation is never truer than it is in romance. Start thinking about your reader the minute you decide whether to write a contemporary or a historical romance, a series or a mainstream novel, and then make it your goal to satisfy her expectations from page one until the end.” (329)

Some may argue that by satisfying the expectations of a reader, one is subverting one’s art. That’s not pertinent for my discussion, but if that is your belief, it may be challenging for you to write a successful romance novel, paranormal or otherwise.

Some may also argue that the HEA requirement has been lifted, due to the cross-pollination of romance with speculative fiction. But I would maintain that while non-HEA books are read by romance readers, they aren’t actually romances; and if you want to submit a paranormal romance novel to a publisher that’s looking for them, you had better keep that HEA intact. It’s a slippery notion, but romance readers read lots of books they themselves do not label as romances—in other words, they leave their portmanteau of expectations behind and enjoy a sort of busman’s reading holiday. When I started writing romance novels, for example, Stephen King was the favorite non-romance author among the romance fans I polled, hands down, but they never claimed him as one of their own.

I do plan to discuss paranormal novels with romantic elements as well as urban fantasy, which a number of prominent romance authors are now writing. But that’s for another column. I’m staying on this topic because of the number of questions I’ve fielded about paranormal romance specifically; and I am trying to impart the knowledge from the SMORomance.

So the first two requirements for a bone fide, genuine paranormal romance novel are a central love story and an HEA. There is a third, slightly more subtle, and that concerns the “alpha-ness” of the hero. Urban fantasy stars strong female protagonists with kick assitude (I wish I could remember where I read that; I didn’t make it up, and I would like to give credit to the author who did.) In the world of paranormal romance, the heroine can be strong, capable, brilliant and kick-ass...but there must be a hero who at the very least matches her; and, more commonly, possesses skills/abilities/magical properties that make him appear to be more powerful than she is, in a Beauty and the Beast-like way.

I once had a student who asked me, “Why can’t I have a romantic hero who is balding, stutters, and wears glasses?”

I said, “If you can do it, you can do it. Maybe you’ll start a trend.”

In Susan Krinard’s essay, “Pushing the Boundaries: The Challenge of Futuristic, Fantasy, and Paranormal Romance,” she says:

“The notion of a very strong heroine and more vulnerable male protagonist is one I’ve come across many times in SF&F—yet another approach less familiar to romance readers. While not precisely ‘role reversal,’ the relationship deals with the shifting dynamics of control between men and women. This is another area I would like to see become more flexible within the romance genre—but again, these changes must be approached gradually.” (Page 139, Mussel, Kay and Johanna Tunon, *North American Romance Writers*.)

I agree with her. I came back to romance writing after years of writing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* novels in part because of the creation of a new line (more on “lines” later) called Bombshell. Early Bombshells featured strong heroines on daring missions as test pilots, vampire hunters, bodyguards, and the like—and her interest in a man/the man was subordinate to her hero’s journey. She was La Machisma, and we authors loved writing her. Most of the time, she wound up with the guy, but she was fine without him. Heroines slept with more than one man (though she dumped her redshirt once she figured out that the guy beside her in the trenches was the one she wanted to keep.)

As I came on board and started working on my first Bombshell, a note came to us authors from HQ to make our books more romantic—to at the very least underscore the presence of a love relationship in our stories. We did. Then, after three years, Harlequin pulled the plug because the line was foundering. Romance readers were disappointed because these books were not romances,

and no one else could find them because they were in the romance section of the bookstore.

In my first two Bombshells, which were a continuing story, I gave my heroine a strong, sexy magic-using mentor and a strong, sexy police detective as the two men in her life. Because of his magical abilities, the mentor was perceived to be more powerful than the detective. He was also more exotic (a French Canadian!)—long-lived, kind of scary, able to read minds and invade dreams. At one point, the detective refers to him as Svengali.

My heroine starts out as a normal, everyday woman who is confronted by the mentor and told that she is the long-lost heiress of a magical House, and that she possesses magical powers, which are now coming to light. My editor and I intended for my heroine to wind up in a committed relationship with the police detective,

fraught with tension because the mentor looms large in their lives. In fact, I ended the second novel with the mentor offstage in a sort of magical coma, so that my two lovers would have to work together to save him.

But the steady email from Bombshell fans indicated that they wanted the heroine to wind up with her sexy, powerful mentor. In fact, not only did they want it, they assumed that was where I was going. In their eyes, it was a given, and the only outcome.

Then the line folded. I had one more book on contract with Bombshell, and I was invited to tweak it and write it for *Silhouette Nocturne*, the new paranormal line. I read some Nocturnes and talked to my editor, and I rewrote the beginning to give the starring male role to the mentor. He really was the alpha male, imbued with powers the detective did not possess. Happily for me, the detective has remained in the series, and will eventually get his own book...and a new love interest.

As you may have noticed, the books I’m talking about were published in a “line.” There are two kinds of romance novels: category romances, also called series romances, and single title romances, referred to as ST’s.

The largest romance publisher is *Silhouette/Harlequin*. At one time, *Silhouette* was a competing romance publisher, created by Simon and Schuster. The two companies are now one, shorthanded to the mainstream world as *Harlequin*. Go to [eHarlequin.com](http://eHarlequin.com) and you can pull down menus to see all the lines *Silhouette/Harlequin* publishes. These books are usually quite close to each other in word count; they adhere to the guidelines for the line as set down by *Harlequin*; and their covers have a similar look. A specific number of these branded titles is published each month—in the case of *Nocturne*, two new titles per month. It used to be that the shelf life of category romances was one month, but now that e-publishing (and purchasing) is on the rise, they have a longer backlist life. Additionally, category romances are sold worldwide and translated into dozens of languages (I recently warned my editor that my Norwegian hero swears in Finnish, and the Finnish is accurate.)

In North America, the *Harlequin* officers are located in Toronto, and *Silhouette* is located in New York City. Authors can (and do) write for both sides of the company. According to statistics compiled by the Romance Writers of America, S/H publishes over 2,000 titles a year.

*Silhouette Nocturne*, *Nocturne Bite*, *Silhouette Romantic Suspense*, and *Harlequin Intrigue* have all published paranormal romances, but *Nocturne* and *Nocturne Bite* are the more direct route to selling PR at S/H. SRS and HI tend to stick to PR written by their established authors, such as Rebecca York.

On the [eHarlequin.com](http://www.eharlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=1161&chapter=0) website, <http://www.eharlequin.com/articlepage.html?articleId=1161&chapter=0> will take you directly to the writing guidelines for *Silhouette Nocturne*. The submission guidelines and the name of the current editor (Tara Gavin) are also listed. Equally valuable are suggested authors to read: Maggie Shayne, Christine Feehan, Lindsay McKenna, and Sherilyn Kenyon. A click of the menu takes you to the *Nocturne* section of S/H’s online bookstore, where you can read the synopses of twelve of the most recent *Nocturne* titles. Note that authors who write for *Nocturne* often create their own worlds, which are marketed as miniseries within the umbrella of *Nocturne*. My miniseries is called *The Gifted*. You may wish to pitch a

miniseries as well, in the hope of securing a multiple-book contract.

At S/H, most of the editors are home-based in various lines, but can acquire (and edit) novels their authors would like to submit to other lines. My editor is part of the team responsible for Silhouette Romantic Suspense, but she works with me on Silhouette Nocturne. I send her my ideas for Nocturne; and she works with me on them; then she gives my formal proposal to Tara Gavin for approval. Once Tara gives us the nod, we go to contract, and I submit my novel to my editor. She and I work on any changes, and then it is submitted to Tara Gavin again.

Silhouette also publishes Nocturne Bite, which are paranormal short stories available thus far as downloads. You can study the guidelines and read the backlist (as it's a new program, there are only three titles so far) to see what the editors are looking for. eHarlequin also sponsors forums where readers can talk about paranormal romances (including those of other publishers.) And Harlequin has a paranormal romance blog at <http://paranormalromanceblog.wordpress.com/>.

Harlequin also publishes single title paranormal romances, as do other publishers. While category romances are part of a branded line, single title books are treated the same as single title books in other genres—with a cover designed just for that book, a longer shelf life (hopefully), and a more individualized approach to writing, editing, promoting and marketing it. ST's are generally longer and more complex. Most category romance writers aspire to single title book status, although some have found that the reality of one's own individual profit-and-loss statement can be dicey; some single title authors report that their sales were better as category authors. However, ST is where the romance envelope is pushed.

Check <http://www.wereallydig.com/romancenovels/ow/otherworldlynovels.html> (We Really Dig Other Worldly Romance Novels) for a listing of recent books by paranormal element, (including a separate listing of time travel novels); author, and a host of links to author interviews, publishers, and romance resources, including a link to the industry trade journal, *Romantic Times*. <http://www.romantictimes.com/>. (If you have ever seen a romance author with a signature line that includes RT 4.5, that means they received 4 1/2 stars out of a five-star rating from *Romantic Times*.) At the moment, the website list is current only until January 2008, but the website will still give you invaluable information, especially if you backtrack to the publishers' and authors' websites.

You can also read an informative paranormal blog at [www.paranormalromance.org](http://www.paranormalromance.org). This website provides an extensive list of paranormal romance authors with bios and lists of their paranormal romance offerings. They also feature reviews, interviews, a blog, online chats, and the annual P.E.A.R.L awards. Another group, [cataromance.com](http://cataromance.com) focuses on category romances, including paranormals.

Additionally, there are markets for paranormal romance short stories and novellas. I have a short story titled "Vampire Unchained" in *The Mammoth Book of Vampire Romances*, coming out from Running Press in August. You may hear of more markets once you become a member of the Romance Writers of

America, a must for anyone interested in writing romances.

RWA is the SFWA of the romance world, with nearly 10,000 members and 140 local and special-interest chapters. N.B: they offer health insurance. Many romance writers belong to the chapter physically closest to them, and any online chapter(s) catering to their special interests. I belong to PASIC, which stands for Published Author Special Interest Chapter, and Kiss of Death, for writers of Romantic Suspense. Although I'm not currently a member of my nearest chapter (San Diego) it's only due to lack of time.

Because of the emphasis on guidelines and responding to editorial and reader expectations, romance writers take more classes than any other genre I've ever seen. Chapters offer online classes as a way of giving back, and also to make money for their chapters. In the case of Kiss of Death, we have had classes about forensics, FBI agents, prisons, profiling, and hand-to-hand combat, just to name a few. Other classes discuss how to plot; how to write a synopsis; characterization; researching.

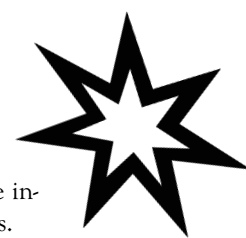
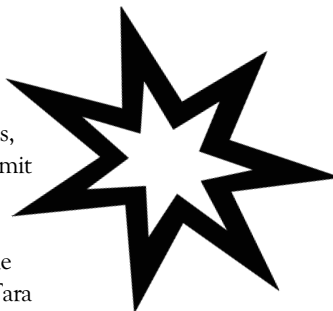
Romance chapters also organize critique partnerships, acting as a matchmaking service authors to pair up to read and critique each other's work. When I was in RWA-SD, we had a "big-sister/little-sister" program, where published authors would mentor aspiring authors.

Chapters also hold workshops that feature impressive guest speakers—big-name authors and acquiring editors. My Nocturne editor was in San Diego in May as a guest of RWA-SD at their annual conference. They also run contests, with the top submissions read by acquiring editors, who then often make an offer to publish the winner and any other submissions that catch their eye.

And RWA holds an annual conference. This year's conference is in San Francisco, running from July 30-August 2. The highest industry award is the RITA™, and there is a paranormal romance category. Go to [http://www.rwanational.org/cs/2008\\_rita\\_finalists#PARA](http://www.rwanational.org/cs/2008_rita_finalists#PARA) to see the paranormal finalists. These are considered the best of the best, as judged by published members of RWA (I have served as a judge.)

Also "at National," RWA awards the Golden Heart Award in ten categories to unpublished manuscripts. The last round of judging is conducted by acquiring editors.

SFWA *Bulletin* contributing editor Cynthia Ward has written a fantastic article titled "Paranormal Romance: Here, There, and Everywhere With the New Science Fiction," for *The Internet*



**There are markets for paranormal romance short stories and novellas.**

**“One day, when I was writing horror, I was going over some of my plot ideas with a writer friend who, as it happened, was a romance writer. After I was finished, she scrunched up her face and said, “No offense, but aren’t all these ideas kind of, well, childish?” I was taken aback for a moment—after all, she was driving a Mercedes.”**

Review of Science Fiction (<http://www.irosf.com>). The direct link is <http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10337> and the article is archived in the Fall 2006 spotlight articles. You need to register to read it, but doing so is painless, free, and her well-researched, thoughtful article is worth the effort. Her focus is coming at paranormal romance from the science fiction side of the family tree, and while she feels that the HEA requirement has been handily dispatched, I remain a bit more the traditionalist.

I love writing paranormal romance novels. I began my writing career in contemporary adult and young adult romances, and I suppose one of those novels, *Shades of Moonlight* (W/A Laurel Chandler, for NAL’s Rapture Romance line) was a paranormal romance, although I thought of it more as an homage to *Topper*. It was about the ghosts haunting a baronet’s English castle. Whenever I needed a romantic boost, I watched *Dracula* starring Frank Langella. I moved into what we call “women’s fiction”—novel’s about women’s lives, their friends, their careers, and also their love lives. And then I landed in horror, my first true love. Then came *Buffy*, about whom I wrote for nearly a decade, and some young adult novels including a horror novel...and then I found *Bombshell*, which begat *Nocturne*. I was thrilled.

Not to my surprise (as I have been down this road before), writer-friends who were willing to concede that while the *Buffy* books were “only” work-for-hire, they were cool because they were *Buffy*. But when I returned to romance, a few made comments about my divorce and supposed I was writing for *Harlequin* for the money. That’s not the case. I love the darkness, passion, and ferocity of paranormal romance. I enjoy getting into the flow and know I’m hitting the beats. And I am appreciative beyond words of the corporate culture at S/H, where editors treat us authors with cordial respect, and do whatever they are able to help me sell more books—last year at Comic-Con, they took out a full page ad for me.

One day, when I was writing horror, I was going over some of my plot ideas with a writer friend who, as it happened, was a romance writer. After I was finished, she scrunched up her face and said, “No offense, but aren’t all these ideas kind of, well, childish?” I was taken aback for a moment—after all, she was driving a Mercedes.

But after a few seconds of parsing, I knew they weren’t childish at all. They were good horror ideas. But she didn’t get horror. As Lori Devoti mentioned, there is some “getting” when it comes romance in general and paranormal romance specifically. I grok the fullness of paranormal, and I buy and read paranormal novels for pleasure.. A wise mentor once told me, “Don’t write what you know. Write what you love.” Then he sent me to my bookshelves to look at what I was reading.

If you’re reading something close to paranormal romances, you might pick up a couple and give them a try. But if as you read you find yourself howling, and it’s not at the moon, maybe it’s time to investigate a different genre...such as urban fantasy, which I’ll talk about next column.

Don’t forget to write!

*Nancy Holder has sold approximately 80 novels and 200 short stories, essays, and articles. A former trustee of the Horror Writers Association, she has received four Bram Stoker awards for her supernatural fiction. Her work has also appeared on the lists for the American Library Association; the American Reading Association; and NY Public Library Books for the Teen Age. She wrote the Gambler’s Star SF trilogy for Eos, and has written tie-in fiction/material for Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Angel; Serenity; Hellboy; Smallville; and other franchises. She writes YA horror for Razorbill (Pretty Little Devils) and is the co-author, with Debbie Viguie, of the Wicked saga. She writes comic books and pulp fiction for Moonstone Books. Son of the Shadows and Son of the Sea from Nocturne are both out now.*

*She is a member of the Clarion Foundation Board, and lives in San Diego with her daughter and co-author Belle; their Cardigan Welsh Corgi, Panda; and the evil cats, David and Kittnen Snow Vampire.*

