

Building a Believable Romance

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Lesson 1. The Romance Reader Contract

When I was an acquiring editor, one of the biggest issues I saw in submissions—specifically in *romance* submissions—was the romantic arc. It was very often incomplete, rushed, uneven, unbelievable, or wooden. But I also see this issue frequently in non-romance books that have made it past the editors and onto the bookshelves. Each time, the author gave up the opportunity to capitalize on the romance market and thought “good enough” on the romantic elements they employed. As a result, the relationship subplot falls apart, isn’t believable, or just seems too convenient.

To build a believable romance, we need to know what romance is, what elements of a romantic relationship have become indelible parts of the Reader Contract, and why those elements are even required in a non-romance story.

We’ll cover the first question in this lesson and some in follow-up, but let’s consider in the meantime why a non-romance reader would demand certain elements be present in your characters’ romance. Why would this reader, who is entirely unfamiliar with the romance genre, insist on the sanctity of certain elements?

I believe there’s a lot to be said about the value of romance in popular fiction, and we see that value reflected in readers outside of the romance genre. When they insist cheating cheapens the romance or promising the reader a fulfilling ending and then denying them this resolution is a huge party foul, they are saying two things:

1. Romance reflects elements of the human experience
2. Believable romances will reflect the mores and taboos of the society they are written for

It’s important to know your audience. Most of us write for a Western audience primarily, or those whose appreciation of Western popular fiction has been well established, so it’s very important to know how we, as a global culture, define romance and how we, as a group, define what kind of relationship or characters will earn a fulfilling romantic arc.

The Universality of Lurve

Romance is a hot seller, and romance readers are pretty eclectic in their preferred reading material. It’s incredibly common to find them diving into sci fi or mysteries or literary or horror. Adding a romantic element to your story, regardless of genre, can serve many purposes.

- It can add a layer to a character.
- It can insert conflict and tension.
- It can enhance your theme.
- It draws in readers who might have found your story too dry otherwise.

- It provides another story thread that can offer a big emotional payoff (or sucker punch) at the end.

Reflection

1. What is your definition of romance? Consider how romance is defined in Western fiction and what conventions are required for this genre and/or element. Ask friends and readers of romance what they consider essential elements of a romance.

2. Romance is everywhere, and not in rom-com movies alone. Here are some examples of non-romance novel/movie/TV series that show romantic popular fiction. Consider these and add some examples of your own.

- Inception
- Wolverine/X-Men movies
- Spider-Man
- Avatar
- The Dark Knight
- The Lord of the Rings
- The Matrix
- Burn Notice series
- Psych series
- The Lost Girl series
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer
- True Evil (by Greg Iles)
- 11/22/63 (by Stephen King)

Lesson 2. Narrative Elements of Romance

Pamela Regis wrote a fantastic study of the romance genre called *A Natural History of Romance*. In it, she defined the five narrative elements of romance (plus three optional elements). These elements, though defined from a heteronormative viewpoint, are absolutely vital to a successfully built romance—even if it's not a het romance. Here's something to keep in mind as you read through the elements below: either character in a two-person romance can function as Regis's "hero," and either character can function as Regis's "heroine." In fact, the female half of a het romance could function as the hero while the male functions as the heroine. How the characters fill the romantic roles is up to you and the story you want to tell. But consider those roles and how they play out for each character.

1. **Society Defined.** Right away, we see the world the hero and heroine live in severely flawed. This flawed society is often the foundation of the external romantic conflict. Class issues might create this foundation (huge in historicals and in paranormal romance, where magical critter species stand in for class or race distinctions).
2. **The Meeting.** The first time the characters come together in the story might not be the first time they've met, but this initial meeting should exemplify the most obvious elements (external, typically) of the romantic conflict. In other words, the first time the reader sees these two crazy people on the page together, she should know right away what's keeping them apart.
3. **The Barrier.** This is essentially the entire romantic conflict, internal and external. It will have some element of the flawed society to it, as well as emotional (internal) and possibly physical (external) elements to it. By the time we've hit the first plot point, we need to have a very firm picture of the entire barrier—the flawed society, the emotional/psychological needs and obstacles of the characters, the physical threats, etc. All of it should be well-defined, and unless there is a ginormous reversal later in the story, these *should not change*. Often, in fact, when it seems the romantic conflict has changed between the characters, it's really only deepened or doubled back on itself. The characters **think** that initial conflict has been overcome, but the new conflict is really just kinda hiding the lingering issues, or it has reversed that issue (ie the solution to their conflict has only worsened their situation and deepened the amount of conflict between them).
4. **The Attraction.** These moments need to show *why* these two deserve their Happily Ever After together. We need to see that they are so much more together than they are separately. We need to see that they've struggled separately. And we need to see that when they are together, and when they have shed their egos, they can change their world. This is shown in their attraction and in the scenes in which the building attraction give them opportunities to work together. The scenes where we see this are "candy scenes." Or if you're familiar with the Save the Cat plotting tool, these are the Fun and Games scenes. We get glimpses of their shifting selves, the crumbling conflicts, and what their society might look like were the flaws repaired.
5. **The Declaration.** This is the moment when each understands that s/he is in love with the other. It's a declaration to self (and possibly to the other) of romantic intention, the

ah-ha/I could have had a V8 moment. In the 80s, it was that shocking moment of internal angst when the heroine realizes OMG I'VE LOVED THAT BASTARD THIS WHOLE TIME BUT IT'S HOPELESS AND NOW I'M SAD AND MUST STOP EATING.

6. **Point of Ritual Death.** This is the romance's dark moment. The all-hope-is-lost scene, where it appears they are doomed to live separately and managing only half of their potential. At the end of this scene, either or both need to realize that, if it's all gone to hell anyway, they might as well put their hearts on display to one another. It's a moment when egos are shed and barriers crumble.
7. **The Recognition.** Here, the heroine's power is revealed, and the barrier falls. She is central to overcoming the romantic conflict, even if the barrier falls because she engineers recognition through the hero (for example, if part of the romantic conflict has been financial, she will reveal the hero's financial awesomesauce *to him* through her actions or inspiration). Within the romance genre, it's essential to have the heroine at the center of this revelation. In a story with only romantic elements, it is not essential because the emotional intensity and payoff for the reader doesn't need to be as intense.
8. **The Betrothal.** Intentions are manifested either in a public declaration or in a ritual. Regardless of how the "betrothal" happens, the reader must leave the story knowing that the relationship these two have forged is strong and almost certainly permanent (Happily Ever After or Happy For Now). In a story utilizing the Marriage of Convenience trope, the betrothal might happen toward the beginning, but by the end, there is typically a secondary emotional binding that balances the wedding that happened earlier in the story. The first time was legal, this time it's for real.

You can have three additional (optional) elements. In each case, the element addresses the flaws of the society (the foundation of the characters' romantic conflict) and reveals to the characters as well as the reader how the reconstructed society, cleared of the flaws that make it toxic for a relationship between the hero and heroine, gives these characters a road ahead and the first markers toward resolving their conflicts.

- **Wedding, Dance, or Fete.** Some kind of gathering gives the reader a peek at what a marriage should reveal in a romance: the new and improved society clear of its flaws. Note: It should be followed immediately by a scene revealing a new complication or a plot reversal.
- **Scapegoat Exiled.** The instrument (person) responsible for the romantic conflict is exiled from the society. This is often the beginning of the flawed society righting itself.
- **The Bad Converted.** Instead of exiling the villain, the villain comes around. Once again, this remedies the flawed society.

Cited:

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

Reflection

1. What's the name of a book or movie you've enjoyed (romance-heavy)? Break down how the story fulfilled each of these narrative elements.
2. Choose a narrative element from Lesson 2 and consider how that element often plays out in your own genre, if there is a romantic element.
3. Map out the narrative elements in your WIP. Are they all present? Do they need to be? Would inclusion strengthen the romantic elements? Are they in order?
4. Brainstorm some narrative elements for a story you'd like to write or for which you'd like to include a romantic element.

Lesson 3. Building Intimacy

Intimacy is a vital aspect of any romantic relationship. Without the physical side of romantic love, a relationship is incomplete. Even if you're writing a sweet romance, the reader has to be convinced that the characters' physical chemistry is strong and compelling, and this is done by showing escalating intimacy.

What is intimacy? It's emotional and physical connection. So that means we can see a couple build intimacy through increasingly personal and vulnerable conversations. Physical intimacy, when its building mirrors the emotional intimacy, helps to deepen the sense of chemistry between the characters. Sexual tension is vital; therefore, intimacy built properly is also vital.

Consider the list below. While it's not necessary to show each of these intimate moments occur, it's vital the ones you do show appear in order. (Note: Erotica and erotic romance get a pass here because the premise of these stories is based on accelerated intimacy that pushes the boundaries of acceptable social behavior. E.g. women having one-night stands or stranger sex or BDSM relationships is considered by some in our society to be wrong or even taboo, and even portraying detailed sex scenes will result in apoplexy in some corners.)

This list originally came from a Linda Howard handout.

1. Eye to Body – Appraising gazes are the first step.
2. Eye to Eye – Meeting another person's gaze can be a sign of aggression or interest.
3. Voice to Voice – Talking is a natural initial step to forging a relationship, but discussion that builds sexual tension or initial interest is key in making the romance stand out.
4. Hand to Hand – First physical contact is typically a handshake or a helping hand. Initiating touch anywhere else on another person's body when you've only just met is inappropriate and, in fiction, a signal to the reader that something is awry with the relationship.
5. Arm to Shoulder – Any generic contact that extends from the hand but does not reach the trunk or head works here. Hand to elbow, for instance, is just as appropriate. Arm to shoulder can signal a friendship, guidance, or protection.
6. Arm to Waist – The first sign of intimate attachment.
7. Mouth to Mouth – If a mouth touches anything besides a hand prior to this point, it potentially signals a problem with the relationship.
8. Hand to Head – This gesture can often be one of domination if used out of order or aggressively. Ideally, palm should touch the face in a non-threatening way, or intimacy could be jeopardized.
9. Hand to Body – The first sign of imminent physical intimacy. Depending on body part, this might not be acceptable in public.

10. Mouth to Breast

11. Hand to Genitals

12. Genitals to Genitals

Note: 10-12 are not generally done in public (exception: erotic stories)

Again, it's vital that your characters progress through this list—even if not all points are shown inside of the story—in order. One of the best examples to support this warning comes from Lavyrle Spencer's *That Camden Summer*. [Trigger warning: rape] In this early 1900s story, the widowed heroine has returned to her husband's hometown with her children, and when she arrives, her brother-in-law is there to meet their ferry. Immediately, he's exceedingly familiar with her, making physical contact and even grabbing her waist. A couple of chapters later, he tries to kiss her. So it's no surprise when, not long after the attempted kiss, he rapes her.

The escalating intimacy, well out of order and advancing way too fast, is a signal to the reader: this man is no hero. Spencer used this brilliantly to foreshadow the coming assault. The brother-in-law's behavior was a broadcast message to the reader not to confuse this character with the actual hero, whose physical contact with the heroine moved very slow, advanced very deliberately, and was directed entirely by the heroine's comfort level.

Reflection

1. How can you use escalating physical intimacy with escalating emotional intimacy in your WIP? Create a chart and list the 12 steps of physical intimacy on one side. On the other side, list the level of knowledge, the level of personal history, the dark secrets revealed, etc. the characters have at that point of the story. Leave it blank if you don't use that physical element. When you're done, look at your chart and decide whether the emotional intimacy escalates as smoothly as the physical intimacy.
2. If your WIP is complete, find page numbers corresponding to each element on your chart. How much story happens between each element? Are they fairly evenly spaced, or does their spacing make sense considering the premise and needs of the plot?

Lesson 4. More About Intimacy Because Apparently There's a Lot to Consider

Attached to this lesson is a table listing common body language. The source is cited at the bottom. I do recommend reading this book—it's super valuable—but it's ridiculously gendered, heteronormative, and often sexist. Keep that in mind while you read and pull out the valuable stuff.

Body language is a fantastic way to telegraph messages to the reader. We recognize certain movements and stances and the messages they're broadcasting. If someone is staring off into space and biting her lip, what do you think is going on in her head? If a dude is standing with legs spread and arms crossed, what is he telling you? These bits of body language say so much about what's going on in the subtext of the scene, and they also reveal character and move the characters through the scenes. But most importantly, in terms of building the romance, they add to sexual tension.

Body language also reflects the escalation of emotional intimacy. This particular kind of intimacy is where the romance itself is built. Characters begin with walls around them—we all do when we first meet someone. How those walls come down reveals a lot about the characters and about the escalation of the emotional intimacy.

Consider a couple who are both wary of trusting others, and then they're thrown together in the apocalypse and are only going to survive if they <dun dun dunnnnn!> trust each other. Those walls are going to crumble fast, revealing their true characters, their vulnerabilities, their incredible strengths, and their darkest fears to each other. But that doesn't mean the entire wall is crumbled. There will still be a garrison standing, where each retreats when the intimacy is too much, too soon. From there, they will hide and avoid until they have to rely on one another again. At some point, there will be just a pile of rocks left, which they will mutually kick over in one soul-baring convo or experience.

Consider a couple who sit on opposite ends of a boardroom table. It's a hostile takeover, and she's going to run his company over his dead body! <insert game show music> Those walls are going to be hard and fast, and it probably won't be until the physical intimacy escalates that their walls are obliged to slowly crumble. When they open up and become completely emotionally intimate, it will most likely happen with a wrecking ball because they've held so tight to the last thing they each have control over in this giant, romantic mess—their emotions.

Consider two neighbors who are thrown together by a matchmaking landlord who wants them to move in together so she can double the rent on one of the apartments and rent it to her ex. They resist the romance, but their walls are low and weak because they already kinda know each other from that one time with the lost cat and the one time getting locked out half-naked. Their conflict escalates when she reveals she's planning to take a job in Singapore, and the walls maybe rise a bit in the spots where they were still standing. But they all crumble when he reveals his troubled past, decides his job doesn't compare to their relationship, finds something in Singapore, and follows her there...and meanwhile, the landlord chortles with glee, doubles the rent on both apartments, and rents the extra place to her other ex.

The fall of emotional barriers signals increasing emotional intimacy. When they crumble, we see more intimacy...when it suddenly goes up between them and hasn't been there before, it signals the character's discomfort and vulnerability, which are signs of intimacy.

Reflection

1. Come up with a scale that you can use in your plotting (or editing) charts to show where the intimacy level is. The scale you use can be anything —numeric, colors, platypii, whatever butters your biscuit. Check your scenes—does intimacy slowly but surely escalate? Does it make sense to be at that level at the first sex scene? Does it make sense if it backtracks? Does the final falling away happen at or near the Dark Moment?

Lesson 5. The Barrier

These are the rules of the Barrier:

1. It must be complete. All elements of the Barrier must be present.
2. It must be daunting. The reader needs to ask how in the seven hells the characters are going to find a HEA/HFN in this hot mess of a conflict-palooza.
3. If it weakens before the Dark Moment in the story, it must come back stronger. It doesn't have to remain the same—it can evolve.
4. It must be completely resolved by The End.

The elements of the Barrier are:

1. The flawed society. Whether it's a requirement of their society or expectations and pressures from their society (even if it's *have a job, and no matter if it keeps you in the same town together or not*), something about the world they live in must be flawed and must keep them apart.
2. Personal internal conflicts. What do they want with their lives? What do they want to change or maintain about themselves? What do they dream of? The thing that keeps them from managing these is their internal conflict.
3. Personal external conflicts. What threat is planning to turn their lives upside down? What physical, measurable goal is on the line? The threat is their external conflict.
4. Story conflict. There's always a big question in a story. In romance, that question is usually "Will they find their HEA/HFN?" So the story conflict in romance is probably the major romantic conflict. If it's not, if your story is, say, a romantic thriller, the story conflict might be the terrorist who's threatened to release incurable and fatal diseases in twenty hours, nine minutes because the story question is "Will they stop the terrorist?"
5. Romantic conflict. This is the conflict that keeps them from sealing the deal. It's the thing that, until it's resolved, keeps these two from fully committing.

Reflection

1. Define all the elements of your story's Barrier. Look at the execution in the story. Does the Barrier ever weaken? If so, does it change, evolve, or escalate after the happy moment has passed?

Lesson 6. About the Candy Scenes

The candy scenes—the fun and games or, in Regis’s terms, the Attraction—are extremely important. It’s so common to see writers skimp on these scenes, but this is where you build the sexual tension, the reasons the characters should be together, the external conflict, and the characterization that makes us root for the characters in all their endeavors. This is where the actual romance happens, where we see them come together, where we see the conflict looming over them, where the shadows lurking around them are getting darker and more menacing, and this is pushing them closer together. This is the meat of your story.

Do. Not. Skimp.

But, you know, don’t go overboard.

The Attraction is kind of like sex. What comes before is foreplay, and the candy scenes are both foreplay and actual sex. If it’s too short, there’s not enough time to make the climax intense enough, so the reader walks away feeling like she got shortchanged. If it’s too long, and the climax takes forever to happen, the reader walks away...or more like hobbles away because saddle sores are a thing and she wasn’t really into that kink tonight, kthanks. Be aware. Keep that candy in moderation.

Reader Cues.

In romance, there are certain reader cues that allow you to show that Attraction building. These cues are often standard romance-speak or cliché, but they can be freshened and presented in a more exciting way without losing the impact. For example, that weird little sizzle/zing/Moment of Deep Awareness and Tingles that accompanies the first touch. Yes, it’s obnoxious. Yes, it’s overused. Yes, it’s a bit nonsensical, particularly when they’ve only just met and this brush happens before there’s any more sexual awareness of each other than “huh, I wouldn’t kick him out of bed.” But it’s shorthand for the romance reader.

Right there, the reader knows *this* is the hero. There’s no question from that point on because only the hero gives her the tinglies across her skin, over her face, down her spine, pooling warmth at the apex of her legs. So give the reader this moment of awareness and use this shorthand to your advantage...but freshen it. Make it different. Instead of tingles, let the accidental brush/intentional touch/whatever reveal something about him or make him noticeable or different than the background dudes. Does she see a rather faded tan line on his ring finger? Does he have a visible tattoo she only notices when he grabs? Does she meet his eyes for the first time since they met? Is something about the touch familiar and shocking?

The fact that there is awareness in this touch—and not even the Speshul Shock of Lurve—tells the reader *this is the guy*. And the heroine won’t even have to worry about all that warmth pooling in her love canal. Awkward.

Back to Candy.

These reader cues that we all know and love show the escalation of the romantic elements. Like with the tingly touch, there are other physical responses that communicate desire, internal conflict, and growing love to the reader. There’s also arguing/bantering (which can be overdone, so make sure it actually works with your voice and style and with the characters leading the romantic charge), which aids in sexual tension and showing where they are in their building Attraction. And there’s subtext.

What is subtext? It's the message underneath the dialogue. It's the fact that they're upset that he's deploying tomorrow when it sounds like they're arguing over where he left his cover. It's the unspoken *I love you* when they seem to be discussing the lifetime mating habits of pygmy marmosets. It's when you describe, through the point of view of the heroine, the blazing sun awakening at the edge of the Earth, and the reader knows that sunrise is all about how she's about to put on her boots and get her revenge on.

So within these candy scenes, we're basically seeing the characters and their relationships deepen. We see the intimacy increase in time with the escalating conflict. We see super secret messages telegraphed to the reader identifying the hero and identifying the unsure power the heroine has to build and use in the dark moment. They are the most important scenes in your story because they tell the story of how this love match came to be. They are the most important scenes because they reveal the source of the emotions the reader needs to feel with the characters. They are the most important scenes because they contain the payoff.

Each candy scene serves a purpose. Actually, it serves five:

1. Shows the attraction.
2. **At least** hints at the romantic conflict.
3. Builds on the theme.
4. Reveals escalating intimacy.
5. Reveals more of or reinforces the extent of the flawed society.

Plotting the Believable Romance.

This seems like it should be a long, in-depth section that goes into the needs of a romance plot, but what you have now should, for a romance, plot the story. It's up to you to decide how best to integrate what you have so that the pace stays strong, but you have all the elements now that you've defined the narrative elements, the escalation of intimacy, the depth and breadth of your barrier, and the candy scenes that give your couple time to come together.

If you still need more, though, I suggest you look at your favorite plotting method and find ways to integrate these narrative elements. I like the Save the Cat method—it's great for books as well as movies, and it blends well with the narrative elements. I'm attaching a romance beat sheet based on Blake Snyder's Save the Cat format, as well as a rigid plot structure based on the standard 3-act format. Check these out and see how you might blend the narrative elements and the rising intimacy (as well as the shifting/strengthening and ultimately diminishing barrier) into your own favorite plotting structure.

If you're a plotter, take your fave plotting method and add new places where you should show a narrative element of romance and the increasing intimacy. For example, I'll make sure The Attraction takes place during Fun & Games in the Save the Cat plotting model. Theme Stated (Save the Cat) will reference The Barrier, since the characters' romantic conflicts will have something to do with the message of the story.

If you're a pantsier, take your last story, grab a Save the Cat beat sheet or a three-act structure and make sure that the romance you wrote fits the guidance of these plotting methods. **ONLY**

worry about the romance, referencing other plot elements only as needed to show where the story itself is. Does the romance build evenly and appropriately? If it looks like nothing is rushed, that the emotions and intimacy unfold with escalating conflicts or tension, then you should be good. If everything looks chunked up or there are long stretches of no forward motion in the romance at all, reconsider those sections and see if you can revise the story to create a slow burn for your reader.

Reflection

1. Look at your WIP. Do you have a wedding/fete scene? If so, does it give the reader a glimpse of a repaired society? If not, could you add one as a candy scene to strengthen the building romance? Remember, it must be followed by an extra complication/plot reversal.
2. List some of those reader telegraphs you find in romance, like the first-touch zing, and describe the message you think it sends the reader.