

*A top romance editor gives you
the know-how you need to succeed as a romance novelist*

Writing a Romance Novel

FOR
DUMMIES[®]

Leslie Wainger

Executive Editor, Harlequin Books

*Foreword by New York Times
bestselling author Linda Howard*

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About the Author

Leslie Wainger has been editing romances and general women's fiction for twenty-five years. She started as the editorial assistant for Silhouette Books and is now an executive editor for Harlequin/Silhouette, where she handles the editorial direction and acquisitions for several romance series. She also edits both series and mainstream novels and works with a roster of authors that includes multiple New York Times and USA TODAY bestsellers. In the course of her career, she's traveled extensively to speak at conferences, and she's done both local and national PR in print, on radio, and on TV, including National Public Radio, the Wall Street Journal, and Fox News. She's written articles, been featured in industry guides and how-to books, and currently has a Letters to the Editor bulletin board in the Community/Learning To Write section of the eHarlequin.com Web site.

When she can get away, she enjoys extended travel vacations; recent destinations have included Australia (where she ate a grub on her first visit and held a baby wombat on her second), New Zealand (where she wisely refrained from swimming in a lake of acid), Peru (where she ate a local delicacy called cuy, aka guinea pig, and — more enjoyably — visited Macchu Pichu), Bolivia (where she tasted alpaca), and Spain (where she fell in love with Gaudi's architecture). Next trip? With any luck, somewhere where she can see monkeys in the wild.

That she's an admitted bookaholic goes without saying, but she's also an all-too-avid collector of CDs and DVDs, with a bent toward popular films (especially romance in any form) and TV series she's known and loved. Additional collections include tacky salt and pepper shakers and (of course) monkeys.

She's also been a fangrrrrl her entire life, and that shows no signs of stopping. Davy Jones was the first great love of her life (and she still insists they would have been perfect for each other, if only he could have waited for her to get from twelve to twenty-two). Current obsessions include everything related to "The Lord of the Rings" (especially Viggo Mortensen, with a note to include the fact that she's been a fan since "Ruby Cairo"), "Farscape" (if you want to see an amazing romance, check out Ben "John Crichton" Browder and Claudia "Aeryn Sun" Black), and James "Spike" Marsters, formerly of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Angel."

Additional useless trivia: She has three cats and the commute from hell.

Dedication

To all my authors, past and present: Thank you for making me look good.

Author's Acknowledgments

As the dedication says, I have to thank all the authors I've worked with. Every single one of them has made me a better editor, and many of them have also become some of my best friends. Special thanks to Linda Howard for the intro and Patricia Gardner Evans for the tech read. For additional technical help, special thanks also to Nancy Yost, who had the (bad?) luck to be scheduled to have lunch with me right when I needed a piece of info and came through in spades, and to Joan L., who answered a library question for me and gets collies in return.

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Family and friends are the backbone of everyone's life. Mom, Dad, Judi, Polly and your attendant crews . . . thank you. Thanks also to all the friends — real-life and on-line — who've supported, pushed, commiserated, laughed, cried, and promised to buy (and even requested autographs). If I start naming names, I'll either go on for pages or leave out someone crucial, so basically, if you

think you should be included . . . trust me, you are. (But special mention has to be made of Melissa, at whose baby shower this book — or at least my participation in it — was also born, Kimm, AZ, Mario, Cheryl, Shelly, Linda K. and Mr. B., all of whom went above and beyond at various points.)

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Dedication

I admit it: When I wrote my first romance book, I didn't know what I was doing. Of course, I was only nine years old and didn't know what I was doing most of the time. What I did know was that I loved writing, and I took great joy in creating these rambling, clichéd stories that swooped in and out of different characters' points of view as the plot galloped from one country to another — all without a single chapter break. I *knew* what chapters were; I just didn't care. All that mattered was telling the story.

My love of writing never faded. I eventually learned to break the tale into chapters (just as I learned the rules of grammar), although I still hate all that wasted white space on a page. Margins are for sissies. Do you know how many words you can get on one sheet of paper when you make your handwriting really, really tiny so you can actually get two lines of prose inside one ruled line of notebook paper, and write from one side of the paper to the other? A lot. And I wrote on both sides of the paper. I think one sheet held close to 1,500 words. Ah, the good old days. Now stories have to be typed and double-spaced on only one side of the paper; not only is a lot of white space wasted, but the challenge of seeing how small I can write and having the words still legible is gone.

But fast-forward a couple of decades, roughly. I was still writing. I had never stopped, and writing was the great private joy of my life. I wrote westerns; I wrote science fiction; I wrote fantasy; and I wrote thrillers — but they all had one thread in common: They all had romances in them. I *connected* to romances, but I wrote everything by the seat of my pants. I hadn't researched or studied anything and had no idea of any do's or don'ts — I just had the stories. Finally, one morning I woke up and decided to see whether I was good enough to be published. Then I did some research. I found out how to prepare a manuscript (margins were required) and how to submit it. Everything else, I did the usual way: by the seat of my pants.

I wrote a book and sent it to Leslie Wainger, my dear friend and editor of over 20 years now, who bought it. That's how she became my dear friend and editor. I was a newbie in the business; she was fairly new herself. What I knew about writing would have rattled around in a peanut shell, but I loved what I did know. Leslie loves books, and she taught me the publishing lingo, how a manuscript gets into book form, and all the other details that become part of a writer's life. Her editing — good heavens, how I needed editing — taught me more about the *structure* of writing than anything else I'd learned since learning the English language.

Little did I know that my chosen genre, romance, was the toughest one to write. It can't be, you say; so many romance books are out there — it can't be difficult. Oh, yeah? Try it. Romance readers are probably the most prolific readers on the face of the earth, and they don't read just romance. They read everything. As a group, they're frighteningly knowledgeable. They know their genre, they know what they expect, and they like being

surprised. How do you give them what they expect and surprise them at the same time? Sheer dumb luck, and a lot of hard work.

Romance is the best discipline for writers. It forces you to learn how to make your characterization so strong that the characters not only live on in the readers' minds, but the readers also have a personal connection to the books. A romance writer has to learn pacing, how to tell a coherent, cohesive, and engrossing story in 80,000 words or less, depending on the category line. It's a tough challenge. Any tips are appreciated.

There weren't any tips when I started writing, back in the dark ages B.C. (Before Computers). No one had analyzed the hearts and parts of numerous romance books and broken them down for me to study so I could polish my craft, tighten my plot, and otherwise get a head start.

I feel cheated. Why wasn't this book written 25 years ago????

But it's written now, by an expert in the romance publishing field, for you to enjoy and learn from. Have fun!

I still feel cheated.

— Linda Howard

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Introduction

Romance is far and away the best-selling genre in all of fiction. The specific numbers are constantly changing, but on average, 50 percent of all mass market paperbacks sold are romances. Add to that the growing sales of trade-paperback and (especially) hardcover romances, and the picture is even more impressive. Just take a look at the bestseller lists: They're filled with romance novels.

Romance is a something-for-everyone genre. Looking for a quick read to keep in your purse and pull out whenever you have a few minutes free? A 55,000-word category romance may give you just what you want. Want a complex story that can keep you turning pages for days as you relax on the beach or the porch of a mountain cabin? Try a 150,000-word mainstream. Whether you like history, the here-and-now, or even the future, whether you're looking for comedy, suspense, something spooky, or an inspirational read, the romance genre has something for you.

Because romance is so popular with readers, it's also popular with would-be writers — many of whom started out as readers and then suddenly decided that they had a story to tell, too. If you're one of these aspiring writers, this book is for you, because there's always room for one more.

A lot of outsiders have a very clear — and clearly wrong! — image of the typical romance writer. They picture her as someone dressed all in pink (boa included) who taps computer keys with the long, red nails of one hand while picking up bon-bons with the other — unless she's writing in the tub, artfully camouflaged by bubbles and probably shorting out a computer per day.

The real truth, as insiders know, is that romance writing is hard work, but it's also extremely rewarding work, allowing successful authors to express their creativity and earn money for it, all the while making thousands — sometimes even millions — of readers happy. Not a bad job if you can get it, and if you've read this far, I'm betting it's a job you want. So welcome to the *inside* of the romance business. It's time to start your new career.

About This Book

I've been in the romance biz for 25 years (okay, 24½, as of this writing). I started as an editorial assistant and worked my way up to my current position of executive editor. In that time, I've seen the romance industry grow and cycle through all kinds of changes. Gothic romances, one of the staples of my teenage years, were only a memory until recently. Regency romances, as epitomized by Georgette Heyer (whose books I also devoured as a teen), have hung on as possibly the hardest subgenre of romance novels. Sometimes historical romances have been on top, sometimes contemporary romances. Right

now, romantic suspense novels seem to be *the* way to break into the big-time, but romantic comedy novels are climbing fast, and inspirational romances are showing strength outside religious bookstores.

Some things, though, never change. Readers are always looking for *a good story*. I've heard that phrase more times than I can count, and when I probe a little deeper, it always comes down to the same things. Readers are looking for strong, compelling characters, a story that makes them feel things right along with those characters, and a happy ending that lets them experience the thrill of falling in love all over again with each book.

As a writer, your job is simple: Give the readers what they're looking for. But the practicalities of that mission are complex. You not only need to know the basics of writing any novel, you also need to know — and master — the specifics of writing a romance. You need to put emotion on the page, and that can be a bit like catching lightning in a bottle.

In this book, I distill everything that I've learned as a romance editor into a step-by-step, topic-based guide to help aspiring romance authors take an idea and grow it into a published novel. I'm not big on rules and regulations when it comes to writing a romance novel, because I think too many do's and don'ts make a writer self-conscious and stifle her creativity. And writing a romance novel is all about finding creative ways to make

the reader happy. Instead of dictating to you or using the dreaded F-word, *formula*, I'm going to do for you what I've done for writers throughout my career: I'm going to give you the tools you need to write well, and to understand what a reader needs and how to give it to her. Then I'm going to turn you loose to tell the story of *your* heart so you can touch *your reader's*.

Foolish Assumptions

Every author — whether she's writing a romance novel or *Writing a Romance Novel For Dummies* — has to make assumptions about her audience. And I've made a few, at least one of which I suspect is true of you:

- ✓ You're interested in making a serious effort at writing a romance novel and getting it published.
- ✓ You're sitting down to write your first book, and you're looking for advice on everything from creating a proposal to writing the manuscript to finding the perfect agent or publisher.
- ✓ You have a stack of unpublished manuscripts under your bed that has yet to grace an editor's desk.
- ✓ You've met with some success in the romance-publishing world, but, like most authors, you're always looking for tips, tricks, or advice to help you improve your craft.

If any of these descriptions sound familiar, you've come to the right place. You can find something here to help you improve your writing skills and guide you to success in your career.

How This Book Is Organized

I've organized *Writing a Romance Novel For Dummies* into six parts, each one designed to help you with a separate stage of the writing process.