



EDITING ROMANCE NOVELS 201

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LESSON #2

Characters

The heart of every romance novel is the characters—there wouldn't be a story without them! Last week we looked at the basics of good characterization. This week we're going to dive deeper to see what characters in romance novels need. There are a few things you can look for and do to help your clients create the kinds of characters romance readers love.

In addition to referencing *A Worthy Pursuit* and *Pride and Prejudice*, I'll also refer to *Writing the Christian Romance* by Gail Gaymer Martin and *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels* by Gwen Hayes. While these books are marketed toward writers, I've found them to be quite helpful as an editor as well. (Please note that Hayes's book is *not* a Christian book, so her examples are not based on a Christian worldview of romance, but her tips for writing a romance are great.)

To kick off this lesson, I want to start with an explanation of why we're spending an entire week on characters. Actually, I'm going to let Gail Gaymer Martin tell you:

A love story provides the reader with a relationship: Two people meet and are curious about, interested in, and then attracted to each other, but something stands in their way of forming a romantic relationship. That conflict between the man and woman, stemming from their background and life experiences, and the struggle to resolve the tension and conflict between them, are what make a story compelling. (*Writing the Christian Romance*, 16)

In this lesson, we're going to look at the types of characters needed to make a romance novel work (including tips on what to ask your clients and how to encourage them to strengthen their characters). Specifically, we'll look at

- Backstory
- GMCs for Heroes and Heroines
- Character Arcs
- Attraction

- Flaws

Backstory

We talked about this a bit in the last lesson, but now I want to reemphasize the importance of a well-developed backstory for romance novel heroes and heroines. Backstory explains everything about how the characters live, move, and think when the reader first meets them. It should not, however, appear in the story (at least not all of it). The author needs to reveal just enough to let the reader know how and why the characters think and act.

Martin explains it like this:

Backstory is the subtle seasoning of a novel. It brings out the nuances and flavors that help to create a delicious blend of action-packed motivation and conflict between the hero and heroine. Dumping all of the characters' pasts into the novel in the first pages is like emptying a saltshaker into soup. Instead, decide what information from the characters' pasts is vital to the plot, and in what order the pertinent information should be presented. (*Writing the Christian Romance*, 33)

If the manuscript you're editing seems flavorless (you don't understand why things are happening) or there's so much flavor that you can't go on (so much backstory that you don't want to—or can't—keep reading), those are issues. Show your author where she can sprinkle in a little more backstory to better explain her characters' GMCs. Then show her where she needs to throw in a potato (for those of you non-cookers out there, adding a potato to oversalted soup will absorb the salt, i.e., where the author needs to take out some of the backstory).

The Romantic Element

Regardless of whether or not the characters in the novel are actively pursuing relationships, there *must* be something in the backstory that influences their thoughts regarding love. It's crucial to understand this because, unlike characters in other genres, the idea of relationships and love *will* come up in a romance, and the characters' backstories determine what it will look like when it comes up.

In *Romancing the Beat*, Gwen Hayes says, “Whatever is keeping [the] characters from falling in love, being in love, or thinking they deserve love is what [the] book is going to be about. All [the] plot points ... need to be looked at through the lens of that fear or misconception or deep-seated issue” (10).

How to Help

Characters in other genres don't need to worry about romantic elements, but those elements are the driving force behind the romance novel. Before you start editing, ask your author if she has created character sketches/worksheets for her hero and heroine; then ask if you can read them. If she doesn't have them, encourage her to create them so you both have an idea of what to look for in each character.

At the end of this lesson, you'll find the character worksheet I send to authors who haven't created character sketches. Not every author uses sheets like these (because some authors are more plot focused), and that's fine if their characters are engaging, believable, and relatable. If, however, you can't connect with or don't understand the characters, ask your author to fill out the sheet. It will force her to delve deeper into her characters' heads, and it will help you understand what the characters should look like on the page.

Once you and your author have a firm grasp on the characters' backstories, it's time to look at GMC.

GMCs for Heroes and Heroines

Last week we looked at the basics of GMC:

Goal: what a character wants to achieve

Motivation: why a character wants to achieve it

Conflict: what prevents a character from achieving it

This week we're going to look at the specific GMC needs of romantic heroes and heroines.

Character GMCs never remain consistent throughout a novel, regardless of the genre. As the characters grow and change throughout the story, any part of that trinity can change—characters might set new goals or pursue the same goals for different reasons, or they might discover new problems preventing them from achieving their goals. Within a romance novel, one of the changes that *must* happen is the inclusion of the romantic relationship.

To do this well and effectively, I recommend my clients create two starting GMCs for their heroes and heroines: professional and personal. A character may not actively be pursuing his personal GMCs, but they need to be established and in place so the character can reveal to the readers how he thinks/feels about a possible romantic relationship.

Let me explain using *A Worthy Pursuit*. Here's a look at Stone's and Charlotte's professional GMCs:

Stone

G: To retrieve Lily and return her to her grandfather

M: Not only has he never failed to retrieve what he's looking for but he's also a man of good character, and he won't let a child be kept from her family

C: Charlotte has papers naming her as Lily's legal guardian, which means Stone may have been hired by the bad guy

Charlotte

G: To work at a school for gifted children and protect them from those who would take advantage of them

M: Having been a child prodigy, she knows the pain of being used for her talents

C: The school where she works suspiciously shuts down, leaving her with two children whose

parents cannot be reached and Lily, a child whose grandfather is determined to steal her from Charlotte

Those are the initial motivations of the main characters, but because they will meet (and eventually fall for each other), there also needs to be personal GMCs to explain why and how they react to the possibility of a romantic relationship. Here are their personal GMCs.

Stone

G: After retrieving Lily, he wants to take his money, buy a house, and retire

M: He's never really had a home (his mother died when he was young, leaving him to fend for himself); now he's thirty-five years old and ready to settle down

C: He's attracted to Charlotte and realizes that he wants to include her in his plans, but he doesn't know if she's capable of trusting him

Charlotte

G: To be a good mother to Lily and to protect her from those who would use her

M: Charlotte's father used her to promote his career, and her mother left her to perform in Europe; Charlotte knows what it's like to be used *and* not to have a family

C: Stone's arrival not only jeopardizes Charlotte's life with Lily but also reawakens her heart and sets her thinking about love (something she'd given up on after being used by a past fiancé)

If those personal GMCs hadn't been established, it would be hard for the reader to understand why Charlotte keeps her distance from Stone even though she's attracted to him. It would also be hard to figure out why Stone persists in pursuing her. Once those GMCs are revealed, however, the reader can empathize with the characters.

As you look at those GMCs, you can see why it's so important to have detailed backstories created for each main character—their pasts influence their goals and motivations. It's common for new writers (or new-to-romance writers) to put their characters together and create superficial conflicts without any thought as to whether there's a strong enough goal or motivation to support and sustain the romantic tension. Each GMC must be grounded in the character's backstory, and the situations that arise throughout the story will challenge and test them.

Which brings us to character arcs.

Character Arcs

As is the case in all fiction, the main characters need to have arcs. They need to start in one place and change throughout the story, ending up in a new place. In romance novels, that arc needs to include the romance. Regardless of the characters' GMCs, the romance needs to weave its way into the arcs.

I love how Hayes says it: “The *main* plot is hole-hearted to whole-hearted” (*Romancing the Beat*, 12).

That doesn't mean there aren't other plot elements or character issues, but subconsciously the characters are working their way from hole to whole.

For this example, let's look at Elizabeth Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice*. As with most of the classics, the writing style is much different from modern fiction writing, but the same basic principles apply. Though not as defined as in today's romance novels, Elizabeth still has a GMC.

Elizabeth

G: To be a good daughter and sister while being true to herself

M: Love for her family and a desire to see them (and herself) happy

C: Mr. Darcy's and Mr. Bingley's acquaintances threaten that happiness

Throughout the story, Elizabeth's arc is easy to spot: she's a bit superficial (perhaps naïve) about life, taking everything at face value and seeing the world only from her point of view. Her association with Mr. Darcy, however, forces her to recognize and confront her pride and prejudices. She knows he is to blame for her sister and Mr. Bingley's not being together, and she assumes it's because Mr. Darcy is cold and heartless. She also believes what Mr. Wickham told her about Mr. Darcy (that he is selfish and uncaring) because it supports the conclusions she's already made about him.

Once Darcy explains the truth, however (that he was trying to protect his friend, Mr. Bingley, and that Mr. Wickham lied about their past), Elizabeth decides to let go of her pride and to try to see the world differently. She soon realizes that people are not always who they appear to be, good or bad. While she discovers these things about herself, the romance somehow slips right into the story. She didn't even realize she was hole-hearted, but as she discovers what kind of man Mr. Darcy truly is, she wants him to make her whole-hearted.

She transitions not only from an immature young lady to a more experienced, more mature woman but also from hole-hearted to whole-hearted.

How to Help

If the hero and the heroine in your clients' books don't have arcs that include the romantic element, something's missing. If you get to the end of the book and you find yourself confused or frustrated with the characters, there's probably an issue with the arcs.

To help your author, chart out that character growth (including the romance!) to see where the issues lie. Some of those issues will be a direct result of plot issues (which we'll talk about in the next lesson), but some of them will also stem from weak characterization (i.e., GMC).

Attraction

At some point in the novel, something about the boy needs to attract the girl (and vice versa). In a *good* novel, that attraction needs to be based on more than physical appearance. While many writers may not realize that they're doing it, they end up writing stories where the only thing the hero and heroine like about each other is how they look.

Tell me if this sounds familiar:

The boy meets the girl, and they rub each other the wrong way. He's rude, and she's snarky. Whenever they talk, his sarcasm flies and her defenses rise. They're always in each other's way, and they constantly blame each other. When they're together they fight, and when they're apart they complain about each other to their friends. But he's handsome, and she's beautiful. So one day the switch flips and, instead of fighting, they're kissing.

Excuse me—what?

That's right. Two people who've never been nice to each other or admired anything about each other are suddenly in love. Actually, no. That's lust. The author hasn't given the reader any reason to believe that these characters sincerely care for each other. If you read back through the story, you'll realize nothing is pulling the characters together beyond their physical attraction. **Truly compelling romance novels need to include characters who have more than just a physical attraction.**

It's okay for the hero and heroine not to get along at the beginning of the story—it's even okay for them to have disagreements throughout the manuscript—but they have to see something in each other that they want to explore or understand or support. Maybe it's a shared love of snakes or a passion for sushi. It doesn't matter how odd or insignificant it seems. Once they've taken the bait (being physically attracted to each other), something substantial has to be there to keep moving them back to each other.

One argument you might consider here is that opposites attract—*my characters are just such opposites that they're attracted to each other.*

That's only true to a certain extent. For this example, I'm not going to use fiction. I'm going to tell you *my* story.

You could not find two more opposite people than me and my husband, but we had one thing in common—our friend Jessica. When she worked at a coffee shop, we both showed up to talk to her. She got busy, so we talked to each other. It didn't take long to realize we're completely different (he's into trucks, camouflage, and Hamburger Helper; I prefer reading, musical theater, and fine dining). But he was good looking (if not odd), and he thought I was cute, so he asked Jessica for my number.

It wasn't *just* our physical attraction that brought us together. We both love and adore Jessica, and I knew that I could trust any man she considered a friend. It was our mutual trust of Jessica that brought us back together (literally—she was the third wheel on our first date). Looks wouldn't have been enough for me; my husband is handsome, but he can be *weird!* Without that other connection, I don't know if we would have had a first date.

Even though ours is a real love story, the same principle applies to romance novel characters. Not convinced yet? Martin says it this way:

As the old saying goes, “opposites attract,” so . . . create a hero and heroine who strike a chord with the other’s conflicts and aspirations. . . . While fashioning these contrasts, however, make sure to find those things that make them compatible—they both love family, they are both Christians, or they have a shared love of nature. (*Writing the Christian Romance*, 20)

How to Help

If your client’s characters are constantly fighting and rarely nice to each other, ask your author what attracts the characters to each other. If she sends you a list of qualities that the characters admire in each other but you don’t see those in the manuscript, offer suggestions for places and ways to bring that out in the story. If your author doesn’t know, encourage her to figure it out so she can strengthen her characters’ attraction (which deepens the reader’s connection).

Flaws

People aren’t perfect; characters shouldn’t be either. There’s a tendency for authors to swing in one of two directions: a perfect hero or a perfect heroine.

The perfect hero is not only handsome but also kind and smart, has a good job, takes care of his grandmother, rescues abused puppies, and always knows exactly the right thing at the right time to make the heroine swoon. All of the issues in the relationship come from her, but he has the patience of a saint and waits for her to overcome her issues and find her way back to him. (Switch the guy/girl roles and you have the perfect heroine.)

Swoon. Or gag.

Readers respond differently to characters, but they tend to either love or hate perfect characters. It’s easy to identify a too-perfect character: either you’ll think he’s too good to be true or you’ll think he’s annoying. If you feel that way, readers will feel that way. Don’t give them the chance to hate a character. Instead, look for opportunities to give the characters flaws. Here are some examples:

Elizabeth Bennet: prejudice

Mr. Darcy: socially awkward

Stone Hammond: rough around the edges

Charlotte Atherton: trust issues

That’s it for Lesson 2! In the next lessons we’ll look at how those characters need to interact and the types of things that need to happen between them to really make sparks fly! Please don’t hesitate to ask if you have any questions, and don’t miss the chance to test your new knowledge with the assignment questions.



LESSON #2 ASSIGNMENTS

To receive a certificate of completion for this course, you'll need to complete at least two assignments from below. However, to get the most from this course, you are encouraged to complete all of them.

For this week's assignments, you'll need a romance novel. If you're new to the genre and don't have a favorite one yet, this exercise will still work if you use a movie plot (but you should be reading a romance novel during this course!). Once you've picked your story, complete two of the following assignments.

Assignment #1

Fill out the attached character worksheet for the hero and the heroine of that story.

Assignment #2

Create personal and professional GMCs for the hero and the heroine.

Assignment #3

Map out the character arcs for the hero and the heroine.

SAMPLE Character Interview Sheet

The Basics

Name:

Age/Gender/Race:

How would you describe your appearance:

Hometown/Current City:

How did you end up in your current city:

Do you plan to stay there, why or why not:

If you could live anywhere, where would you go and why:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about where you live:

Family

Marital Status:

Family (parents, siblings, children, etc.):

To which family member are you the closest, why:

If you could change anything about your family, what would it be (and why):

What is your favorite thing about your family, why:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your family:

Education

Education completed:

If you didn't graduate high school, why:

If you did graduate high school, why did you choose to go to college (or not to go):

If you went to college, how did you pick one:

If you did anything other than college, how did you decide to do that (and why):

What is your biggest regret about your entire educational experience:

What is your fondest memory about your entire educational experience:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your educational experience:

Employment

Where do you currently work:

If unemployed, why (and what are you doing to find employment):

If employed, how did you find your job:

Why did you take this job, do you like it (why or why not):

What is your dream job, why:

How would you describe your work ethic:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your work experience:

Social Life

How would you describe your social life:

What are your thoughts on social network sites:

How would your friends describe you:

How would you describe your friends:

Why do you think an active social life is important (or not important):

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your social life:

Faith/Religion

How would you describe your faith/religious affiliation:

How did you come to these beliefs:

Why do you think faith is important (or not important):

How do you exercise your beliefs:

How would you share your beliefs with a friend:

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your beliefs:

The Rest

What's your favorite color:

What's your favorite music style (why):

What's your favorite movie genre (why):

What's your favorite book genre (why):

Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you: