

I was judging a contest recently when I came upon a manuscript that had a problem which might resonate with some of you. It was a romance, of course, but that's all I was getting from the first few chapters. Heroine, hero, some sparks and interest between them but, uh, not much else. I had no urge to read further. I tried to explain my problem to the author and decided maybe it was a subject for a Perils article. Now don't jump to the conclusion that this was erotica and I just don't get it. I've read some of the bestselling erotica, not *Fifty Shades*, but others, and they all have plots other than trips to the bedroom or other play stations.

First, we know that our books that do involve romance have what we call inner conflict, why the lovers can't be together on page one. There can be lots of reasons that she is a reluctant lover: she's been hurt in the past, is always drawn to bad boys with regrettable consequences, or maybe she's career focused now and thinks the timing is off for a serious commitment. And him? Maybe he's a commitment-phobe, been hurt in the past too or is one of those guys who never communicates—death to a relationship--and he doesn't want to change. Those are the kinds of things that can take a long time, maybe even the entire novel, to work through before the happily ever after. But is dealing with inner conflict enough to sustain a book?

I say no. You've got to have something else going on, and it can't just be shopping for your new dominatrix outfit or running your bed and breakfast. There has to be a major outer conflict that disturbs and distracts the two lovebirds and keeps the relationship from rolling along. What you pick for your conflict depends on the type of book you're writing. Easiest to me is the mystery or romantic suspense. Toss in a murder to solve, almost any type of crime, and you can have your pair involved either as suspects or investigators. Readers love those books. A family-centric book can have all kinds of drama from a secret baby, crisis with a loved one, illness or hard decisions involving a dead or dying parent.

Your setting can help you decide how your plot will go. Writing a ranch book? Land disputes, cattle rustlers (yes, they are still out there), and problems with hired help can keep a story moving. City life is always complicated. Your neighbors are close and can be minor characters that might add spice and intrigue. You can witness something you shouldn't—think *Rear Window*. Small towns are notorious for having busybodies who are into everyone's business. Gossip can complicate your couple's love life. A business can fall into Chapter Eleven. And watch out for that neighbor who may have secrets.

Then there's your time period. Whether it's a Regency miss forced to marry a stranger or a Victorian spinster who is governess for a rake's illegitimate offspring, the very constraints of an era can help you figure out plot twists. What was shocking in 1812 wasn't such a big deal in 1880. Or was it? Your research can help you find some great ideas. There was a war in 1812. How can you use that? Lots of inventions were discovered in the Victorian and Georgian eras. I've read great historicals that made use of the wizards who came up with some of them.

And speaking of wizards... If you're into paranormals, the world you create will give you plenty of ideas for plot to tangle your lovers in. Danger, intrigue, mishaps, whatever you choose, something has got to be happening to pull your reader along as they root for your two central characters to get together. I've thrown in special powers when Glory needed them, given my heroine a backstory that explained why she had them and even introduced a meddling relative from Olympus when necessary. Why not? My imagination is my only limitation. That and a logical story line. If you haven't provided enough action and interest? No one will read past the opening chapters. And that includes an acquiring editor.

I read a straight contemporary recently with a pretty lightweight outer conflict-- they were after the same job. Not enough? In that case, the inner conflict was very strong. She was already engaged to another man when they met. The hero was a dog, going from one-night-stand

to one-night-stand. He'd never been in love before, she'd settled for her high school sweetheart and refused to admit they'd outgrown each other. In this case, the outer conflict wasn't a big deal, it was the inner conflict that had me turning the pages. How could these two ever be together? And the voice. It was unique. But that's another article.

So what's the bottom line? Grab your reader from the beginning with a strong hint at both the inner and outer conflicts. We want to know the starring characters in a romance right away and why they should or shouldn't be together along with what's keeping them apart. Then plunge them into the action. And all before the end of Chapter One. Easy, peasy. Right?

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