

## **A Balancing Act - Putting the Romance into Suspense**

**By Maggie Nash**

### **What is the attraction of the romantic suspense plot?**

For me, it's the heart stopping suspense, the thrill of the chase, and non-stop action that heightens the emotion and intensifies the romance. Knowing that the characters not only have to solve the mystery and conquer the evil villain or villains, they also learn trust and in the process deal with the best *and* the worst in each other. This is one of the main attractions of the suspense story for me. Whatever the plot device, be it women in jeopardy, murder, stalkers, terrorists, spy thrillers, how can the heroine and hero not fall for each other in these intense and emotional circumstances?

### **How much is the right mix of romance and suspense?**

Authors such as Nora Roberts, Iris Johansen, Tami Hoag, Shannon McKenna and Rebecca York continue to write huge best sellers. These authors and all those others who write romantic suspense have such diverse styles it's difficult to even attempt to define the genre. The popularity of romantic suspense continues to grow, but for some writers this sub genre of romance fiction continues to be one of the most difficult to write successfully. The problem lies in the balance between the romance and the suspense. How much of each is needed? Should there be two separate or one integrated plot?

The short answer is that it all depends what type of story you want to write, and which publisher you are targeting. In the category market, some publishers ask for a 50/50 split of romance with suspense or a 60/40 split with

more of an emphasis on the emotional growth of the characters. If your book doesn't fit into these moulds they won't publish it. This may sound unfair, but in category fiction it's all about reader expectation. In most cases the reader is buying the series, not the author, so the guidelines need to be very clear.

Mainstream single title romantic suspense on the other hand varies from author to author. If you are writing a single title romantic suspense novel you have more flexibility with the balance of romance and suspense in your story. Shannon McKenna integrates powerful emotional and sexual relationships within her suspense plots, while for Tami Hoag the suspense or thriller plot is the main focus. That doesn't mean the romance is secondary. Character development and relationship building are integral parts of all romantic suspense novels and add to the suspense/thriller plot and the spine tingling tension that enhances the story.

Marketing of your book can play a part in your decision as well. Depending on your own particular blend of romance and suspense, you may well find your book placed on the crime shelves in the local bookshop as well as the romance section. This can increase sales exposure of your books. Many authors and publishers do this deliberately.

At the end of the day, you have to write the book *you* want to write. I believe that instinct plays a huge part in how you decide to distribute the suspense with the romantic or emotional plot line. Nora Roberts says you "just know" what is right for your story. I'm not sure that it comes as naturally as Ms. Roberts would have us think, but believing in your characters and your story goes a long way to making it the best darn story you can write.

#### **EXERCISE ONE:**

- Think about what sort of book you want to write.
- Are you targeting a particular publisher?
- How much romance/suspense do you think your book requires?

## Steps to Balancing the Romance with the Suspense

So now you have an idea as to how much romance you want to include in the suspense plot. What next?

It's really important that both plot lines run not only parallel, but are entwined or integrated. To make the romantic suspense real to the reader the story cannot possibly work with just the romance, or just the suspense plot. They are both symbiotic parts of the story and cannot exist without each other. This is the tricky bit and unfortunately it's where a number of writers come unstuck. The flames of the romance need to be fanned to different heights throughout the story, but what is the best way to do this?

### 1. Make your Characters Memorable

The first step is creating the characters that will work well in a both a romance and a suspense. The hero should be someone who is larger, or more handsome, or more conflicted, or more silver-tongued, or more MORE...than the average Joe. He doesn't need to be some huge heroic superhero, but he does need to grab you from the first glimpse. He's the guy who's got an axe to grind, or has more success with women than most. He's the one with the killer smile and the sexy body like none you've ever seen before. He's the millionaire because he's worked his butt off all his life, or the rebel who's great at his job but never gets promoted because he has such a bad attitude. He could even be the biggest nerd, but has an IQ off the scale. You get the picture.

Your heroine needs to be strong enough to deal with the circumstances thrown at her in the story however, she also should be someone your readers can relate to. She is the woman they identify with. She looks like them, or how they *want* to look, she has a similar job, circumstances, personality traits,

opportunities, or they *want* to be like her. They want to *be* her. The hero is the fantasy, but the heroine could be you! If the reader gets involved emotionally with the character, then the story will involve them to the point that they won't want to put it down.

## EXERCISE TWO

Write a short character chart for both your hero and your heroine, say 5 or 6 lines on each, if that is all you can think of right now.

Although it's good to put in the physical traits, I want you to spend some time thinking what personality traits they have.

A good trick I use it to first visualize where they live...what sort of dwelling?  
House? Apartment? House boat? Hut?

Once you know where they live...close your eyes and put them there. What sort of furniture do they have? What books are on their shelves? Is the place tidy or messy? Are there photographs? Who are they of? Is there music playing? What style?

What is their mood? Are they happy? Sad? Angry? Irritated? Hopeful? Lonely? Cynical?

What is their family like? Who are their friends? Where do they work?

I'm a visual learner so I find this method extremely useful in getting to know my characters....I hope you do too...

## 2. Create a Villain you Love to Hate

Unlike a straight romance, where the main focus is the heroine and the hero, in romantic suspense the antagonist takes on greater importance. The plot often revolves around what the villain has done or is planning to do. Without him/her/them, there *is* no suspense. That element of evil is what makes for a successful villainous character but we also have to understand his or her motivation for the character to meld with the story. This pseudo-sympathetic villain is often the one we feel sorry for because we see how easily the human mind can be corrupted by circumstances. This is also the character that is so charismatic, they can make being evil appear seductive. For example, think of the Phantom from *Phantom of the Opera*. Even though he was a villain and definitely up to no good, readers around the world relate to him because they understand his conflict and motivation.

The other type of villain is the one who has absolutely no discernable redeeming features. This character is pure evil and as such adds considerably to the chilling plot line. We want to toss him in jail and throw away the key. We want him dead! In the context of the story only of course. This increases the tension of the story and the danger to both main characters, immediately upping the stakes and intensifying the romantic elements.

### EXERCISE THREE

- Tell us about a villain who you loved to hate...one who made an impression...Tell us why you feel this way. It could be one who creeped you out, or one you felt sorry for...or you were appalled at...Let us know...
- List 3 characteristics that you feel would make a good villain.

### 3. Establish an emotional connection

Now you've got your characters sorted out they have to meet. To ensure the romance plot starts you have to produce an emotional connection between the two protagonists. It could be something as simple as bumping into each other and apologizing, or it could be a case of annoyance or even anger that one of them is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Without planting this first emotional reaction between them early on in the story, it's so much more difficult to establish a believable romance further down the track.

The suspense plot itself is often the reason for the first meeting and this can certainly be a brilliant opportunity for the hero and heroine to begin a relationship on some level. In my first novel, *Crash and Burn*, the heroine and hero first meet on a train. As fellow passengers, they are attracted to each other, but when Beth, our heroine, witnesses a shooting and needs assistance, the handsome, but sleeping Daniel isn't the most ideal helper. Once awoken, Daniel wants Beth to stay out of danger so he can handle things, but she sticks to him like glue until the train crash that steals her memory. Although they don't know each other at all we have already established several emotions here: attraction, annoyance, protectiveness and fear. The connection is made.

#### EXERCISE FOUR

Describe (in a few lines) briefly your hero and heroines first meeting.

What emotional connection have they made? What emotions are involved?

So...let's recap...

We've thought about what sort of book we want to write.

We've started with some memorable characters.

We have a villain we love to hate.

An emotional connection has been established between the heroine and the hero.

What's the next important ingredient needed to balance that romance with the suspense?

Of course you can't have a romance unless you...

#### **4. Show Attraction**

Attraction for each other, often despite antagonism, is mandatory to any romance and the romantic suspense is no exception. This begins with a physical awareness between the heroine and the hero, that heart pounding, blush inducing chemical reaction that happens when you see someone who floats your boat. Think Brad Pitt or Gerard Butler. My pulse rises just picturing their faces in my head.

This is the reaction you need to show between your characters. Notice I said show...not tell. Where is the impact if you tell us that he thinks she's hot, or she finds herself strangely attracted to him? You have to *show* why and you use the five senses to convey this. What does he/she look like? Does he or she have a distinctive scent? What perfume/aftershave can be smelt? How does their skin feel? What characteristics does his/her voice have? Do they have distinctive speech patterns? What do they taste when kissed?

You should keep the attraction thing going even when they are not together. They should be constantly thinking of each other and remember little

things about their last encounter. He relives the feel of her silken skin. She sighs as she remembers the power of his kiss.

Never forget that you must continue that emotional connection I mentioned as well as increasing the physical attraction. Without the characters beginning to care for each other the attraction becomes meaningless. Her looks might strike a cord with him as he remembers a lost love. He makes her feel protected and safe in the midst of all the chaos. However it happens, it's something that evolves as the characters spend more time together and are drawn further into the intrigue or suspense of the circumstances they find themselves in.

#### EXERCISE FIVE

Write a paragraph showing how you can weave attraction into a scene while still showing the story.

Below is an example:

From *Crash and Burn* ©2005 Maggie Nash Triskelion Publishing.

Beth is having a bit of a struggle dampening her attraction to Daniel.

Holy shit! Her insides started melting. No man should be this good looking. She struggled to shake off the intense reaction her body was having. First things first! She forced her mind back to the reason she was here. "You have to wake up *now!*"

Catching her eyes with his, he gave her a 'come hither' smile. "Well, you certainly know how to get a man's atten—"

"Just shut up and listen," said Beth, stopping him mid-sentence. Why do men always wake up expecting the same thing? Although, with him, any other time... Stop it Beth! She shook her head to clear her totally inappropriate mind shift and continued. "We don't have time for this."

## 5. Make the Conflict Strong

Robert McKee says that nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict. Not only is conflict a necessary part of the story, but both the internal and external conflict must be strong enough to last until the end of the story. In romance fiction, there has to be valid reasons to keep the main characters from forming a lasting relationship until the end of the book. Internal conflict can be as simple as a need for independence or as complex as some deep-seated fear from childhood. In allowing the reader to have knowledge and understanding of this emotional baggage or internal conflict, you also give the characters room to evolve and grow. As the story progresses, the internal conflicts assume less importance as the characters learn to trust each other and gain in maturity. If done well, this process of character growth enhances the romance plot and can provide the resolution the reader is waiting for.

The external conflict is the circumstances that keeps the characters apart. In suspense, this is often the obstacle of the situation. For example a crazed killer may be stalking the heroine and she is in constant danger. The hero and heroine are working undercover thus preventing them from being together at least until the case is resolved.

Some common examples of conflict...

Internal Conflict (Emotional in origin)

The heroine has a deep fear of abandonment due to losing her beloved father as a young impressionable child. She finds it difficult to trust, or to believe that anyone would love her enough to stay with her

### External Conflict (Outside sources)

Just when the hero and heroine begin to feel something for each other, the villain captures the hero and threatens his life. The heroine must outwit the enemy, even though she's never held a gun before in her life, and there is no one she can trust.

### EXERCISE SIX

Write down an example of an internal and an external conflict?

You can use characters you have already created, or new characters

## **6. Increase the Intensity**

One sure fire way to keep the intensity of the romance balanced with the suspense is to have the characters together as often as possible. In some cases you will find them together all the way through the book. This forces the protagonists to grow together emotionally. They need to build a relationship of trust for each other while at the same time battling the bad guys.

The suspense plot itself can create a rollercoaster ride of emotions as events occur and the characters are placed in such danger or action that it makes our hearts pound in fear and worry. Will they survive? How do they get out of this seemingly impossible situation?

You can go about this a few ways. First you can keep your reader guessing as much as your characters. When something happens, they are as surprised as the characters involved. This works well in a number of situations.

Another way is to have the reader know the facts while the characters have no idea. The reader knows that a villain is watching and waiting for the heroine to arrive home late at night. The heroine has no idea and goes happily along, following her normal routine while the readers are on the edge of their seats worried about the heroine and what is going to happen to her. They might even shout at her to run while she still has the chance. This emotional involvement of the reader enhances their enjoyment, and when the main characters eventually get together there is more satisfaction due to this higher degree of caring for the welfare of the characters. After a suspenseful event, there is an affirmation of life as the characters *and* the readers rejoice in another escape from danger.

### **So now you have some ideas to work with...**

Creating romantic suspense can be a very rewarding experience. Getting the balance between the romance and the suspense is a simple process if you remember that there are no hard and fast rules. The characters have a need for each other that is enhanced by the danger of the suspense, and the thrill of being together through the experience. This is what makes for satisfying reading and is why we continue to come back for more.

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