

Can't judge romance novel by its steamy cover

Audience expanding as genre is no longer all about smut, shirtless heroes

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ATLANTA - Strong women and edgy plots about relationships are replacing the heated passion and ripped bodices of swooning damsels in distress traditionally associated with romance novels.

Some of the more than 500 authors signing their books at the Romance Writers of America's 26th annual conference this week said the genre is not about smut or trash and is no longer exclusively for women.

"It's not all lace and moonlight and heaving bosoms. That's all nice, but it's about a lot more than that," said Emily Giffin, author of best sellers such as "Something Borrowed" and "Something Blue."

Giffin, 34, who left a career at a New York law firm to pursue writing, sipped an Amstel Light as she signed books for fans and explained that her books focus on relationships, romantic and otherwise.

Sari Robins, another former attorney, said she is tired of people dismissing romance novels as poorly written fluff.

"I write intelligent heroines," she said. "The writing is solid. I take a lot of pride in how good the books are. I think people don't realize how hard it is to get published and that to get published it really has to be good."

The 40-year-old author is promoting her fifth book, "What to Wear to a Seduction." The cover features a woman in a flowing white dress lying on her back with her hair cascading around her shoulders and a shirtless, strapped man kissing her neck.

She acknowledged that hot cover art may lead people to think her novels are mainly about sex. When her first book was published in 2002, she said she initially wanted a more staid cover. But after doing some market research, she accepted the age-old adage — sex sells — and agreed to "tasteful but steamy" covers.

Love scenes, she added, should be sexy but not gratuitous. And they should always be used to challenge the characters or advance the plot. What many may not

realize is that romance novels are divided into a number of sub-genres that draw on other types of fiction. They include mysteries, thrillers, inspirational stories, paranormal plots and contemporary, historical and futuristic settings.

Because of the wide range of subjects covered, romance novels can appeal to a broad audience, which partly accounts for their success. Romance novels generated \$1.2 billion in sales in 2004 — about 40 percent of fiction sales — according to the latest market survey carried out by Romance Writers of America, which said that sales have remained fairly constant for the last several years.

One thing all romance stories have in common — and another reason for their success — is a happy ending.

At the convention's book signing Wednesday evening, there were rows and rows of authors seated at tables behind towering piles of their tomes. Some had props related to their stories, such as bottles of red nail polish next to a pile of books entitled "What Goes with Blood Red, Anyway?" and bowls of candy — especially Hershey's Kisses.

The crowd was overwhelmingly female, reflecting the genre's fan base. Most of the men were husbands or boyfriends obediently tagging along to carry bags and boxes heavy with novels.

With the expansion of romance novels into science fiction and military tales, though, the male following is increasing, said Nicole Kennedy, a spokeswoman for the group. The 2004 market survey indicated that male readership jumped from 7 percent of romance readers in 2002 to 22 percent in 2004.

Kennedy cited the success of Suzanne Brockmann, who has written two series of romance novels featuring Navy SEAL teams, which Kennedy said are wildly popular among Navy SEALs.

Though romance writing remains an almost exclusively female vocation, some men have ventured into the field. Former Green Beret Bob Mayer, who has written many non-romance books under his own name and under the pen name Robert Doherty, teamed up with veteran comedic romance writer Jenny Crusie for a military romance called "Don't Look Down," released this year.

Mayer and Crusie met at the Maui Writers Conference three years ago. Both were looking to do something different, and they decided to collaborate. Crusie writes the parts that come from a woman's point of view, while Mayer weighs in with the male perspective.

"He tells them everything I don't want to hear," Crusie said with a grimace.

"Some people don't want to hear the truth," Mayer shot back jokingly. "Usually, you have women writing the male point of view, too. I read some sometimes and go, 'No, that's not what the guy is really thinking.'"

The conference attracted a lot of unpublished romance writers who came to learn from the masters. One of the most important pieces of advice that best seller Nora Roberts had to offer to aspiring writers was to have passion for the topic.

"I believe strongly that you can't write well what you can't sit down and enjoy," she said.

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