

Professional romantics

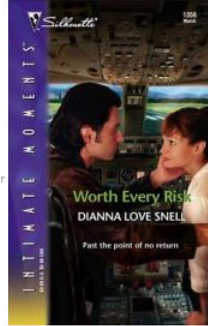
Keeping classic damsel in distress-hunk tales hot is no easy feat

By GAYLE WHITE
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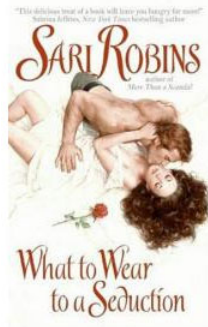
Here's the plot: A beautiful heroine facing some kind of threat encounters a handsome man with a mysterious past. Passion ensues. They overcome an obstacle and ride off into the happily-ever-after.

In today's world of romantic fiction, that barest-bones of story lines can be set in the Old West, Regency England or modern Manhattan. It can be medieval, paranormal or futuristic. It can end with a kiss and a promise — and include graphic descriptions of glorious intimacy throughout.



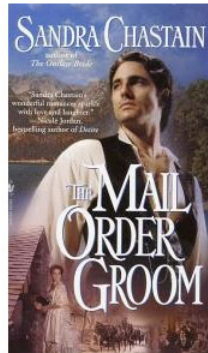
(ENLARGE)

Opening lines of **"Worth Every Risk"**: Lightning crackled nearby. Close, but not close enough. "Come on, God, please," Angel Farentino whispered the desperate prayer for the hundredth time since midnight. But lights still burned through the opulent compound, her prison for the last seven days.



(ENLARGE)

Opening lines of **"What to Wear to a Seduction"**: Barely taking in the birds chirping in the trees, the squirrels darting about, or the sun riding on the pine-scented breeze, Prescott Devane strode down the path to the orphanage's guesthouse, his irritation at full boil.



(ENLARGE)

Opening lines of **"Mail Order Groom"**: "Not a man in sight." Melissa Grayson let out a sigh of relief.



(ENLARGE)

Opening lines of **"Last Kiss Goodbye"**: "Mommy!" Eight-year-old Ivy Stanton stared at the blood on her hands in horror. There was so much of it. All over her. Her mother. The floor.

More than 39 percent of all fiction sold is romance, according to a market survey by the Romance Writers of America. And the genre generated \$1.2 billion in sales in 2004.

Mega-selling author Nora Roberts says she hopes romance novels are successful because so many are "really well-written and interesting stories about relationships, emotions, people commitment, continuity in family."

Roberts is in town this week — along with more of the industry's top writers, agents and editors — for the annual convention of the Romance Writers of America. The meeting also is drawing thousands of beginning and aspiring writers.

They'll attend workshops on how to spice up their writing, choose the right character names and make sure their descriptions of vintage undergarments are accurate.

They'll also be warned in a workshop called "Show Me the Money" that Roberts is an exception. Veteran romance writer Brenda Hiatt keeps track of which publishers are buying what for how much.

Advances for first romance novels fall into a range of \$1,000-\$16,000, according to Hiatt's statistics, with most toward the lower end.

"People look at the Dan Browns, the Stephen Kings and the Danielle Steeles, and they think this is the way to make their fortune," she said. "They really don't want to hear how difficult it is to publish a book in the first place, and if you do, how little money you make unless you get really lucky. It's comparable to winning the lottery."

Most romance writers, she said, "write because they have to. It's who they are, what they do. They've got stories to tell."

Among those storytellers are several metro Atlanta writers.

— Book editor Teresa Weaver contributed to this article.

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