Getting Up to Speed in Romance
By Joyce Saricks; Updated by Krista Biggs

What is Romance?

Romance novels have a central plot revolving around a developing romantic relationship and with an "emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (Romance Writers of America). While the genre includes books with a wide range of subgenres -- from historical to science fiction to suspense and more -- those settings are secondary to the love story. Romance also includes a wide range of sexuality, from inspirational romances where the characters may share one gentle kiss to erotic romances with explicit kink.

What happens in a Romance novel?

With so many subgenres to pull from, almost anything can happen in the secondary plot of a romance novel. However, the primary focus remains the same. Each follows a romantic relationship from its beginnings through to a satisfactory conclusion, while exploring the misunderstandings that threaten to scuttle the relationship along the way. As the main characters explore their growing passion for one another, the character growth that accompanies love sets the stage for a happy ending. And although the sexuality featured ranges from chaste to steamy, the buildup of sexual awareness over the course of the story is a must.

Why do people like to read Romance?

Romance is a genre of emotions and characters. Readers need to feel an emotional link with the protagonists and become invested in the outcome of their story. As the genre has changed, character stereotypes have changed too. The ingénue who brings a rich and powerful titan of industry to his knees remains popular, but sexually confident heroines exist as well, with heroes who admire their power and success.

Because romances are stories of emotions, they are written so that readers are pulled immediately into a story that keeps them there. While the genre has changed to allow books that follow a relationship over a series of books, the emotional pull and happy ending remain sacrosanct. While many readers will read a trilogy with a relationship cliff hanger in books one and two, readers do not want unhappy surprises at the close of the relationship’s journey.
Key titles

The Kiss Quotient by Helen Hoang
A charming and erotic own voices romance in which Stella Lane, who has Asperger's Syndrome, decides that she needs to know more about dating and sex and takes logical steps to get up to speed. Enter Michael Phan, the escort Stella hires as a teacher. While their original relationship is strictly business, their emotions are soon engaged.

A Night to Surrender by Tessa Dare
It's a battle of the sexes in Tessa Dare's steamy Regency romance. The Earl of Rycliff must muster a militia but he's not going to find many volunteers in Spindle Cove, a woman-dominated community led by the spirited Susanna Finch. Their mutual attraction is complicated by their conflicting goals. Witty banter and sexy encounters along with quirky secondary characters round out the story.

The Proposal by Jasmine Guillory
When someone asks you to spend your life with him, it shouldn't come as a surprise -- or happen in front of 45,000 people. When freelance writer Nikole Paterson goes to a Dodgers game with her actor boyfriend, his man bun, and his bros, the last thing she expects is a scoreboard proposal. Saying no isn't the hard part -- it's having to face a stadium full of disappointed fans! This fast-paced and upbeat novel features positive female friendships and a sweet romance.

The Unsung Hero by Suzanne Brockmann
After a near-fatal head injury, Navy SEAL Tom Paoletti must try to stop an international terrorist with the help of Dr. Kelly Ashton, his childhood girlfriend who is now all grown up. This entry in Suzanne Brockmann's wildly popular Troubleshooters series showcases her gift for blending intense adventure with sensuous romance.

The Hating Game by Sally Thorne
Author Sally Thorne burst on the scene with this hilarious and sexy workplace comedy about the fine line between love and hate. Lucy Hutton and Joshua Templeman detest each other. And they have no problem displaying their feelings. When the tension between Lucy and Joshua reaches its boiling point, Lucy discovers that maybe she doesn’t hate Joshua. And maybe, he doesn’t hate her either.

Key authors

Alyssa Cole writes smart, steamy historical and contemporary own voices romances featuring an array of diverse characters. Her heroines are intelligent, independent women who have rich, full lives although are a bit reluctant to open their hearts to romance. The men who ultimately win them over are strong, thoughtful partners who respect the heroines and their choices. Her rich detail and intricate plots add depth and dimension as the characters find their way to happily ever after. Start with A Princess in Theory.
Prolific African American writer Beverly Jenkins made her name with vividly descriptive historical romances featuring tough-minded heroines and charismatic heroes. Her contemporary romances share these qualities. Jenkins' historical novels are set throughout nineteenth century America, from Philadelphia to the Old West. Since its publication in 1996, Indigo has never been out of print. The story of a conductor on the Underground Railroad and a former slave found a ready readership among African American readers eager for characters who looked like them.

Cat Sebastian primarily writes witty Regency romances, usually set in England, starring flawed-but-likable LGBTQIA diverse protagonists. Her steamy, detailed love scenes and intricate plots play with notions of race, gender, and class differences while subverting traditional male/female sexual tropes. Realistic secondary characters and charming banter add spice to her plausible recreations of 19th-century English culture. In Unmasked by the Marquess, a nobleman is uncomfortably attracted to a young man who turns out to be a young woman!

Christina Lauren writes contemporary and erotic romance starring snarky, sassy heroines and smolderingly handsome leading men and is spiked with explicit scenes and racy humor. These tales of unlikely attraction, love/hate relationships, and scorching-hot assignations among buttoned-down professionals are infused with realism and told in stylish, engaging prose. Christina Lauren is the combined pen name of Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings. My Favorite Half-Night Stand is a laugh-out-loud romantic comedy full of mistaken identities, hijinks, and a classic love story with a modern twist.

Julia Quinn writes humorous, character-driven Regency romances. While Quinn's romances are set firmly within the Regency time period, the relationship between the hero and heroine is definitely more than the "kisses only" of a traditional Regency romance; the sensuality is fairly explicit, and the emotions and feelings of the lovers are most important. Readers enjoy Quinn's unique tone: humor that makes the reader smile frequently, characters with an understanding of their own -- and others' -- foibles and engaging, witty banter. Each steamy entry in her popular Bridgerton series features a member of the Bridgerton family finding love. Start with the first in the series, The Duke and I.

How do I help Romance fans?

You have about five seconds to make a connection with these elusive readers. Let them know right away that you have read a romance and that you understand why they enjoy the genre. One of the most important and difficult pieces of information to discover is how much sex the reader desires -- or will tolerate. Offer a variety of titles and let the reader choose. Don't assume; let the reader tell you.

Readers often prefer to read in a single subgenre such as contemporary, historical, or paranormal. However, if the characters or tone are similar, they may be willing to try something outside of their comfort zone.
Authors often create series that feature novels linked through characters or settings, with the protagonists of one story appearing as secondary characters in others. This gives a real sense of family, an important theme for some readers.

Print romances are published primarily in paperback, so libraries need to purchase and catalog this format. Reviews appear in the major library reviewing sources.

A few great sources for notable books include: the RITA Awards, the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Awards and the Library Journal Best Romance Books.

NoveList has several appeals (AP) to help you find diverse titles and authors in romances. Add AND RL 1 to the search for only adult titles.

GN Romance AND AP "Culturally diverse"
GN Romance AND AP "LGBTQIA diverse"
GN Romance AND AP "Religiously diverse"
GN Romance AND AP "Ability diverse"
GN Romance AND AP "Own Voices"

**Notable Trends**

Self-publishing, digital-first publishers, and e-book-only novels are popular in romance and often push the boundaries of the traditional romance genre. The changes in the genre can be difficult to keep up with when it happens online, but it makes the genre exciting.

Romantic themes and conventions can be found in almost every genre -- science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, suspense, romantic suspense, gentle reads, mystery, and women's lives and relationships. Readers from those genres who appreciate the romantic aspect, may also enjoy romances.

*Joyce Saricks is a well-known Readers' Advisory consultant, presenting seminars around the country as well as online. In addition, Joyce has written several readers' advisory books, such as The Reader's Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction, 3rd edition.*