

The Genre Hurdle

By Linda Rohrbough

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Recently, a number of relatively new novelists I know had the following experiences. One pitched her book as Fantasy and the agent said it didn't work for her as Fantasy but if certain changes were made, she could love it as a Paranormal Romance. Another pitched a book as Mainstream and the agent came back with a rejection saying while the author was quite talented, he doesn't represent Romantic Suspense.

It sounds like the agents and authors are speaking two different languages, doesn't it? So what gives? There are several problems here. One, writers are encouraged not to consider genre when they start writing, but instead write the book they feel passionate about. Two, genre terminology is confusing. And three, (fed by problems one and two) once "the book of your heart" is written, how do you figure out what genre to label it?

So starting with problem one, novelists often follow popular advice in answer to the question about what genre to write in. Here's an excerpt from Writers' Digest website question and answer archives, "Before looking into which markets are easiest to break in to, I would encourage you to first consider what you enjoy reading, what you enjoy writing, and what you write well. . . . I would encourage you first to write what you love, and write the best book you can, and worry about publication later."¹ This is the "write the book of your heart" advice. The theory is if you have passion about the work, the reader will too.

A number of successful authors followed a different career path. They choose a popular genre, establish themselves, then moved to a more popular genre with the attention and cooperation of their agent and their publisher. For example, Michael Crichton wrote Westerns under a pseudonym while at Harvard Medical School, then made a splash with his first medical thriller *The Andromeda Strain*. He's been called the father of the techno-thriller genre and his most popular work in that genre is *Jurassic Park*.

The second problem is genre is a moving target. New authors do come along and create genre categories or subcategories--like Helen Fielding, credited for creation of the Chic Lit genre, a subcategory of Romance, with *Bridget Jones's Diary*. While it may seem the genre lines are hard and unmoving, there's a lot of room for interpretation and opinion. Table One gives you the most commonly discussed genres and a definition for each. This is by no means an all inclusive list. Some genres fall into subcategories. For example, Speculative Fiction encompasses the genres of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. Table Two shows how genres stack up in sales in the overall marketplace. Clearly Romance leads the pack with over a billion dollars in sales every year.

If you want to know more about a specific genre, there are places to do research. PPWC is a great place to start. I've provided other resources, such as national groups that focus on each genre listed in Table Three, who also have local chapters. However, you can learn a lot about a genre by just perusing the website of the national group. Table Four is a list of books that deal with the boundaries and reader expectations for each genre in more detail.

¹ "Q&A: Writing What's Hot;" www.writersdigest.com.

If you have a novel written and are now in the “worry about publication later” phase of your career development, your next step is to determine the genre. One of the ways is to look at other novels like yours and then look up what genre those novels fit into. Try not to pick the most popular best sellers because they have a tendency to be labeled Mainstream. For example, Stephen King books are considered Mainstream, but they’re Horror. (By the way, I heard Don D’Auria, Executive Editor at Tor Books say at PPWC two years ago that if you ask people if they read Horror, they’ll say no. But if you ask them if they read Stephen King, they’ll say yes--hence the Mainstream designation.)

It can be difficult to be objective about your own work. I have a friend who has written an adult novel that for me is a cross between “Friends” and “The Fugitive,” but the main characters are animals. An agent fell in love with the book, decided it was a children’s title, asked my friend to write out the sex scenes between the human characters, but has been unsuccessful in placing the book. My friend, in her cover letter, compares her book to *Watership Down*. I told her an editor set up to expect *Watership Down* is going to be disappointed when reading this funny, fast-paced, but not Literary book. It’s been a year now and the latest in a stack of rejections comes from an editor who liked the book but said it didn’t match up to *Watership Down*. I have no doubt my friend’s book will get published, but I think comparing her novel to a book everyone knows is keeping her stuck, especially since the other title is in a different genre.

Another tactic is to ask people who have experience to help, such as writers who are published in the genre you hope to break into. The idea here is to find someone ahead of you in the game. But don’t expect help for free. Try to arrange an exchange, perhaps trading an area of your expertise for their help. And don’t ask for a read of the entire manuscript. Writing pros put together a one to five page synopsis, then ask for a read of the synopsis. For this task, a five page synopsis is probably better, as it will provide a better feel for how you write overall in addition to more detail about your novel. This exercise will also force you to better define your story. If you need someone to read your book all the way through, form a small, supportive critique group and exchange manuscripts with the other novelists.

One way to look like a writer who just fell off the turnip truck is to claim your novel is a certain genre but then have a word count way outside the boundaries for that genre. An example would be pitching an 80,000 word Mystery. Mysteries run about 60,000 words. Again this is marketing. A publisher can compensate for 2,000 to 3,000 words each side of 60,000 by the font the book is printed in, margins and paper thickness, but the word count has to do with what the market will bear price-wise and bookstore shelf-space. A novel that’s way longer is going to cost more and take up more shelf-space, while a shorter work will have the reader wondering why they paid so much and why they’re getting less of a read. How do you know what word count is expected? That requires research in the genre. The Internet is a great source for this type of research, especially in places where writers post questions and answers.

There are other ways to look green. As a novel, you can pitch your book at the upper end of the word count window. That has agents and editors thinking your book contains “fluff,” long passages readers won’t read. It’s better as a new novelist to be on the low to mid-range end of the word count. Popular novelists in a genre are often on the high end of the word count because they have a following and publishers know their books will sell. And the higher the word count, the more the publisher can charge, but the

difference in production costs is minimal. However, a new author is a risk and publishers like to keep their risks at a minimum.

The other way to look green is to be unaware of subgenres in the genre you've chosen. Let's take Mystery as an example. If you're pitching a Mystery and don't know anything about Cozies if asked, then you're going to look like you don't know what you're doing. Now if it's some new subgenre, like Hen Lit, a subgenre of Mainstream (like Chick Lit only with older women protagonists) an agent or editor will understand. The subgenres can vary a great deal in word count, so it's worth your while to know what you're doing. You should know enough about the genre, if you're writing in it, to have a minimal grasp of the "language." This subgenre information, both word count and trends, is mainly found at good writer's conferences, which is why seasoned writers make it their business to attend conferences.

One thing that comes to mind for me in writing this piece is the balance between believing in yourself and listening to advice. Examples of rule breaking abound in this business. Obviously, someone who creates a new subgenre is not following "the rules." So try to keep that in mind if you get discouraged.

As a final note, I want to leave you with this story. I heard Lisa Gardner speak about the time she asked how to make more money than she did writing Romance and quit her day job. Her agent's advice was write a Mainstream Suspense proposal. She did, her agent got a great advance and Lisa quit her job to write full-time. She then spent some of the most painful months of her life eating nothing but Ramen Noodles as she wrote and rewrote, figuring out her own set of writing tools to fix her novel so her editor would finally accept the manuscript and she could get the rest of the advance. *The Perfect Husband* turned out to be a big hit and Lisa is now a best-selling Mainstream Suspense author.

Samuel Johnson said, "What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure." So hang in there. You can do this.

Linda Rohrbough has been writing about the computer industry since 1989 and has more than 5,000 articles and five books to her credit. Her work has been honored three times by the Computer Press Association. She has finished her first techno-thriller novel and is working on a second. E-mail Linda at Linda@PCbios.com or visit her website www.PCbios.com.

Side Bars (Tables)

Table One

(See "The Genre Hurdle, Table One" under *The Business of Writing* Column at www.PCbios.com.)

Table Two

Genre Popularity by Category*

Romance: 33.8 percent (over \$1 billion in sales annually)

Mystery: 25.6 percent

Mainstream (or General): 24.9 percent

Science Fiction: 6 percent

Other Fiction: 9.7 percent (western, adventure, male, history, movie tie-ins)*

*Source Romance Writers of America, Inc., www.rwanational.org

(*Note: RWA is slicing up the genres to show a comparison with Romance. This is not intended to show how genres are divided.)

Table Three

National Organizations Devoted to Specific Genres with Websites

American Crime Writers League, www.acwl.org

Christian Writers Guild, www.christianwritersguild.com

Horror Writers Association, www.horror.org

Mystery Writers of America, www.mysterywriters.org

National Association of Science Writers, www.nasw.org

Romance Writers of America, www.rwanational.com

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, www.sfgwa.org

Sisters in Crime, www.sistersincrime.org

Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, www.scbwi.org

Western Writers of America, www.westernwriters.org

Table Four

Books with Genre Information:

Writer's Market FAQs by Peter Rubie

20 Master Plots (And How to Build Them) by Ronald B. Tobias

The Marshal Plan for Novel Writing by Evan Marshall

Making Crime Pay: A Practical Guide to Mystery Writing by Stephanie Bendel

How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy by Orson Scott Card

Writing the Modern Mystery by Barbara Norville

How to Write Horror Fiction by William Nolan

How to Write Romances by Phyllis Taylor Pianka

How to Write Western Novels by Matthew Braun

How to Write Action Adventure Novels by Michael Newton