

# *Romance Novel Trends*

*By*

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## **1. How Do You Feel About Tattoos? Yay or Nay?**

Tattoos are hot, on both men and women, if their popularity on Romance Novel covers is any indication. Almost as popular as the plain ol' Hot Abs cover, tattooed heroes are showing up in all kinds of novels and novellas.

So the question is, are they as important for a romance novel cover as hot abs are?

### **A bit of history...**

The art of tattooing has been around, well, since the Bronze Age, and possibly even earlier. For thousands of years, we humans have had a fascination with permanently adorning our bodies with symbolic or simply decorative markings. The tattoo has gone in and out of fashion throughout the years in various cultures. Currently in the United States, tattooing is becoming more accepted as form of self-expression. A recent study estimated that over 45 million Americans have tattoos, with "Millennials", ages 18-29, being the largest group by a wide margin. Tattoos and piercings have gained popularity over the past few decades, and are more accepted now than in past generations.

Numerous TV shows like Miami Ink, L.A. Ink, Tattoo Nightmares, and Ink Masters have become commonplace. In 2011, Mattel even introduced a tattooed Barbie doll, which caused a bit of a controversy.

### **Oh, Those Bad Boys...**

I have noticed a trend in Romance Novel covers that reflects this current shift in our culture. Many of the men (with Naked, Hot Abs, of course) on Romance and Erotic Romance novel covers are now tattooed hunks. Is there still something about the tattoo that screams, "BAD BOY"? Even though, in reality, CEO's, bankers, attorneys and accountants may have tattoos, there is still that stigma associated with it. But when the shirt (or pants) come off and all you see is muscle and ink, naughtiness and fun is the message coming through. Loud and clear! (Even if he wears a suit the rest of the time).

In my own personal experience, I have to admit my Hubby's tats have the same effect on me. My late first husband was vehemently against tattoos, and I never really agreed with him. I feel that they can enhance a body, especially if artfully done, and are symbolic in nature. Ironically my own tattoo, a phoenix, was a tribute to my late husband though he would never have approved. But my tattoo really means something special to me. And my current husband (he has four) has a story and meaning behind each of his. When I met him, I found they not only made him more attractive to look at, but, yeah the 'bad boy' factor entered into it.

What do you think? Do tattoos on a Romance Novel Hero make you want to grab that book and read it? Does it imply to you that the Hero may also be a “Bad Boy” type? Should there be only a few tats, or cover that boy up?

(If you'd like to discuss, contact info is at the end of this mini ebook. I love to hear from readers!)

## **2. Are Hot Abs The New Bodice Rippers?**

Romance novels are notorious for their cover art, more so than many genres. Part of this “reputation” came from the proliferation of mass-marketed paperbacks in the 1970's and early 1980's that featured a scantily-clad couple on the cover in a frantic passionate embrace, hair flowing and faces contorted in intense expressions (one commenter on a blog recently called it their “O-faces”). It was the first time a male book cover model became ridiculously famous, too. Yes, I am talking about the illustrious Fabio. Thankfully, this was about the time the trend had reached its' peak. Historical Romances were enormously popular then, so many covers featured the models in period costume, thus the derisive term “Bodice Rippers” began to be used to describe Romance novels in general, usually by people who did not read them.

### **Evolution**

It seemed that once the cheesy-couple-in-embrace trend subsided, covers became classier, with more prominent use of borders, lettering, landscapes, etc. There were still women or men or even couples on some covers, and these became more varied as the Romance genre began to branch into several different subgenres, such as Paranormal, Romantic Suspense, Sweet Romance, Inspirational, and so on. Cover art began to more closely resemble the stories themselves, with clues or symbolism that depicted the actual story. This trend has emerged to create the great variety we see today while browsing the bookshelves or online outlets for novels.

The trend of including elements of the story in the cover art has created an expectation among readers. I polled various friends and fellow writers on this subject, and also researched blogs and book review websites. Most readers find it adds to the story when they can look back at the cover and see the “hidden clues” the cover art held to the story. It's as if the wrapping on the Birthday Gift held clues to the object inside. Conversely, it is a great source of irritation when the opposite happens, and the cover art has nothing to do with the story, or the hero has black hair in the story and he's blond on the cover, for example. We have come to expect the package to depict the product, and in those cases it seems as though the publisher didn't care about the story and just wanted a flashy cover. It feels like bait and switch, but by that time we have read the book, so it may be moot. Or is it?

### **Because...Abs!**

The most obvious recent trend I have seen while browsing for Romance novels is what I call “The Hot Ab cover.” Thousands of naked male abs on cover after cover. No head, sometimes a bit below the belt, but mostly ABS. Hey, I love looking at a tight six pack. But there are so many of these now I find myself just breezing past them. Is anyone else becoming numb to these? And does it tell us anything about the story, other than, “hot guy takes his shirt off”?

### **The Secret Object**

Another trend has been sparked by the phenomenal success of “Fifty Shades of Grey” by E.L. James. It pertains more often to Erotic Romance or Erotica, and has been described as ‘minimalist’ or ‘stealth’ covers. Whatever you may think of “Fifty Shades of Grey”, that cover was evocative. Just the silk tie...in

grey of course...looks innocent, right? But so much meaning behind it, that you only fully understood once you read the novel (or some Spoiler explained it to you.) Still, it must have worked well because there are shelves and online sites full of novels with a single flower, a pair of cufflinks, or a belt...hint, hint, get it?

Yes, we do.

The other benefit to these seemingly innocuous covers is you can sit on the subway or a park bench reading, and strangers (or your family) may not realize you are reading a Romance novel or Erotica. And the use of e-readers certainly allows for privacy, too.

### **Are Abs Here To Stay?**

Now cover art has been reduced to the size of a postage stamp, when shopping online. But many say it is still important, and continues to drive their choices when shopping for books to read. So how do authors and publishers catch the shopper's eye, intrigue them with hints about the story, but avoid becoming a clone of all the other covers out there?

It's a challenge to be sure. Perhaps these trends of men's Hot Abs and/ or Just a Belt Buckle/Tie/Cufflink will seem as cheesy to us years from now as those book covers of yesteryear. Will today's Hot Abs become tomorrow's Bodice Rippers?

What would you like to see more of on covers? What do you never want to see again?

(If you'd like to discuss, contact info is at the end of this mini ebook. I love to hear from readers!)

## **3. What's So Great About Romance Novel Heroes?**

Besides being gorgeous to look at, I mean. Although they are usually portrayed as superior physical specimens, they are also usually flawed in some way. They have some score to settle or some major emotional scars to overcome. A typical Romance Hero spends the first part of any good romance novel pissing off the Heroine, and more often than not, seducing her against her better judgment. Why are today's women, who have more freedom and independence than previous generations, still so fascinated with the "Alpha Male" hero stereotype?

### **Primal Urges**

There is something very primal about the male taking charge, taking care of a woman. Whether he is a billionaire with control issues, or a seventeenth-century scot, or an ageless vampire, a common thread emerges—he "rescues" the heroine. The threat may be soldiers, supernatural foes, or he may even be saving her from herself. But the hero brings something to the story that is way more satisfying than the heroine doing all these things on her own.

Women in real life do amazing things all the time, with or without men in their lives. Novel Heroines are written all the time that kick butt, take no prisoners and save the day. Some of those are excellent stories, with interesting, vivid characters. But some people are drawn to Romance because they prefer particular elements in their stories, such as the "Happily Ever After". The relationship between the two main characters in this genre is forefront, and they must end up together once the story arc is complete.

Sure, it's a formula, but there is a reason for it—fulfillment. Just as you would expect the mystery to be solved by the end of a novel in the Mystery genre, Romance readers expect the two main characters to be committed to their relationship at the end of the story.

### **Branching Out**

Nowadays, there are more sub-genres of Romance than ever before. There are BDSM, Gay and Lesbian romances, Paranormal Romances, Interracial Romances and countless other variations. But in this post I am focusing on the more common male-female relationship. I believe the “take-charge Alpha Male” (albeit in countless variations) is so popular because he is the ideal. The heroine does not have to remind him about his Mother's birthday, help him find his socks, or endure the clip-ping! of his monthly toe-nail cutting. He is not subject to mundane reality, and his focus for most of the book is on the Heroine.

### **Fantasies are Good For You**

With our Romance heroes, we can live out our fantasies. He is an eleven on a scale of one to ten in the bedroom, and he always looks sexy. Even though he has flaws, we know they can be fixed, and usually are by the end of the book. We need this outlet, to know that men can have all these awesome qualities, so when we see flashes of them in our boyfriends and husbands, we can smile that special smile, saved for our own real-life Hero.

And it makes it easier to understand that in men's fantasies, there is an ideal woman. We may not agree with or particularly enjoy what they fantasize about, but when your man gives you that special smile, you may have just done something to remind him that you are the ideal woman, the Ultimate Heroine, in his eyes.

Do you like the way Heroes are portrayed in Romance Novels? What would you like to see done differently in regard to Heroes?

(If you'd like to discuss, contact info is at the end of this mini ebook. I love to hear from readers!)

## **4. Is Silver The New Grey? Older Heroes & Heroines in Fiction**

There's a growing trend in fiction, and it's not grey, but almost. Silver is in, with older fictional heroes and heroines (not in their twenties) in romance novels, and even in some other genres, too. Which makes sense when statistics show a significant portion of readers who read books regularly are women, and over the age of fifty-five, as shown in a recent Book Bub study. Many readers enjoy stories with characters who are more like them, who have more life experience and are facing problems and challenges they can relate to.

### **A Gathering**

Several social media pages or groups have emerged to provide a place for those interested in reading or writing romances featuring mature or “seasoned” main characters. For example, the “Seasoned Romance” group page on Facebook declares that it is a “place for readers and writers of love stories with heroes and heroines in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and beyond. Sex and love can get better with age. So let's read, write, and talk about it!” They have already passed seven hundred members as of this writing, proving there is interest in stories with older characters.

I am working on a new series featuring “seasoned” characters, so I did some research to find out what readers are responding to. Here's what I found:

New York Times Bestselling Author **Roxanne St. Clair** features “silver fox” heroes in her popular **Barefoot Bay Timeless Series**. This series promises “plenty of laughs, a few tears, and a chance to fall for a man who’s lived and loved and knows exactly how to treat a woman. I promise you’ll break out a tissue or two with these emotional stories about three handsome, accomplished, and sexy men in their forties who kick off their shoes and fall in love again.” I agree there’s a certain appeal to a man who knows what he’s doing in the bedroom, and older guys usually do. Judging by the models on the covers of Roxanne’s books, they still look hot, too!

Even more proof that Seasoned Romance is now a thing—there will be a Vintage Love panel at this year’s **RWA** convention in Orlando in July, 2017, and there was one I attended at the 2017 Romantic Times Convention in Atlanta. Let’s hope this continues to be a trend at reader and writer conferences, as there is growing interest.

Author **Natasha Moore** has a **Silver Fox Series**, with the tagline, “Love Can Happen At Any Age”. She also has a book in a multi-author collection of mature romances, entitled, **Hot Silver Nights**.” Sometimes only one of the main characters is older, leading to complications due to age differences. It also plays into the fantasy of attracting younger partner. There is a list on **Maryse’s Book Blog**, from a few years ago, has several older woman/younger man books recommended by readers. The theme of an older man/younger woman has fans, too—as several lists on Amazon show.

Heck, even **Nora Roberts** is on a list of Mature Romances on the **Booklist Reader Blog**, and of course **Goodreads** has a list of novels with Older Hero and Heroines (over 40).

### **The Appeal of Seasoned Characters**

Perhaps part of the appeal of older characters is they have more to offer—more experience, more connections, and thus they often have more at stake. They may have children or a business, something significant to lose, more so than perhaps a younger, twenty-something character. They also may have more emotional baggage, since they’ve been around; second chance romances or widows/widowers are a common trope with older characters.

I know diversity of characters is a hot topic these days, and rightfully so—fiction should reflect a wider view of the world than it sometimes does. And that includes characters of all races and origins, in the prime of their lives, who still have dreams, ambitions, and yes, hot sex!

This is one trend I can get behind, because for many of us it’s true that love, sex and romance do not belong only to the young. I’ve had some of the best sex and most romantic moments of my life after I turned forty, and I’m not done yet!

How about you? If you have any recommendations of books featuring older characters that you loved, let me know!

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## **5. Paranormal Romance Genre- Overdone or Just Getting Started?**

Anyone who reads Romance Novels knows that the Paranormal Romance sub-genre has been hot, hot, hot for several years. But has it begun to burn out?

### **History Repeats Itself...Again**

Vampires have always been considered sexy creatures, even back in the “Dracula” days, so it is no surprise that Vampires (and their ilk) make up the bulk of Paranormal Romance Characters. Two huge franchises have found success with Vampire characters—first Anne Rice’s Vampire Chronicles Series, then Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight Series. There are uncountable other novels with Vampires or Vampire-like beings featured, and new ones are constantly being published. The sub-genre has splintered off into further sub- sub- genres, too- Vampire novels with an Urban Fantasy bent, a Comedic bent, a Thriller-Suspense bent....and on.

### **Other Creative Creatures**

Werewolves and Shape-Shifters seem to be the runners up in the Most Popular Paranormal Creatures contest. In fact, you can likely find a “were” creature of any type imaginable in Romance Novels today—bears, cougars, panthers, and even some you probably haven’t wondered about. Snakes, anyone?

Ghosts, Witches and Wizards, Angels and Demons, selkies, mermaids/men, fae, even monsters like Bigfoot and the Abominable Snowman (wait...what?!). Supernatural beings showing up in Romance Novels (and Erotic Romance Novels, to be sure) is now quite commonplace. But the beauty of the Paranormal genre is the fact there is no limit but the writer’s imagination. Authors can create worlds and characters using archetypes and mythologies, and spin it with their own twist.

That may be why even the Vampire craze won’t die (pardon the pun). Authors keep coming up with creative, interesting versions of their own, so we keep on reading. As a writer who leans toward the paranormal, I am glad there is an abundance of great stories out there, and I look forward to seeing what interesting trends develop in this genre.

So what is your favorite type of paranormal character? What would you like to see more of? Have you had enough of Vamps and Weres, or do you crave more?

(If you’d like to discuss, contact info is at the end of this mini ebook. I love to hear from readers!)

## **6. Can A Heroine Be “Too Orgasmic”?**

A common criticism regarding romance writing is characters who are “**TSTL**”, or “Too Stupid To Live”, referring to the plot contrivance of a Heroine who foolishly puts herself in harm’s way so that she can be rescued later. I know it is challenging to invent obstacles which are harrowing yet still plausible, but it’s the writer’s job to create a world where the reader can suspend their disbelief enough to not notice such contrivances.

### **Yes, That Book**

A few years ago the national fuss over the series “Fifty Shades of Grey” by E.L. James, caught my attention. Out of curiosity I jumped on the bandwagon and downloaded it. I wanted to find out why this particular book was causing such a furor, as romances involving BDSM are nothing new. Although it was not the most well-written book, I was intrigued enough to keep turning the pages for the first several chapters. By chapter seventeen, however, I had discovered something that completely threw me out of the story. So much so I made up my own acronym- “**TOTB**”, or “Too Orgasmic To Believe”!

I know the purpose of reading a romance novel is to escape the real world, and as a fantasy, the sex has to be perfect. But, does it, really? In almost every romance novel I have read, the Heroine has a mind-blowing-out-of-body-experience orgasm every time she has sex. Does this make anyone else roll their eyes? The reason “Fifty Shades” hit this home for me was the fact that the Heroine was a virgin, had never had any kind of sex with anyone (including herself), and she orgasms not only the first time, but every single one of the hundreds of times they do it subsequently. Even while she was on her period, and

twice in a row, no less! (Ewww- sorry, but that scene in the bathroom was just gross). My “subconscious” and my “inner goddess” were both shaking their heads. That woman is not just exceptional, she’s a freakin’ medical miracle.

Yes, I know Christian Grey and all the other alpha-male heroes are such super awesome perfect lovers, that they MAKE the heroines come every time....and, believe me, I aspire to that in real life. But writers are also advised to make their heroes and heroines flawed in some way, so that their characters are more “relatable” to their readers, and have room to grow in the story. Except in the bedroom apparently—where they have to be perfect lovers, eleven on a scale of one to ten, every time. (The only notable exception is some BDSM stories have orgasm denial as a technique, in which case it is withheld on purpose.)

### **In Real Life**

I can’t speak for anyone else, but in my own experience, having sex also has about ‘fifty shades’ to it. It’s rarely black or white, rarely awful or utterly fantastic. It is possible to have awesome sex without orgasm, and it is also possible to have mind-blowing multiples. And orgasms can vary in intensity and duration. I can count at least twenty different “shades” or types, of orgasm that I have experienced.

I’m not saying that the sex scenes should be disappointing (unless that is part of the plot), but can we at least be a *little* more realistic? I have heard there has been discussion over using more realistic physical descriptions, so that heroines would be more like “real” people and less like supermodels or Barbie Dolls. With the trend toward making more relatable characters, will the sex become more realistic, and thereby more like real-life experiences? Wouldn’t it be more interesting if the experience was more varied for the characters, rather than sexual nirvana every time?

And Ladies, if you actually do have over-the-top orgasms every time you have sex; if you are truly “TOTB”, then I salute you! Please start your own blog and tell us how you do it.

How do you like your romance/erotica sex scenes? Complete fantasy or with a dose of realism? What would you like to see done differently in regards to sex scenes?

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As promised, here’s my contact info. I hope you enjoyed this mini E-Book on Romance Novel Trends!

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