

What's It All About?

© Susan Lyons

Do you remember those high school and college English classes where they'd ask, "What's the author trying to say?" Excuse me, but TRYING TO SAY??? Isn't that a little offensive? If we're any good at all, our story does say it. And the deepest message, the really basic one, is the theme. Some stories have a single theme and some may have several, perhaps each of somewhat different importance.

Interestingly, on occasion we don't even realize those deep messages ourselves. I've heard writers comment about reading reviews of their own work that gave them an "aha moment" because the reviewer picked up on an underlying theme that the authors themselves hadn't. Maybe because it's so deeply rooted, so intrinsic to us? Maybe because we can't see the forest for the trees? Maybe because we're so close to our own work?

I used to have that problem. I'd go to workshops where the instructor would ask us the theme of our works in progress, and I'd be able to list half a dozen messages, but not one fundamental theme. That didn't mean it wasn't there, only that I was too oblivious to recognize it.

You know what it was? Even in my very first published book, *Champagne Rules*? Finding yourself. My 20-something heroine Suzanne had the family, friendship, and career aspects of her life all sorted out, but she hadn't figured out the sexual and romantic aspects. She had a "sensible Suzanne" side and when she hooked up with the hero Jaxon, she found a "sexy Suzanne" side. What she needed to learn was how to integrate them, and to honor her romantic, loving side too. By the end of the book, she was well on her way.

Next came the second book in my Awesome Foursome series, *Hot in Here*. Chinese-Canadian Jenny lived dual lives: good Chinese daughter at home and modern Western woman out in the world. She could maintain both until she met a hot firefighter. A Caucasian one, which meant her traditional parents would never approve. Jenny had serious identity issues, and meeting Scott forced her to confront them and – you guessed it – find herself as the woman she wanted to be.

It actually took me five years of being a published writer to realize that the fundamental theme in all my novels and novellas is finding yourself.

It's not that I didn't know I wrote character-driven stories and loved character arc, especially when it was sparked by meeting a very appealing and very challenging love interest. I'd just never been able to put it into one short phrase before. And since then, that same phrase can be used to characterize at least one of the themes of every single book I've written – although in most cases there's at least one other theme in addition.

It seems to me there are only so many fundamental themes. For example, one is "you can never go home again". Here's another, which superficially seems like kind of the opposite but isn't necessarily (and it's one that often finds its way into my stories): "you have to face your past to

find out who you want to be”. Others are: “the thing that matters most is family,” “love is the most important thing in the world,” “you have to sacrifice to be redeemed,” and “justice triumphs over evil.”

Some authors write the same themes over and over. Others have a variety of themes. Some authors know their theme before they start to write the book, while for others the theme reveals itself as they’re writing or after they’ve finished the book – or sometimes, not until they read a review.

Do we write certain themes because we’re driven to? Obviously, our themes aren’t trivial. These are fundamental issues that resonate for most people – and definitely for us. Do we write about issues we’ve confronted and resolved, or about issues that continue to torment us personally? I suspect the answer is different for each author.

When I realized that my recurring theme is finding yourself, I had to sit back and ponder the extent to which I, Susan, have found myself and the extent to which I am, to use a writer’s expression, a work in progress. I think I’ve come pretty far on the journey to self-discovery, but there’s still a lot to discover, and a lot of growing to be done. For me, that thought is actually encouraging rather than disappointing. Life’s a journey!

©Susan Lyons. International bestselling author Susan Lyons, who also writes as Susan Fox and Savanna Fox, writes “emotionally compelling, sexy contemporary romance” (Publishers Weekly). Visit her website at www.susanlyons.ca.