

Romance – Fantasy or Reality?

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I read a lot of romance and, like many romance readers, often hear the criticism that romance fiction is escapist fantasy. I'm sure writers and readers of science fiction, techno-thrillers, mysteries and every other genre hear the same complaint.

Well, you know what, there's a reason they call it FICTION! Of course it's fantasy.

Or do the critics mean by "fantasy" something that couldn't possibly ever be real? Such as, space ships fighting star wars, a super-spy saving the world, an amateur sleuth doing a better job than the trained cops – or a woman meeting a true hero who turns out to be the love of her life? Impossible or possible?

It seems to me, even in the less likely scenarios, fiction must have an element of reality within it if it's to be truly meaningful and memorable to the reader. For example, even if the scenario is fantastical and the protagonist "larger than life," there still must be features in that character and/or plot that are realistic enough for the reader to identify and care. Otherwise, the reader won't be hooked to finish the book.

Each fiction reader looks for a particular blend of fantasy and reality (and that blend may vary depending on our mood), and that's what draws each of us, as readers, to different genres and subgenres.

With romance constituting over 50% of sales of popular paperback fiction, obviously it appeals to a lot of readers. As a writer and reader of romance, I think most readers turn to romance for stories of female empowerment. We love to see a heroine with some flaws or disadvantages who faces challenges and finds the internal strength to overcome obstacles. We want her to believe she's worthy of love, and to find a man who respects, loves and commits to her. The story may play out in Regency England, the Wild West, small-town America or Manhattan night clubs, and the heroine may be anything from a virgin schoolmistress to a dominatrix.

And you know what? Even though these heroines are fictional characters, they symbolize every woman's ability to find the strength to face challenges and grow. That's a message about reality. They also attest to every woman's right to find a man who loves her for who she really is. And that's a message of hope. It won't be every woman's reality, but we all want to believe it's possible – and, for many women, it is.

The genre of romance has an incredible number of subgenres and cross-genres – from werewolf erotica to Christian inspirational – so there's something to meet each reader's taste. Some tend more toward the fantastical and some more toward the realistic, but each contain a blend.

Take, for example, my book *Touch Me*. What woman wouldn't fantasize about a man like Adonis Stefanakis? He looks like a Greek god, believes in tantric sex, and wants to give Ann Montgomery six hours of love-making – one orgasm at a time. Except, the reality is, twenty-

eight year old Ann is a career-obsessed, performance-driven lawyer. First, she doesn't have six hours to spend on something that isn't going to advance her career. Second, the idea of six hours of having to be fabulous in bed is totally intimidating. So, what's the deeper reality – in other words, what are her flaws and issues? She doesn't know how to balance career and relationships, and she's not secure about her own sexuality. As Adonis challenges Ann to grow into a more balanced – not to mention sexy – woman, readers can identify. Because Ann's issues are real; they're ones many women experience themselves.

So, is *Touch Me* fantasy or reality? It's both. And I think all good fiction is.

What kind of fiction do you read? What balance of fantasy and reality appeals to you?

©Susan Lyons. Award-winning author Susan Lyons writes sexy romance that's passionate, heartwarming and fun. She is published by Kensington, Berkley, Harlequin, The Wild Rose Press, and Freya's Bower. Visit her website at www.susanlyons.ca.