LESSON 2: WHAT IS GENRE?

What is genre?
When we say we write genre fiction, what exactly does that mean?

When we say we write “Paranormal Fiction,” that means we are writing in a genre and in a genre that has particular elements to that genre that you won’t find (usually) in the other genres.

What is the difference between genre fiction and any other fiction?

First, we have fiction. Fiction writing is that writing that is not factual—not a memoir, not a biography or autobiography (sans Stephen Frey), not a factual article, not mere speculative or opinion article, and all that, it’s not.

Not that all those other types of writing aren’t good and valid, they are. But they aren’t fiction. They aren’t part of our imagination. They don’t stray from the facts to a story about more than the facts. It might be rooted in fact, or present day, yet fiction goes beyond the reality realm and into everything else we can imagine. So we could say fiction is the result of our imagination. Not a very scientific term, but apt.

And then we have types of fiction. You know, anything that sticks around long enough gets categorized as something—fashion, politics, religion, culture, technology, speak—everything. Just yesterday I was reading an article in the New York Time about how the Germans were upset because their standard language dictionary included some new words. They weren’t unhappy because the dictionary added words, (their dictionary would be like our Oxford English, a standard for English around the world). The Germans were unhappy because they were American words. 😊

But they made sense. Why use 3 very complicated German words to say you are reading a “blog.”? So our language develops with the times just like story and how we present it to our readers develops, grows, and gets categorized.

Categorization didn’t really take hold until bookstores came along and they had to shelve stuff. At first, it was all “literature” but soon it became obvious there was a lot of literature about specific topics—like the Wild West—that they could shelf in a place of their own so the reader can easily find them.

Easier to find; easier to buy.

And so, books began to live in their own little segment in the bookstore. Westerns, romance, mystery/crime/detective, science fiction (which included fantasy and horror because you know, most underpaid bookstore attendants really don’t know the difference), and so on. And shelving today depends on what’s hot, or what THEY think is hot, they being corporate whomever trying to gauge the readership.

Books I read as a kid and an adult are now shelved in YA (Young Adult) and those branch out to “Teen Fantasy” and “Teen Fiction” and “Grades 8-12” and “Grades 1-3” and so on. (I’m glad Barnes & Noble separated all that female protag teen fantasy away from other teen fantasy. Do you know why? If you answer correctly, I’ll critique your first 3 pages of your manuscript.)
So today we have the “Science Fiction” section of the bookstore, where science fiction, fantasy, horror, and all that goes under there is shelved. That’s also called speculative fiction. However, there’s some of those “elements” of science fiction, fantasy and horror in the romance section. What’s with that? LOL

So here’s a good place to put a caveat or two.

CAVEAT 1: The term “sci fi” refers to media like TV, movies, video. The term “spec fic” or “SF” refers to speculative fiction, ie literature of speculative fiction. In this class, I use “spec fic” or “SF” to refer to speculative fiction, the umbrella genre for all that.

CAVEAT 2: When I say “SF” or “spec fic,” I am including all non-romance marketed books. Books that would be shelved in the science fiction section of the bookstore. When I say “paranormal” fiction, I am referring to all spec fic type literature marketed in the romance section of the bookstore.

Although it all really is speculative fiction, how we market the books is very different. Why?

Quite simply because romance is the biggest selling fiction category in the world. And smart people want their books marketed where it has a better chance to sell. Now that doesn’t mean that every paranormal book is marketed in the romance section just because of that. Many paranormal books are categorized on the romance shelves because they have romance in them. Mostly because romance is a strong, if not the strongest, element in the book. Doesn’t have to be, but usually is.

So we have two main categories of fiction, ie GENRE, that we are discussing here:

SPECULATIVE FICTION (SF) ←-------------→ PARANORMAL FICTION ←-------------→ ROMANCE

Spec fic is shelved in the science fiction/fantasy section of the bookstore, ie marketed to SF readers, while Paranormal fiction is shelved in the romance section (sometimes might have its own section).

In many ways, these two genres are the same, and in some ways they differ. And we’ll talk about these.

So we talked about what genre is.

Genre is a category of fiction that is dependent on its ELEMENTS.

So what are the elements? 😊

**Genre elements**

What is an element?

An element is a part of that fiction category that is common to it, and not common to other categories. For instance, in “paranormal romance,” (can also be called paranormal, but paranormal romance means the romance is stronger than the paranormal), romance is a strong element. It is part of the main plot, with the paranormal elements as the setting and type of character perhaps, but still, the romance motivates the plot. Take out the romance and you still have a paranormal fiction novel, but the plot, the story, is changed.
Let’s look at the different genre/subgenres, their elements, and how they are marketed. Some of these genre/subgenres may be very similar. That’s OK. But remember, marketing determines where our book will be on the shelves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCIENCE FICTION</th>
<th>FANTASY</th>
<th>PARANORMAL</th>
<th>PARANORMAL / SF ROMANCE</th>
<th>ROMANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science/technology greatly affects chars. Story cannot be SF without tech.</td>
<td>N/A May have tech, but not essential to story</td>
<td>N/A May have tech, but not essential to story</td>
<td>May have as an essential element, would be SF Romance</td>
<td>N/A May have tech, but not essential to story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A May have, but not essential to story</td>
<td>Fantasy essential to story. Magic, medieval times, time travel, alternate universes, fantastical characters, are all part of different types of fantasy. *</td>
<td>Fantasy elements may essential, would be called Paranormal Romance (fantasy elements and/or SF elements + romance make this genre)</td>
<td>Fantasy elements may essential, would be called Paranormal Romance (fantasy elements and/or SF elements + romance make this genre)</td>
<td>N/A May have, but not essential to story (if too much fantasy, story shifts to paranormal romance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A May have, but not essential to story. May have romance but it’s not an essential story element.</td>
<td>N/A May have, but not essential to story. May have romance but it’s not an essential story element.</td>
<td>N/A May have, but not essential to story. May have romance but it’s not an essential story element.</td>
<td>Romance essential element in all its subgenres. (romance + _____ SF &amp;/or fantasy)</td>
<td>Romance essential element in all its subgenres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space ships, scientists, space, high tech, air cars, time travel, instant travel, miniaturization, etc.</td>
<td>Kings, queens, dragons, monsters, magic, wands, witches, monsters, sprites, fairies, post-apocalyptic, psychic, etc.</td>
<td>Fantasy or SF or both, witches, magic, psychic, vampires, angels, demons, aliens, gargoyles, etc.</td>
<td>Fantasy or SF or both elements with romance. Usually male/female, aliens, space, vampires, angels, etc etc.</td>
<td>Usually not paranormal. Romance is strongest element. Happily Ever After (HEA), or not, usually male/female, etc</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*I haven’t seen a plain paranormal for a paranormal with SF. It’s always been Paranormal SF with romance. It might be out there, that would be SF with no romance, and still be marketed as Paranormal, I just haven’t seen it. Have you?*

How did these genres come about?

**History of Genre**

Paranormal got its roots in Gothic fiction, sometimes referred to as “gothic horror,” a genre that combines both horror and romance.
And the Paranormal also features terror in some way, with its other-worldly characters or some imminent disaster that must be averted.

You might chuckle to think how the gothic evolved into the paranormal in Europe with names like “roman noir” or black novel in France, and “shudder novel” in Germany.

**British Gothic**

As you glance over these, look at how the development of gothic toward romance developed.

**Horace Walpole—**

1. Regarded as the first true Gothic romance writer

2. Liked to combine elements of the medieval romance, which he deemed too fanciful, and the modern novel, which he considered too strictly confined to realism.

3. Created many Gothic standard tropes:
   a. Threatening mystery
   b. Ancestral curse
   c. Hidden passages
   d. Fainting heroines

**Clara Reeve—**

1. Balanced fantastic elements with 18th century realism

**Ann Radcliffe—**

1. developed the technique of the explained supernatural, where every seemingly supernatural intrusion was eventually traced back to a natural cause. This made the gothic novel socially acceptable (can’t have any of those unreal horrors running around without being explained, now can we? 😊)

2. introduced the brooding gothic villain
Matthew Gregory Lewis—

1. *The Monk* 1796 was an important development for Lewis’ portrayals of the Catholic Church

2. **Self-parody**

3. “‘Black magic and the monastery”

4. Influenced Ann Radcliffe’s last novel, *The Italian*, who uses a monk and the Inquisition in Rome

Marquis de Sade—

1. Not known so much for his gothic romances, yet he used a gothic framework in some of his fiction (*The Misfortunes of Virtue* and *Eugenie de Franval*)

2. Correlated the French revolutionary Reign of Terror (a period of violence after the onset of the French Revolution) and the “terrorist school” of writing.

**Victorian Gothic**

There are many different developments of the Gothic theme through every country in Europe. Earlier I hit on Germany’s “the shudder” novel and so on. Every society had their own favorites and specialties, many traits of those historical developments melded with the current American Paranormal.

In the Victorian era, gothics weren’t the dominant genre, but they evolved more into what we would call a paranormal now with G. W. M. Reynolds’ *Faust, Wagner the Wehr-wolf*, and *The Necromancer*. *The Mysteries of London* has been accorded an important place in the development of the urban as a particularly Victorian Gothic setting, much like Dickens set the world’s critical eye on England, particularly London, in the 1890s.

And what would a discussion of the Gothics be without Edgar Allen Poe?

Poe was a bit different. Instead of focusing on the physical aspects of the Gothic, he delved into the psychology of his characters as they (often) descended into madness. It’s been said that Poe’s critics complained about his “German tales” (remember the ‘shudder’ from earlier), and Poe replied, “*that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.*” (Wonder if Freud read Poe?)

Poe is a big influence in all modern Gothic and Paranormal stories. If you haven’t read Poe and you write Paranormal, I highly recommend you try a few of his stories. You won’t regret it 😊.
After this point, the Gothic and resulting Paranormal evolution expands exponentially with the Bronte sisters, Robert Louis Stevenson (Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Bram Stoker (for which the Bram Stoker Award is named), and Gaston Leroux’s The Phantom of the Opera.

How many of those listed in the above paragraph are still running as plays, movies, TV shows, and novels still published? Wouldn’t you like to be one of those forever famous?

We might not become “forever famous,” but we can become better writers by studying our genre’s roots, reading the stories and analyzing them, discovering what makes them ‘tick’ and then using some of those elements, tropes, and truths (for if they are every-lasting story and genre elements or genre devices, then they must be some type of “truth” to human storytelling, wouldn’t you say?).

Post-Victorian Gothic and on

So here we come, zooming into the 1900s and 20th and 21st century.

PULPS took over in the US publishing lots of Gothic goodies like Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Block (Lovecraft’s protégé). Slowly, horror fiction Y-ed off (split) from the Gothic.

GOTHIC ROMANCES Beginning in the 1950s, Gothic Romances became popular with authors such as Phyllis Whitney, Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart, and more and the covers usually featured “a terror-stricken woman in diaphanous attire in front of a gloomy castle, with a single lit window.” (Which really helped give Romances in general a bad rap.)

Not all women wrote Gothic Romances. Some were men: the prolific Clarissa Ross and Marilyn Ross were pseudonyms for the male writer Dan Ross and Frank Belknap Long published Gothics under his wife's name, Lyda Belknap Long. Another example is British writer Peter O’Donnell, who wrote under the pseudonym Madeleine Brent. Outside of companies like Lovespell, who carry Colleen Shannon, very few books seem to be published using the term today.

SOUTHERN GOTHIC Where would we be without our Deep Southern roots? Strictly an American creation, Southern Gothics combine some Gothic elements with the setting and style of the Deep South with authors like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty (one of my faves), Harper Lee, and Flannery O'Connor.

CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC And so as we humans are every-changing, so does our literature. Writers like Joyce Carol Oates and Raymond Kenney and Henry Farrell are best-known in this vein. Margaret Atwood could also be classified in here in the Canadian vein.

MODERN HORROR Horror kept on keepin’ on, so to speak, blossoming into one of the most popular genres with Gothic traits and some wonderful writers have built upon their Gothic heritage like Ann Rice, Stephen King, Daphne du Maurier.
OTHER MEDIA And so goes literature to the graphic novels, comics, films, music, video games, etc.

You can read more about the rich history of the Gothic novel at Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction and expand your research (I hope you do!) into all the interesting aspects of Gothics.

Classifying 21st century authors
Let’s look at some of the better-known writers and books out there and compare where they sit in the genre:

- Justin Cronin’s books, The Passage, and the sequel, The Twelve, definitely not paranormal because, although it is “not normal” and it does have the usually non-fantasy elements of vampires, werewolves, zombies, the entire stories are centered around science, science gone wrong (or rather, people gone wrong using science, chicken and the egg thing.)

Cronin’s website has this description of book one:

“The Passage is the story of Amy—abandoned by her mother at the age of six, pursued and then imprisoned by the shadowy figures behind a government experiment of apocalyptic proportions. But Special Agent Brad Wolgast, the lawman sent to track her down, is disarmed by the curiously quiet girl and risks everything to save her. As the experiment goes nightmarishly wrong, Wolgast secures her escape—but he can’t stop society’s collapse. And as Amy walks alone, across miles and decades, into a future dark with violence and despair, she is filled with the mysterious and terrifying knowledge that only she has the power to save the ruined world.”

- However, books like Charlaine Harris’ Sookie Stackhouse novels are most definitely paranormal, romance notwithstanding, chock full of vampires and other-worldly beings like sprites and faeries and such. (There’re relationships, but not HEA—Happily Ever After—as most, but not all, romance markets require.) If you’re not familiar with the series, definitely give at least the first book a try. Harris’ books have become best sellers immediately upon release, now due to their popularity, but she had a great twist on an old concept: Deep South Paranormal. She put the slang and the twang into vampires and now it’s on HBO. Who’da thought? (or as we say in Texas, “Who’da thunk?”) The Sookie novels are a great resource for paranormal/fantasy writers. See how she makes Sookie Stackhouse a household name while Harris pulls in the mystery/crime readers (broadening her audience base), solving mysteries and relationships in the deep, deep South in a little town of Bon Temps where people are a bit.... Different. 😊

What Harris’ website says about the Stackhouse novels:
Is George R. R. Martin’s Game of Thrones a paranormal / romance?

Hardly. Why?

They definitely have romance in them, lots of rollicking, romping sex and love and betrayal and relationships gone right and wrong, however, because his stories are pure fantasy, and in fact they fall in the “epic fantasy” and/or “high fantasy” categories. Why?

OK, let me make sure I am correct here and in a way I’m not and in a way I am. Martin’s series is actually called A Song of Ice and Fire with Game of Thrones as the first book in the series (published 1996) with seven books listed in the series so far (two forthcoming, hurry up! LOL). But usually the first book in the series gets dubbed for the series. (Much like with Harris’ series, it’s called the Sookie Stackhouse series or just Sookie when talking about the books and True Blood when talking about the TV series.)

The GoT series has all the epic/high fantasy elements defined by either its taking place in an imaginary world distinct from our own (it is) or by the epic stature of its characters, themes, and plot (it is).

Discussion 2

1. Who are some of your favorite authors? (name one or two)
2. What genre are they in?
3. Are there sub-genres?
4. How did you classify that book in that genre?

Example:

1. Book title: A Discovery of Witches by Deborah Harkness
2. Genre: literary fiction (is how it is marketed, not necessarily marketed by content. It is actually a fantasy, time travel, historical, paranormal, romance, etc.)
3. Subgenres: yes—fantasy, time travel, medieval fantasy, historical, paranormal, romance
4. Classify—where it is shelved in the bookstore. It’s marketed as a mainstream novel.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Walpole
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction