

Genre Writing

By Michelle Douglas

**HUNTER
WRITERS
CENTRE**



Genre fiction is fiction that sells. It is fiction that has a readymade market of avid readers. This, of course, is good news for the writer of such fiction. Where readers are hungry, publishers are eager to meet the demand. So, what precisely is genre fiction?

The terms genre fiction and popular fiction are often used interchangeably. There are eight primary genres of popular fiction—romance, crime fiction, science fiction, fantasy, horror, western, historical and adventure. An important feature of genre fiction is that it privileges its audience—it is what the reader wants to read, rather than what the writer wants to write, that is of paramount importance. The reader has **expectations** that must be **met** if an author is to prove successful. In effect, the writer enters into a contract with the reader by promising to deliver a certain kind of story.

So what should you, an aspiring writer of popular fiction, keep in mind when you turn your pen (and your thoughts) to writing this kind of fiction? How do you attempt to meet reader expectations? The answer lies in knowing and understanding the conventions and constraints that bind the popular genre you are targeting.

Some examples of conventions: In a romance novel the story **MUST** end in the happy union of the hero and heroine. In a crime novel the mystery **MUST** be solved. In an adventure novel the hero **MUST** save the day.

Some examples of constraints: In a romance novel the story **MUST** focus primarily on the developing romance between the hero and heroine. In a crime novel there **MUST** be red herrings, multiple suspects and surprises. In an adventure novel the hero **MUST** be pitted against a strong adversary/villain and show resourcefulness. (There may be additional constraints implemented by publishers too such as word-count limits and explicit language policies etc)

From these few examples, it becomes easy to see that the very definition of genre fiction arises from the conventions that surround it. These conventions have led many critics to deride genre fiction as formulaic, but adhering to conventions does not result in monotonous, unvaried stories. Creativity is free to flourish within the boundaries prescribed for it. Genre fiction and literary fiction are both forms of writing, but they have different goals. And genre fiction's primary goal is to entertain.

How to get started?

Writers are usually directed to study the market to determine the kind of book they should be writing. However, the market is so vast and the world of publishing, with its swings and shifts and passing trends, almost impossible to keep up with. Too often by the time a trend has been identified and a book written in response to it, the market has moved onto the next fad.

It is more productive to study published books in your chosen genre and to not only pinpoint what it is these books do well, but to analyse their individual components. The following list is a good place to start:

- How long is the novel?
- How many chapters does it have and what is a chapter's average length?
- How many main characters are there and what are their roles, their ages and their jobs?
- What viewpoint is the book written in—is a reader only privy to the main character's thoughts or to multiple viewpoints?
- Is the book written in first person or third person, past tense or present tense?

- Where is the story set?
- How many secondary characters are there and what are their roles?
- What is the ratio of dialogue to narrative?

There will be other questions depending on the genre you've chosen. For example:

- For a romance novel it might be: When does the first kiss happen? How many love scenes are there?
- In a crime novel it might be: How many suspects are there and what are their individual motivations for committing the crime?
- In a historical novel what time period is covered?

By answering the above questions—and any others that seem relevant to you—and incorporating your findings into your own work, you will, in effect, be targeting the market. You will have worked out not only what your readership expects (and be able to meet those expectations) but what a prospective publisher expects as well.

One Final Thought

If you wish to try your hand at writing genre fiction, it's important to respect the genre you are targeting. Ideally, it should be a genre you enjoy reading yourself. If you hate reading romances, don't target that particular market. If science fiction makes you yawn then in all likelihood the finished book will make a publisher yawn too. Remember, genre fiction's first priority is to the reader and your "job" is to write a story that will delight that reader. The best way to ensure your reader has fun when they read your book is to have fun while you're writing it.

As Edgar Rice Burroughs said, "I have been successful probably because I have always realized that I knew nothing about writing and have merely tried to tell an interesting story entertainingly." That is what genre fiction authors try to do—to tell an interesting story in a way that will entertain readers.

Michelle Douglas graduated with an MPhil (Creative Writing) and is currently studying her PhD at the University of Newcastle. She is a widely published romance novelist (with 18 books so far to her credit). If you'd like to learn more about her and her work you can visit:

Her website: www.michelle@michelle-douglas.com

Her Amazon author page: <http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B0034Q2IHA>

Her Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/michelle.douglas.3538

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form or transmitted to any other person without the prior written permission of Hunter Writers Centre.