

The romance heroine should be 'sooo terrific'

Genre writers get tips in conference here

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Direct from the bowels of R.M.S. Queen Mary and the commissioning of the Romance Writers of America's Second Annual Conference last weekend came the word: Winds of change blow hot over the romance market.

Adieu, comely 16-year-old governess and moody marquises. Farewell, cattle on the misty moor. What publishers, editors and readers want is Today's Romance, with a Heroine and Hero in a Today-kind of situation.

Tips such as this were what approximately 200 writers and would-be writers came from all parts of the country to hear at this conference sponsored by Romance Writers of America. Founded in 1960 by then-Dell editor Vivian Stevens, RWA is a Houston-based romance writers' support group with about 1,500 members and 50 chapters in the United States and Puerto Rico. The writers spent \$26 each for three days of such seminars as "Writing the Sensual Novel" and "Word Processing: Is It for Me?" and cocktail parties and individual interviews with editors and publishers from romance giants such as Harlequin, Silhouette, Dell, Jove, Pocket Books and Signet.

Uppermost, as on Texas

writer, who figured she spent \$1,000 to come, pointed out, "is the contact. To have editors say, 'Send it to me.'"

Those in charge of this conference were thankful it came off at all. A bitter conflict had erupted three months ago between the national leadership group and the Los Angeles chapter over just who was in charge of this conference and who was doing what with the money. "A misunderstanding of authority" is how one close to the situation described it, and it resulted in the early retirement of the Los Angeles chapter president. Everyone had on their happy faces last weekend, though some believed the fighting kept the attendance down from last year's 700 in Houston.

From a conference such as this, confided veteran editor Evelyn Grippo of Harlequin West, "I might get four very good writers, in each of our lines. It does pay off."

For the writers, the big news is what's selling. Historicals, Gothics and romantic suspense are out but may be coming back. Sex, in varying degrees according to publisher and line, is in.

Robin, Grunder, an associate editor for Signet's New American Library, hosted a seminar Friday on "The New Heroine, the New

Romance." Grunder, looking a bit like a baby-cheeked governess herself, checked off for her group what the New Heroine is and isn't.

What she is not, she said, is "the very naive young girl who meets her hero by tripping and landing at his feet."

■ "She isn't scared of men."

■ "She's not childlike, dependent."

■ "She's a wonderful, super,

great person, she's sooo terrific, she just hasn't met her match. She has a career, a conviction of her opinions. She's capable and resourceful — the kind of girl if she has only one week's vacation and she's taking a cruise and she just misses the boat, she won't just stand there and cry. She'll see this terrific-looking guy in a speedboat and she'll jump in and

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A glossary for romance readers

ROMANCE: Girl meets Boy, Girl and Boy have conflict, Girl gets Boy back, in 50,000 words.

SUPERROMANCE: Girl and Boy meet, etc., but in 90,000 words, with subplots and supporting cast.

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE: Frequently confused with the Gothic though both are not currently in fashion. A crime has been committed and needs solving. The Gothic heroine herself is almost always in danger, but in the romantic suspense, she just may

be imperiled because she is connected with one of the other characters.

GOTHIC: A genre that traces its roots back to "Jane Eyre" and "Rebecca." A mood piece which creates, according to Harlequin, "an easy feeling, a sensation of unseen, unspecified menace and danger, of dark passions, and a brooding romance. Violence lurks, but there is no overt crime."

BODICE RIPPER: Made fashionable by Avon queenpin Rose-

mary Rogers. Hero's a bit headstrong, heroine's a bit unwilling — at first. Tends to exploit the rape fantasy.

HISTORICAL ROMANCE: Love in the Old West or Regency, Victorian or Edwardian England, a genre pretty much on the wane. Very little sex, unless you are Rosemary Rogers and write your historicals as Bodice Rippers.

SENSUAL ROMANCE: Plenty of sex and not just a two-paragraph quickie. "More explicit sex, but always with the glow of romance about it" is the way Jayne Krentz, an Ecstasy veteran with 21 titles, explains it. Very in.

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say, Ten dollars if you can get me to that boat."

The name Nancy Drew popped into mind, but Grunder stated this New Heroine is, more than anything, "a real person."

And so is her hero, who need not be twice her age anymore like the Heroine Herself now is between 25 and 30, nor need he be a Greek god. The two of them get together in the New Plot, a contemporary conflict that results from two equal, well-matched personalities.

A word Grunder favors is "plausibility." "You don't want to have a conflict that could be cleared up by a five-minute conversation," she explained.

Like the woman cartoonist who comes in conflict with the new beach sports promoter in town. Or the burned-out Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter (female) who goes to Acapulco for a rest only to discover the getaway house already is occupied by a handsome stranger (male).

"Here's one I just thought of," Grunder chirped. "He's a television reporter doing a special on romance writers. She's a well-known romance writer who has written a lot of good books and he interviews her and his very first question is, 'So how long have you been writing these trashy romances?'"

Laugh if you want. As one prospective writer, running from "So You Want to Write a Silhouette" to "Humor in Romance," so adroitly put it, "When a girl can make \$50,000 a book, that's big business."

"Noney," replied one woman when asked why she does it. "You'll hear that from everyone in this room."

Veteran editor Evelyn Grippo,

now with Harlequin West, explained that Harlequin publishes about 20 books each month, with an average printing of 400,000 copies per title. "The shelf life is eternal," she added, since every few years the books are re-packaged and reprinted. "In three or four years, an author will make about \$30,000 to \$40,000 on a book," she said, "and assuming you write as few as one a year, that's a pretty nice annuity you get rolling."

Currently in vogue is the Harlequin-type romance, invented in England about 40 years ago by the publishing house Mills & Boon. It caught on in America two years ago with the vigor of the plague during the Dark Ages. "Nobody paid attention to them here for a long time," Grippo said. "I myself remember laughing at the cover art and the fiction itself and telling my staff, 'This is how we're going to publish.' Then two years later I was trying to rip them off."

If Harlequin, the undisputed champion, was the ripped-off, the rippers themselves are all doing quite well. "There's room," said Grippo, "just as there's room for Veeva and Alpha Beta."

Despite the current publishing depression, the market is still expanding for romances, read by an estimated 20 million people — though some editors predict it will peak soon. Then it will be on to suspense romance or Gothics or romantic sci-fi or whatever next tickles the fantasy of the American woman.

Spotting trends, in fact, was a primary concern at this conference. At Saturday's editors' panel on "Trends in Romantic Fiction," Grippo, Grunder and Pocket Books' Kate Duffy informally polled the audience for its likes and dislikes.

"I'm from the San Francisco chapter of Romance Writers of America, and we did this survey," one woman began. "Our readers hated contrived stories, liked sex,

did like historicals and romantic suspense but were less inclined to like the bodice rippers" (see accompanying glossary).

"The writers really are the ones who manufacture the trends," Grippo later explained. "They read all these books." (And so they do. One woman came to the microphone to admit she supports a 60-book-a-month habit.)

For their part, the editors did their best to explain just what they were looking for. The publishing trend is toward specialization — for example, Jove has a line, called Second Chance at Love, that deals with just that; Signet is coming out with a line with Heroes and Heroines over the age of 30. Dell, Signet and Silhouette have, in order, the Candlelight Ecstasy, Rapture and Desire lines of sensual romances (again, see glossary).

This specialization, known as "category writing," is the easiest way for a writer to break in. With the weekend's registration packet, in fact, came a ream of "tip sheets" — how-to's on writing for each of the categories.

For Adventures in Love, Signet's new line, there was this advice: "We don't want to know that the moonlit night was romantic, we want to know that the sky was a dark velvet canopy over their heads. We don't want to know that his touch aroused her, we want to know that the rough feel of his calloused fingertips as he wonderingly explored the outline of her face with featherlike caresses set her trembling as no arrogant and inescapable embrace could have."

Still, despite the tips and notes and helpful hints from the editors themselves, the insecure in the audience kept fretting. "This is what is in right now," complained one woman. "How do you know what to start writing for a year or two from now?"

"What will always sell" replied Grippo. "Sex."