

## ***GETTING A PLOT TOGETHER***

### ***- Part 1: Knowing your genre***

***by Sherry-Anne Jacobs***

Exactly how you put a plot together depends on your own approach to writing and no way is right or wrong – it's the quality of the resulting story that counts.

You may want to make a start by simply picturing the main characters and the general situation. This may be something as simple as wanting to write about the women working in munitions in World War I, which spurred me to write *OUR LIZZIE* (see end of article for details if you're interested). On the other hand, you may want to get the whole story shaped and detailed, with characters clearly visualised before you write it 'properly'. With 32 novels published (February 2005) I now work somewhere between those two extremes ie I have a rough plan, which I don't always follow if a better idea occurs to me.

### **WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW YOUR GENRE**

Whichever approach you use, you'll need to know your genre area for several reasons, and it's better to have this information *before* you write. The main reasons are:

1. You're writing a story for other people to read. Those people have their expectations, ie things they want to find in books which is why they buy this genre.
2. As a result of 1, publishers also have their expectations. Quite simply, if they don't please enough readers, they go out of business.
3. As a result of 1 & 2, it's easier for a beginning writer to get published if a story is of a clearly recognisable genre/type

4. The query letter from a writer (whether to a publisher or a literary agent) is more credible if it shows an understanding of where the novel being offered sits in the fiction landscape ie the genre. This demonstrates a professional knowledge and approach.

## HOW TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR GENRE

In order to learn about your genre, you need to read at least 50, preferably 100 books in that genre - and not old ones or classics, either, but books as recent and successful as you can find. Yes, really! It doesn't matter whether you're intending to write a modern relationships novel, a science fiction adventure, a historical novel, a romance, a horror tale, or a literary novel, you still need to understand the parameters.

## GENRE PARAMETERS

Parameters are not the same as rules! Don't regard them as limitations for writers, but as a practical starting point, something concrete that you can study and understand in a professional way. There will still be room for manoeuvring within the parameters ie putting your own personal imagination into play.

In workshops, I've had people exclaim in horror at this idea of genre parameters and one man even walked out on me when I insisted on discussing this idea. (He had already told me loftily that *he* was going to write a book which would *not* fit any category, a 'good' book.) Don't fool yourself that your novel is going to be so utterly different that it won't fit anywhere! I've been reading at least three novels a week for most of my life and I've never met anything that doesn't fit somewhere. There are novels that combine two or more recognisable genres, but these are still recognisable as genres and the books are defined as cross-genre novels.

## GOOD PLOTS STEM FROM A SOUND KNOWLEDGE BASE

You need to know what sort of story frameworks are both popular and expected in your chosen genre (eg whether happy endings are crucial, or (in my UK style sagas) that heroines have to be working class). And you're wise to know which types of plots have been used to death, so that you will be more likely to come up with something sparkling and new within that genre's limitations.

I know someone who has written several novels, none of which has been accepted. This person hasn't read any novels for years. The comments that came with the rejections were not about bad writing, but about the fact that these plots ideas had been done to death. My friend should have known that and not wasted time on reinventing the wheel.

## ONGOING GENRE RESEARCH

I still do my market research – as an avid reader it's a pleasure to me as well as a necessity. I read the best-selling books in my genres, I go regularly to bookshops and simply walk round, studying what's for sale and what's in high focus positions ie selling well. I read the blurb on the back covers of many more books than I can buy - though I buy quite a few as well. I also get into conversation with the sales assistants if I can, and ask them what's walking off the shelves, what are the most popular genres, what they've read recently and enjoyed. They can be mines of information.

## CONCLUSION

Armed with all this knowledge and understanding, you are more likely to produce an interesting and sellable plot.

*(In Part 2 I'll talk about putting the characters and plot together.)*

\* I read a series of extracts from working class people's autobiographies and one was by a woman who'd worked in a munitions factory in WWI. I thought how interesting it'd be to research it further (well, if I'm not interested, who else is going to be?) and how it might interest readers too. I felt that men's various roles in WWI had been well exploited in historical fiction, but maybe not the women's side of things. *OUR LIZZIE* was the result. It was my first book to get into the bestseller charts in the UK and Lizzie is still one of my favourite characters of all time. That book has led to a series of four about the Kershaw Sisters, the final book of which is yet to appear in print but has been written. You can read Chapter 1 of Lizzie's tale elsewhere on my web page. The book is still in print, like all my paperbacks.