

Romantic Fiction

'Romantic' is more a description than a definition in UK publishing, in which it differs from North America. Romantic fiction embraces everything from novels that concentrate wholly on the courtship stage of a love affair to complex relationships in the context of family, friends and history.

Some Recognisable Sub genres

Aga Saga - originated in the UK in the 90s, about the longings and moral dilemmas of love among the married middle classes; can be heartbreaking. Originator and most respected: Joanna Trollope

Category Romance - term of art meaning romances published on a magazine cycle (generally on and off the shelves in a month) often shorter than mainstream novels, almost entirely published by multinational giant Harlequin Mills & Boon. They concentrate entirely on the development of the hero and heroine's love affair and always have a happy ending.

Chick Lit - started in the UK in 1996 with *Bridget Jones's Diary*, about the romantic trials of the metropolitan single girl. Most popular: Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic* series

Historical - a story set in a past era from the 50s to classical times; may concentrate on major historical characters or events (e.g. Elizabeth Chadwick on William Marshall) or delight in the mores of the period eg Georgette Heyer's Regency-set romantic comedies, which created their own sub genre. The hot historical (known as a 'bodice-ripper' in its day) is now out of favour in the UK.

Medical Romance - a major genre in the 50s and 60s, particularly popular when serialized in magazines, this genre is now almost entirely the preserve of TV series and category romance. Big names: Lucilla Andrews, Claire

Rayner, Kate Hardy.

Paranormal - rising popularity in the States, throughout the 90s after the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, set in fantasy worlds or societies, the huge majority have vampire heroes (that Alpha Male again) with a dash of heroines with magical powers. Apart from Teen author Stephanie Meyer, this sub genre hasn't really broken in the UK in a big way yet.

Regional Saga - working class, 19th or 20th century, mainly urban, often industrial, with strong themes of the Hero Woman, endurance and family, as well as romantic love. Originators: Catherine Cookson Tyneside, Harry Bowling London.

Romantic Comedy - whether laugh-out-loud, a warmly smiling world, or an ironic journey through dating hell, these romantic tribulations have a happy ending. Most loved: Katie Fforde, Jill Mansell

Romantic Suspense - heroine on a quest may rescue or be rescued by the hero, elements of the thriller, including mystery and danger. Currently more popular in the US (Nora Roberts et al) than the UK, but the first great writer in the genre was Mary Stewart, republished by Hodder in 2007, 50 years after first publication. New Arrival: Louise Bagshawe.

Subgenres in Category Romance

Category romance –romances published on a magazine cycle (generally on and off the shelves in a month) often shorter than mainstream novels. They are almost entirely published by multinational giant Harlequin Mills & Boon (HMB). Harper Collins's Little Black Dress imprint, has some of the characteristics of the category romance but its books stay on the shelves longer! Focus entirely on hero and heroine. Always has a happy ending.

Known for its marketing savvy, HMB has developed specifically branded imprints, originally to guide the reader on sexual content/explicitness. They have evolved to embrace wider issues such as tone and even sexual politics.

Contemporary – a number of lines with story set in a generally unspecified present day. The giant of the HMB group is known as Modern in the UK, its defining characteristic the notorious Alpha Male hero and a seriously sexy story (though it's not the most explicit in the HMB stable) which may be quite dark. (Sara Craven, Penny Jordan, Kate Walker) HMB's Romance imprint covers a wider range of heroes and sexual tone, from placid to simmering (Liz Fielding, Fiona Harper, Jessica Hart). Little Black Dresses have been mainly contemporary so far, often with a chick-lit feel (Julie Cohen, Rachel Gibson, Kate Lace).

Historical – Apart from the Regency (see below), these are often set in turbulent times, Roman invasions, mediaeval, Civil War, with the focus still on hero and heroine's love story. They may well be on opposing sides.

Regency – Austenian comedy of manners or Brontëesque dark doings, set between 1790 and 1830 (okay, Regency stretched) and inspired by Georgette Heyer in the first place but a lot sexier. (Louise Allen, Joanna Maitland)

Medical – Set in hospitals, clinics, GPs' surgeries, the protagonists will be medical practitioners. Originally called doctor nurse stories, with the

expectation that the hero would be the high status doctor, these days it is just as likely that the troubled, exhausted brain surgeon will be the heroine.

(Margaret Barker, Kate Hardy)