

Byronic alpha males

Where did the Byronic hero, the wounded, brooding, unapproachable hyper-masculine “alpha male,” come from? Why has the character type remained so popular? [Sarah Frantz](#), scholar-editor, looks at this figure’s past, his enduring appeal, and why he keeps popping up in romance novel history.

A conversation with Sarah Frantz

How has the alpha male hero changed over time?

Sarah Frantz: So in 1807, Byron published *The Corsair* and it was *the* bestselling book of the year, 1807 to 1808. It sold 10,000 copies the first day it was released, which is like J.K. Rowling status, right? It sold unbelievable amounts. And he created the Byronic hero, right? He created this hero with the nameless crimes who broods over his criminal acts, he’s undeserving of love no matter what because of these terrible things that he’s done that he won’t talk to anybody about. And Byron doesn’t then give him a happy ending, that’s not why Byron was interested in; but then, of course, romance authors and domestic novel authors and marriage plot authors took that hero and have moved him through the centuries. So you can pin labels on. So Darcy’s not quite a Byronic hero, but then of course you have Heathcliff and you have Rochester [...]

[...] And you hit the 1970s with the blockbuster historical romances, and you’ve got that same hero again. And he shows up in paranormals; he’s the ultimate in paranormals, right? There he can be immortal and his nameless crimes can have

been committed over the last 2,000 years instead of just over the last 20 years. And Georgette Heyer used that trope as well.

So as somebody who's focused mainly on the way women write men, I don't have all these theories about heroines but I have them about heroes and I don't know that there has been much change. You think he's gone away for five years and you have these nice beta males who know what they want and they're perfectly happy being who they are; and then he pops up again, and suddenly he's a dragon! Then he's a vampire! And now he's a werewolf! And now he's the billionaire with the red room with the BDSM in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. He just keeps coming back.

So I think that that construction of masculinity as a female fantasy is obviously something that strikes a cord and strikes a nerve and has for 250 years. And I'm sure—that's where my scholarship ends, so I'm sure if we go further back it comes back again and again and again.

Why are women attracted to the alpha male hero?

I want to stress that women are attracted to the male character in books. They might knee him in the balls when they see him in real life and he tries to—you know, nobody, like, actually really wants Edward from *Twilight* coming after them. I think that he's attractive in the books. And I think that the fantasy in the books is one that Jayne Ann Krentz talked about in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, it's about bringing him to his knees and making him change for you, which is always the problem, right? You like the "bad boy" and you want to go after the bad boy and you're convinced you'll make him change, and then of course in real life he never does. But I think making that bad boy focus on you 100 percent and only focus on you and you are his obsession—and you're not so obsessed with him—but you are *his* obsession and he will give you anything that you want.

What that gives women is a power over the patriarchal system—writ large, with all of the things that—patriarchy with the big, capital P. It gives women the power over that system that they have had to struggle with and through and against and work with their entire lives. He is the embodiment and the representation and the ultimate version of this system that we all live in and I think that it gives us a

certain measure of power over that. Some romance readers are attracted to that and some romance readers are like, "I want nothing to do with the alpha male, I couldn't care less. I like the books that are more about the heroines." I like the books that are more about the heroes.

It's that powerful hero who has to admit at the end of his book, "I love you, and I will do anything for you and you are essential to my life. You are essential not only to my future happiness, but to me being a good person." That's what Austen did, right? She had Darcy say, "You are essential to me being the moral person that I am supposed to be, that is the moral person who will build the nation going forward. If it's not for you, I'm not going to be the person that our world needs to be able to move forward in a positive fashion." I think that the alpha male still provides women with that: You are essential to me being a good person. That's a powerful thing.

Do you prefer alpha or beta male heroes? What makes a hero alpha or beta in your opinion?

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