Rewarding Women

The writing process is very different for men and women, says Jennifer Crusie. She compared men's adventure novels with romance fiction and found a stark contrast between the two. Men's novels set up women as inferior, while in romance novels, women were rewarded for "going after what [they] want."

How do male and female writers differ?

Well, I would have told you I hadn't read romance novels because I was an intellectual, I didn't do that. However, I was a huge fan of Mary Stewart and Georgette Heyer, which weren't romance novels, they were mysteries. And later on, I thought back on that... But I wouldn't have read romance because they were all Harlequins to me. And they were all the bodice ripper covers, and I just wasn't interested in that. I did my master's thesis on mystery fiction, which I thought was fascinating, and it was on women in mystery fiction. And I was clearly easing myself over there saying this is how women have been marginalized in mystery fiction, this is how they are coming to the fore. It was fascinating. Then when I went to do my PhD dissertation, I wanted to look at the impact on gender on narrative strategies because I knew women told stories differently than men did, colloquially, sitting on the front porch.

Men will say, start here, did this, did this, ended here. Women will say, well it started here, that was the year the apple butter... and Janice, you remember Janice? She was Susan's sister who went to Paris. And Janice said... To men it seems like you're rambling, but women are setting up the pattern — here is the pattern of this life, here is the context — and then I'm going to give you this. It's not a linear story, it's a pattern story.

So what I wanted to know was, how women who are going to go into publishing, which demanded a linear story, were going to take that pattern structure and make it linear. What compromises you had to make, how you had to translate, did you tell it, which is what happens with me. I tell it in a pattern structure in the first draft, and then in the second draft I go back and tell it in a linear structure so it makes sense.

And I was just fascinated by that and I thought, now I need to draw on primary sources. So I was going to do 100 novels that were men's adventure fiction because they were written by men, edited by men. And then do 100 romance novels – written by women, read by women, edited by women. And I started with the romance novels and was just so caught up in the strength of the base of the genre which did privilege women's experiences.

It did privilege emotions. It did privilege relationships. But mostly it put the women at the center of the book. She struggled and she won. And this was coming out of my master's and PhD work with Emma Bovary, who has a wonderful affair and then takes arsenic and takes three days to die. Who does that? You take arsenic, you die! But she had to suffer for what she had done. Or Anna Karenina who falls in love with a rat and who gets thrown under the train? Anna does of course, and then the rat goes on and lives a normal life. Those toxic stories, no matter how great literature they are, they are toxic to women. If you are free and sexual and live life the way you want, you're going to die horribly or end up with a scarlet letter on your chest, some of it for the rest of your life because boy, did you screw up. The idea that romance reversed that toxicity and not only that, that it reversed the fairytales where you have Cinderella who sits and waits for the prince to show up with the really small foot — cause they've got such small feet. They were all so passive and punished for being aggressive. And then you get to the romance fiction and it's not there. You get rewarded for going after what you want. And you can have sex without dying horribly, which I thought was a plus.

And at that point I thought, that is where I want to go, this is what I want to study.

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