

Everybody knows they're hotter than hot, but why is that?

P Is for Paranormal —Still

BY LUCINDA DYER

There's no new way to say it, except possibly *en français*, the language of love. Paranormal is *le dernier cri* in the romance category—its hold on readers and publishers alike defies any logic or explanation. In its first year it was a phase, then it became a definite trend. Now, it's a sea change, with no evidence that the tide's waning.

So, sure, everybody agrees about the P-word, but what, exactly, is its appeal—why is this romance genre so, er, bloody popular?

As Deb Werksman, Sourcebooks senior acquisitions editor, puts it, "Humans have their limits—the sweet guy we go home to at night is maybe going a little bald and getting a little paunchy and certainly doesn't have fangs, feathers, or fur. We can escape into a hot paranormal romance story where heroes have remarkable sexual powers and then project them onto our own all too human sweethearts."

According to Sarah

Wendell, cofounder of smartbitchestras-hybooks.com, "Paranormal romance, in all its incarnations, often represents the ultimate in impossible love. *He* might desire to both kiss and exsanguinate the heroine. *She* may have a slight depilatory issue when the moon is full. One or both can see ghosts, fairies, selkies, or elves, or *be* ghosts, fairies, selkies, or elves. Whatever the challenge in a paranormal, it'll be overcome and with superhuman—literally—power. So it's no wonder that the genre hasn't run out of steam. Or fangs."

The success of paranormals, however, rests on more than humorous references and "undead" jokes, say many industry players. Says Wendell, "Paranormal stories also reflect many of humanity's continuing struggles. Vampires represent our struggle with mortality, and werewolves and shape-shifters our struggle with rage and insanity. These are enduring themes in fiction, and romance is no exception."

Bantam Dell senior editor Shauna Summers takes a broader view: "The demand and popularity of the paranormal is really pervasive through all of pop culture—movies, television, as

well as books, which is part of why it continues to be so hot within romance. I think part of the appeal is the freshness and creativity that paranormal writers bring to their storytelling, which is due at least in part to the fact that with this subgenre they're only limited by their imaginations. There is less of a need to make the books realistic; instead, it's all about character development and world-building. I think there's also an appeal post-9/11 of good triumphing in a dark and dangerous world."

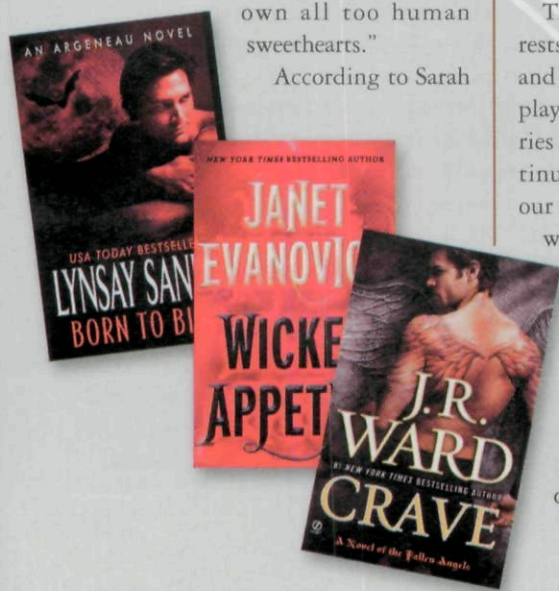
At Grand Central, Amy Pierpont, the editorial director of Forever, also credits the writers' imaginations. "Authors are creating such spectacular worlds for their otherworldly characters that readers become entranced not only with the heroes and heroines of paranormal romance but the secondary characters, the setting, the special powers and abilities, all of which create a new, fantastical world where everyday trials and triumphs play out in a way that is satisfying and familiar. To watch beloved characters triumph over adversity of a paranormal sort makes the everyday trials we readers face seem perhaps a little more manageable."

Long Live the P-Word

The category shows no signs of dying off—nor, of course, do its characters, though some already have. Kensington editorial director Alicia Condon admits to being surprised at how long paranormals have remained on top. "I've been in publishing for 30 years and have seen many trends come and go, but paranormals have lasted longer than many of us expected because they exploit such powerful fantasies."

Writers of paranormal romance, she says, are able to manipulate their fictional worlds "to heighten the experience of falling in love, and authors aren't limited to what's physically true even as they explore emotional truths that resonate with all of us."

"When first introduced to paranormal romances, I think readers are surprised



New Ventures

Entering the romance market might seem an unlikely choice for a publisher best known for the original Chicken Soup for the Soul series, but HCI has taken the plunge with its reality-based True Vows series, in which each novel is based on a real couple's true life romance. The series debuts in October, with first printings of 50,000 for each of the first three titles: *Hard to Hold* from bestselling author Julie Leto, *The Icing on the Cake* from Alison Kent, and *Meet Me in Manhattan* from Judith Arnold. A fourth novel will be out in January, with subsequent titles being released every other month. HCI, editorial director Michele Matrisciani remembers, was determined the publisher's romantic debut be made "without stepping on toes, pretending to be something we are not, competing with the genre's powerhouses, or reinventing the wheel. And we've been blown away by the support and enthusiasm exhibited by our novelists as well as the romance community as a whole."

The newest entrant into LGBT romance publishing is Enlightenment Press, cofounded by two women with their own unorthodox love story. Shamim Sarif is a British Muslim and her wife, Hanan Kattan, a Palestinian Christian from Jordan. "Starting Enlightenment Press was daunting," says Sarif, "but we decided to be fearless and jump in with both feet. The romance community has been very receptive, especially the LGBT crowd and independents. The world is opening up for LGBT publishing, and we're so excited to have the opportunity to influence the market with intelligent romance that is less escapist than aspirational." Enlightenment will publish its first two titles this September, both lesbian romances written by Sarif. *The World Unseen* is set in 1950s South Africa and *I Can't Think Straight*, based on Sarif and Kattan's own romance, moves between high society in Jordan and London's West End. —L.D.



reports. "We see readers as young as 15 and 16 who are coming out of YA, as well as traditional romance fans in their 30s, 40s, or 50s looking for a darker, edgier book and finding it in paranormal."

An assessment with which Sourcebook's Werksman agrees. "The crossover of young readers from fantasy/sci-fi certainly doesn't hurt, but I think the subgenre is so imaginative and rich that the old guard reader is also finding something to sink her teeth into."

Dorchester's Hultenschmidt has a somewhat different take. She believes adult paranormal romance authors are doing just as much to fuel a new generation of readers. "Writers suddenly saw a huge opening in the YA market and moved in to take advantage. Look at P.C. Cast or Rachel Vincent. I don't think YA readers are crossing over into the adult genre as much as adult writers are crossing over into YA projects."

Critters and Cupcakes and Books, Oh, My

One thing everyone does agree upon: readers of paranormal romance have an insatiable appetite for something new. Today's writers must compete in a world filled with an ever-changing cast of creatures—both human and inhuman. "Paranormal is morphing to include subgenres that were unheard of a year or two ago," says Tor Romance editor Heather Osborn. "Things like steampunk and zombies are keeping the genre fresh and exciting." Tor's upping the ante with *The Wish List* by Gabi Stevens (May), in which a young CPA discovers she's about to become a fairy godmother, and *Rebel* (Sept.), the third book in Claire Delacroix's Time of Transition series.

At Kensington, there are high hopes for a tough-talking yet vulnerable succubus. "It's hard to fall in love when your role in life is taking people's souls," says Condon of Richelle Mead's *Succubus Blues* (Aug.). And "funny, human and accessible" shape-shifting dragons take center stage in G.A. Aiken's *Last Dragon Standing* (Zebra, Sept.).

Once readers find that something new,

by the compelling, mythic worlds the characters live in," says Silhouette Nocturne senior executive editor Tara Gavin. "They're impressed by the well-developed characters, which are often archetypes of different age-old longings. The werewolf often is part of a pack, and the whole sense of community and family and loyalty are examined. In the vampire—sensuality, power, and protectiveness are symbolized."

The ability of writers to create "completely new worlds and new rules" is key for Dorchester editorial director Leah Hultenschmidt. "Paranormal also lends itself to series, so readers who glom onto a group of characters can't get enough. Everyone in our office keeps asking me who the next characters are going to be in Elisabeth Naughton's new Eternal Guardians series and offering advice on who would make the best couple. You'd think we were talking about a soap opera. And

it's that kind of rabid following that keeps paranormals so viable in the market."

Paranormals: Fueled by New Young Readers?

One question to be asked when exploring the continuing popularity of paranormal romance is the role played by the Harry Potter generation. Are paranormal sales being fueled by these new fans or are they built on a firm foundation of traditional romance readers? For an eyes-on-the-ground answer, we consulted former RWA's Bookseller of the Year Kathy Baker. The romance buyer at Legacy Books in Plano, Tex., Baker oversees one of the country's largest romance sections—including five six-foot bays crammed with paranormal titles. So who does Baker see standing in front of all those bays: *Twilight*-addicted teens or Regency readers in disguise? The widest range of buyers you can imagine, she

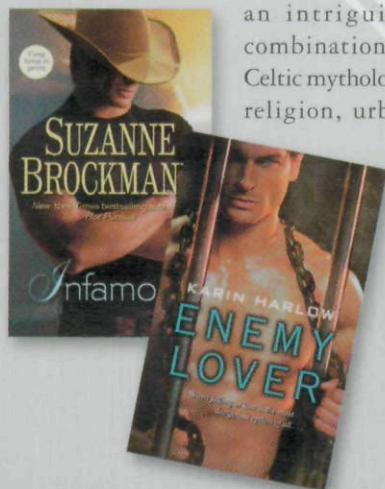
Paranormal Romance

be it a creature or a world, they want to read about it again and again—there may be nothing hotter in paranormal than the series. At Harlequin, reports Silhouette Nocturne's Gavin, Gena Showalter's next *Lords of the Underworld* title, *The Darkest Passion*, is due next month. And the new *Keepers* series—"three sisters who maintain order between the vampires, shape-shifters, and werewolves in modern-day New Orleans"—kicks off in October with Heather Graham's aptly titled *Keepers*. The first book in Janet Evanovich's Diesel series, *Wicked Appetite* (Sept.), is described by St. Martin's associate publisher Jennifer Enderlin as a tantalizing mix of "an underground group called the Unmentionables, extrasensory powers, a secret government... and magic cupcakes."

In October, J.R. Ward continues her bestselling *Fallen Angels* series with *Crave* (Signet). "The power of the fallen angel backstory is twofold," says NAL editor Kerry Donovan. "Their imperfections make them more relatable to us, and it also brings them into our world where they walk among us as intriguing heroes. Readers love a hero who needs to earn his way back to grace and needs the love of a good woman to find redemption."

Dorchester's testing the limits with Erin Kellison's forthcoming *Shadow* series. "When the *Shadow* books passed through the office, we all knew we held something special," says Hultenschmidt. *Shadow Bound* and *Shadow Fall* "break the mold of the traditional paranormal romance" with

an intriguing combination of Celtic mythology, religion, urban



fantasy, and "a hint of *Sleeping Beauty*." (Going for the balletomanes, perhaps.)

When it comes to vampires, once the life blood of paranormal, the love affair continues. At Pocket, quips executive editor Lauren McKenna, "our passion for vampires is undying." *Demon from the Dark* (Aug.), the 10th in Kresley Cole's *Immortals After Dark* series, will have the author's highest ship numbers to date, while this month's *Enemy Lover*, the first in Karin Harlow's series about a Black Ops team, offers "the perfect combination of vampires and alpha males." For Avon executive editor Erika Tsang, there's a simple reason Lynsay Sands's *Argeneau* series has kept readers enthralled through 12 books (the 13th, *Born to Bite*, is due in September): "there's something to be said about a vampire who pledges his everlasting and eternal love for you... you know he means it."

Beyond Beyond the Grave

And what about the other tried and true romance categories in this age of the paranormal—can a sales matchup between a Regency rake and a legion of the undead really be a fair fight? Very possibly, says Bantam Dell's Summers. "Regency romances provide the same appeal as paranormal romance but in an opposite kind of way. The Regency world is safe and romantic, where everyone knows what is expected of them, whether or not they actually live by those rules."

Two publishers are putting their money on that safe world and those stylish gentlemen from Georgian and Victorian England. "We've been hearing for the past year or so that historicals are making a comeback," reports Grand Central's Pierpont. Poised to take advantage of that trend are bestselling suspense writer Eileen Dreyer (see "Why I Write," p. 27), who makes her romance debut with July's *Barely a Lady*, and Elizabeth Hoyt's *Wicked Intentions* (Aug.), the first entry in her *Maiden Lane* series.

St. Martin's superstar Lisa Kleypas has back-to-back novels set in Victorian England with *Married by Morning* (June) and *Love in the Afternoon* (July). It's

Kleypas's "extraordinary world-building," says Enderlin, that will give her the edge in a contest with vampires and shape-shifters. And the Scottish Highlands have a powerful magic of their own, says Pocket's McKenna—powerful enough to bring bestselling author Teresa Medeiros "back to her historical roots" for *The Devil Wears Plaid* (Aug.).

While a sword-wielding Scot may frighten the life out of a fallen angel or werewolf, the odds do seem stacked against a nice guy romantic hero from smalltown America. In the midst of readers' ongoing love affair with critters undead, does a guy with a gentle touch and a Honda in his driveway stand a chance? "Smalltown contemporary romances like Sherryl Woods's *Sweet Tea at Sunrise* [three weeks on PW's mass market chart] are giving paranormals a real run for their money," reports Margaret O'Neill Marbury, Harlequin single title editorial director. The contemporaries, she adds, "have never gone away, and their recent popularity only means that more and more people are finding their way to the genre."

The same can be said for what Berkley executive editor Wendy McCurdy calls the "gentle fiction" exemplified by Jodi Thomas's *Harmony* series, which launches in July with *Welcome to Harmony*. Avon's Tsang agrees that contemporary romances like Toni Blake's *Sugar Creek* (June) are hitting the mark with readers. "In a world where not a whole lot is making sense, you want something warm and fuzzy to hold on to, and what's more warm and fuzzy than home? But in that same vein, it's another reason why paranormals are popular. There's that fantasy of being able to fix all that's wrong with the world through magic and supernatural paranormal that's extremely appealing right now."

For readers wanting a somewhat earthier contemporary, there's the *Honky Tonk* series from Sourcebooks, the first country music-themed romance series, which launches next month. It's all about "ranches, cowboys, and beer joints," says Werksman of Carolyn Brown's first title, *I Love This Bar*. Similar elements—a tall stranger

in a cowboy hat, a movie set in a dusty Arizona town—mark Ballantine's *Infamous*, the first mass market original in six years from bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann.

Life After the Succubi

So whither goest these oddly assorted denizens? "I see the genre evolving and changing with readers' tastes," says Tor's

Osborn. "As for topping unusual creatures like zombies and succubi, I really don't think the object of the game should be to continually outdo one another—it would be exhausting for both the readers and the author." Osborn's more interested in seeing writers put unique spins on established genres. "After all, isn't that what paranormal romance did for romance? Taking the expected 'boy

meets girl' and switching it up to 'vampire meets girl'? Now it's time to switch it up to 'psychic vampire meets psychotherapist.'" Sarah Wendell agrees that it need not be a race to create the next creature and that authors should be encouraged to explore "the amazing depth in the folklore and mythologies of different cultures that can serve as a backdrop for paranormal romance. There's no limit to what could come next—as long as it all ends happily. Furrily, maybe, but also happily." ■

Why I Write...

BY EILEEN DREYER



When I was on maternity leave with my second child, I got the bright idea to read all the classic literature I'd missed in school.

Don't get me wrong. I had an excellent education. But I went through high school during the '60s, which meant that instead of *Silas Marner*, I read *Ani-*

mal Farm. Instead of Dickens, Ralph Ellison. I managed to avoid most English Victorian authors, as well as all the French and Russians.

College was no better. For some reason, the administrators at nursing school didn't think I needed classic literature to give shots and read EKGs. So there I was at 30, with two children and a bachelor of science, and I'd never read Hardy or Dostoyevski or Maugham. I had six weeks before having to return to work. I would do it now. I would be enlightened and uplifted.

My first mistake was to start with Proust. I did choose *Swann in Love*, which is the length of your average sweet Harlequin. The problem was, Proust didn't consider a sentence worth its while unless it had at least eight commas, and I only had 15-minute windows in the bathroom to get any reading done before my three-year-old started pounding on the door.

So much for Proust. I never got farther than the first page. Then one night as I was feeding my baby, *Anna Karenina* came on TV. Great, I thought. Cliffs Notes. I can wet my feet with the movie and then dive into the book. By the end of the two hours, I crossed Russians off my list, too. Hardy and Maugham joined them within the week.

I mean, come on. These were all stories of people who were miserable, made everybody else miserable, and then died. Really? I was a trauma nurse. I was a mother of two children. I was matriarch of a large Irish family. Why did I need to read about Anna Karenina's emotional turmoils? I had enough of my own. Why would I want to spend all that time with these people? They acted just like my family members, who were always calling with problems. And as for Mr. Hardy, don't even get me started on his view of women. By the time I got through that first book, I wanted to dig him up and kick him.

I've since decided that classics are made to be read in college, when you're not in the real world yet, and all that angst is still romantic. Believe me. By the time you're juggling children, work, bills, and spouses, it no longer seems poetic to suffer. What you're looking for is relief.

Which was how I came to write romance. It's not so much that it's an escape from my real life, although it is. There were days when writing romance was the only way I could make good things happen to good people.

It isn't that I envy my characters or unfavorably compare my husband to my heroes (he was kind of amazed that they tended to resemble him). It is that in these books, no matter what my characters go through, things always work out in the end. There is always hope that things will get better.

And when you spend your days battling drunks and holding dying children, you really need that. Heck, you need it if you spend your day battling utility companies and holding crying children. We all need something that will lift us from the drudgery, to make us feel better about ourselves and our lives. Romance does that. And that is why I write it.

New York Times bestselling author Eileen Dreyer published her first romance in 1986. Since then she's gone on to publish 35 more romance novels; this summer sees her first historical romance, *Barely a Lady*, coming from Grand Central Publishing.

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