

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS “PARANORMAL ROMANCE”?

Paula Guran

“Paranormal romance” may not be what you think it is.

In standard romance publishing terminology, “paranormal romance” is a subgenre of romance. Romance, to *be* romance, must have a plot concerning a love relationship between two people (usually one male and one female) and have a positive satisfying ending in which the reader is assured the couple will remain together—if not “happily ever after” at least relatively happy for an extended period of time. (Romance fans shorthand this necessary “happily ever after” ending as “HEA”.)

To be “paranormal” a romance needs involve the supernatural—magic, the occult, ghosts, shapechangers like werewolves, psychic powers, superhuman abilities, travel through time, fantastic or legendary creatures (vampires, fairies, gods and goddesses, angels, demons, and the like), a fantasy world or alternative-Earth or -reality setting, relationships that continue to exist over eras and eons, etc.—or have a futuristic or science-fictional element.

Pamela Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*,¹ defines a romance novel as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” and there is no doubt that “romance novels end happily.” (Regis also supplies a more complete definition that includes eight essential elements and three accidental elements characteristic of the genre.)

Gone with the Wind, then, is not romance and neither is Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and E.M. Forester’s *A Room With A View* are romance.

True literary genres have limits. These are the limits of the romance

genre. Despite my natural tendency to doubt definition and desire to expand boundaries, I have to agree with Regis: If it doesn't fit that definition then it isn't romance—at least to the people who have expectations of the genre. To keep things clear, let's style this genre from here on out as a proper noun and capitalize it: *Romance*.

As Regis writes, Romance “contains serious ideas. The genre is not about woman's bondage, as the literary critics would have it. The romance novel is, to the contrary, about women's freedom. The genre is popular because it conveys the pain, uplift, and joy that freedom brings.” Romance is also the most underappreciated, disrespected, and misunderstood of all genres. It is also the most popular.²

But when it comes to the type of fiction referred to as paranormal romance, I contend that although *some* twenty-first century paranormal romance is still definitional Romance, another type of “paranormal romance” has emerged that is *not* Romance. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge this duality or at least explore the idea.

If there is no other reason for my musings, then my thoughts can at least apply to this anthology. Since *Best New Paranormal Romance* is, as far as I know, the first book to attempt to highlight some of the best short paranormal romance of the year, I suppose this alone makes it somewhat definitional. Of course, anyone having the audacity to point out examples of “the best” of anything is classifying. So, by compiling these stories in one volume, I am, by default, doing some defining.

But, don't worry; I'm not going to get very deep or profound here.

I've yet to discover when the term “paranormal romance” was first used or what book(s) it was applied to. I think, though, the first “big hit” for paranormal romance may have been Diana Gabaldon's time-travel title *Outlander*. It certainly wasn't the first paranormal romance novel ever published, but it seems to be the first to get a great deal of attention. It also had massive sales. The Romance Writers of America named it the Best Romance of 1991 and that same year the RWA introduced the “Futuristic/Fantasy /Paranormal” category for the organization's annual RITA Awards.³

Despite the award and the many Romance subgenre novels it in-

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spired, no one can contend *Outlander* is Romance. Gabaldon's book does *not* conform to the conventions of any single genre. (The author herself feels the "best description is . . . 'the smartest historical sci-fi adventure-romance story ever written by a science Ph.D. with a background in scripting 'Scrooge McDuck' comics.'")⁴ *Outlander* "was originally marketed as a historical romance because, although the book didn't fit neatly into *any* genre (and at the same time was certainly not 'literary fiction'), of all the markets that it might conceivably appeal to, romance was by far the biggest."⁵ You often find *Outlander* (and the five novels that followed) shelved as "fiction" in many bookstores now.

It seems that books popularly referred to as paranormal romance (at least by some folks) have a history of not always being Romance.⁶

Looking (rather arbitrarily but coincidentally) at the Nielsen Bookscan Overall Adult Fiction Bestseller List (which includes hardcover, mass market, and trade paperback books) halfway through 2006 (the week ending 2 July 2006),⁷ I found Laurell K. Hamilton's hardcover *Danse Macabre*, in its first week of release, listed as #2. Kim Harrison's *A Fistful of Charms*, just released as an original paperback, was #11. Also placing in the top 100 after one week of sales were Christine Feehan's *Dangerous Tides** (mmp original, #13), the mass market paperback reprint of the futuristic *Memory in Death* by [Nora Roberts writing as] J.D. Robb (#24), *The Vision* by Heather Graham (mmp reprint, #62); *Edge of Danger** (original mmp, #76) by Cherry Adair*, and *A Bite to Remember** by Lynsay Sands (mmp original, #92).

Switching to the "hardcover only" list for the week, we also find Sherrilyn Kenyon's first hardcover (after many mass market novels) *Dark of the Moon** at #34 after five weeks. The paperback-only list shows *Kitty Goes to Washington* by Carrie Vaughn as #47 after one week.

Readers, reviewers, and booksellers call *all* of these books *paranormal romance*.

Wondering what the asterisk (*) means? The books so marked are considered by Bookscan to be "Romance." J.D. Robb's *Memory in Death* is termed Mystery/Detective. *The Vision* by Heather Graham is listed as Horror/Occult/Psychological. The rest are listed as Fantasy.

How Bookscan determines category (I don't know), is not the

point. The point I am trying to make is that many of the most popular paranormal romance novels (as well as others less popular) are not Romances, yet they are often marketed as “paranormal-romance-the-subgenre-of-Romance.” Further, although some paranormal romance readers prefer Romance, not all of them do. Some do not read Romance at all. Nor does the public as a whole nor the media think of pr specifically as Romance. Admittedly, neither the public nor media gives it much thought, but they do use the term paranormal romance.

Here’s just one example. A recent *USA Today* article (tied to the release of Laurell K. Hamilton’s *Danse Macabre*) addresses the popularity of vampire romance.⁸ The article quotes Nicole Kennedy of Romance Writers of America: “It’s a different twist on the bad-boy hero.” The article then cites *Danse Macabre* as “the latest entry in a fast-growing trend that spans many genres.”

Continuing to quote:

At Borders stores, sales of novels with paranormal themes, which include vampires, are up as much as 30% over the past two years, particularly romance, says spokeswoman Sue Grimshaw. “Readers have embraced the genre.”

Nearly 20% of all romance novels sold in 2005 had paranormal story lines, compared with 14% in 2004, according to Romance Writers of America figures. “Vampires are one of the most popular trends in paranormal romance,” Kennedy says.

Also mentioned are Charlaine Harris’s six-book *Southern Vampire* series and Sherrilyn Kenyon’s *Dark Side of the Moon*. Christine Feehan is called the “queen of the paranormal romance.” MaryJanice Davidson is called “one of a growing number of authors writing in the vampire chick-lit genre.”

Paranormal romance, to this reporter “spans many genres” and “novels with paranormal themes” need not be Romance.

I haven’t read every single one of the books or authors I am about to mention, so I can’t be absolutely certain I’m sorting them properly. But

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I'll take a shot at separating Romance from paranormal romance to serve as an example. The following would probably be paranormal but not Romance: Kelley Armstrong's *Women of the Underworld* series, L.A. Banks's *Vampire Huntress* series, MaryJanice Davidson's *Undead* books, both of Laurell K. Hamilton's series, Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire* series, Kim Harrison's *Hollow* series, Katie MacAlister's titles like *A Girl's Guide to Vampires*, *Sex and the Single Vampire*, etc., and Carrie Vaughn's "Kitty" novels.

Examples of Romance writers who write paranormal (although not exclusively) are Amanda Ashley, Jayne Ann Krentz/Jayne Castle, Nora Roberts/J.D. Robb, Lynsay Sands, and Mary Jo Putney (but the books she writes as M.J. Putney are not). Christine Feehan, Sherrilyn Kenyon, and Maggie Shayne are probably a rather dark shade of Romance.

Kim Wilkins wrote novel *Giants of the Frost* knowing it crossed genres, but assuming (for several very good reasons) it would be identified as fantasy fiction. It was subsequently defined by publishers in Australia and the UK, reviewers, booksellers, and award panels as, among other labels, Romance, fantasy, and horror. The US publisher, Warner, published the novel as "fantasy" but positioned it, according to Wilkins, "as predominantly romance fiction" asking the author to change the ending as they were "concerned that readers would be so disappointed by my unhappy ending, that they would not recommend it to friends, nor buy anything else of mine subsequently." She complied and changed the ending.

Meanwhile, in Australia, the novel had been nominated as fantasy, as horror, and even as science fiction for various awards. But when Romance readers shortlisted it for a Romance award, Wilkins's publishers "withdrew the book from the shortlist," according to the author, "citing the marketing problems the romance-fiction shortlisting would create for my subsequent publications."⁹

Wilkins is an academic as well as a popular novelist. Using her experiences with *Giants of the Frost* and drawing on several literary theories of genre, she wrote a fascinating article: *The Process of Genre: Authors, Readers, Institutions*. (My two paragraphs here do not do

even the smallest amount of justice to it and I am greatly over-simplifying.) She concluded “[G]enres are not given categories but interactions between text and reader . . . [but] these interactions are always changing . . . genre itself is formed over time . . . *Giants of the Frost* is [something] around which genres like romance fiction and fantasy fiction are defined and redefined, in a continuing process, at specific cultural moments.”¹⁰

It is my theory (at least for now) that at this cultural moment a new genre is being defined. Although some paranormals might be considered a subgenre of Romance, some cannot. There are paranormals that would be best classified as belonging to a subgenre of fantasy or mystery or action/adventure or erotica or suspense or horror or historical fiction . . . By combining the aspects of so many “types” of literature, paranormal romance is becoming a type unto itself.

I did not come to paranormal romance from Romance. I suspect that many other paranormal readers come from the same literary turf I do—science fiction, fantasy, and horror. It’s not that sf/f/h is devoid of love stories or strong female characters, especially these days, but there’s also a long history and tradition of science fiction, horror, and yes, even fantasy, having, well, let’s just say “issues” concerning romance, sex, and women. Readers of paranormal romance—male as well as female—may find something in pr that they often find lacking in sf/f/h.

I have always been a voracious reader, but never inclined toward Romance. Oh, I tried a few, but other than Barbara Michaels/Elizabeth Peters, Mary Stewart, and the romantic (but not Romance) novels of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and *Frenchman’s Creek*, I don’t recall reading much I liked. (It’s probably significant that Stewart can be considered the mother of modern suspense romance and that Barbara Mertz—writing as Michaels or Peters—frequently wrote in both non-supernatural and supernatural suspense romance. The latter is what we’d now call paranormal.)

In the mid-1990s I started working with horror and dark erotica. I came across one of the earlier Laurell K. Hamilton books not long thereafter and wasn’t terribly impressed. Those first paperbacks weren’t

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packaged very attractively, but I sampled one. Hamilton's writing just didn't grab me and get me reading. With so many other good books to read I wasn't inclined to read "vampire romance" anyway.

At the World Fantasy Convention in the fall of 1998, I was on an erotica panel with, among others, Cecilia Tan of Circling Press. She enthusiastically mentioned that LKH wrote great sex scenes. The next time a Hamilton title came my way, I paid more attention. Cecilia was right.

Hamilton leapt from paperback novelist to hardcover author in January 2000 with *Obsidian Butterfly*, the ninth in her Anita Blake series. The novel made the extended *New York Times Bestseller List*. Later that year, Ballantine published *A Kiss of Shadows*, the first Meredith Gentry book. It hit #14 on the *New York Times Best-Seller List*. (It's rare for the first in any series to sell so strongly.)

On Labor Day Weekend 2001, at Dragon*Con, I was on a midnight panel with Laurell Hamilton that turned out to be just the two of us in front of a room overflowing with her fans. (By then I'd caught up with what she was writing.) These readers knew *all* her books and were intensely interested, truly involved with her characters. Fans may flock to any television or movie actor at Dragon*Con (a huge annual multi-media genre convention in Atlanta), but authors, even best-selling ones, seldom elicit this sort of devotion.

Hamilton's tenth Anita Blake book, *Narcissus in Chains*, was published in October 2001. It stayed on the *New York Times Bestseller List* for six weeks, reaching a high position of #5. Her best-selling status was no fluke. Editors began looking for "Hamiltonesque" writers.

Meanwhile, as a reviewer, I was being assigned a lot of "vampire romance." Many *sf/f/h* reviewers just didn't "get" why this stuff was so popular. Being genre reviewers they understood the appeal of space opera and monsters, but did not see the allure of paranormal romance. I thought I understood what enthusiasts saw. And, geez, there sure seemed to be a lot of these books being published—some good, some pretty bad—but a lot of somebodies were buying them.

I interviewed Hamilton in early 2003 and she mentioned that Robert E. Howard had inspired her writing. Her comment gave me the final

clue I needed to theorize about at least one type of current paranormal romance. Adventure—books like Hamilton’s were fantasy adventure stories for women. Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Barbarian and Laurel K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake, I realized, have quite a bit in butt-kicking common.

This type of paranormal romance novel adheres to the standard romance genre pattern in some ways, but also breaks away. It doesn’t end with HEA and is often darker and/or grittier than Romance. Nor is it always focused primarily on “love”. Like dark erotica, it explores sexual “secrets” and desires rather than just the “gender secrets” of Romance. The women protagonists are strong but often still finding themselves, or somewhat weaker and discovering empowerment.

Women see romance as part of life’s adventure. The guys adventured with blood-drenched brawny swordsmen with sinewy muscles and big . . . weapons. Wipe out a horde of bad guys, grab a princess who adores you or a convenient wench, make whoopee, and depart to slaughter more monsters (or equivalents). James Bond was cosmopolitan, cool, deadly, and didn’t spend much time discussing philosophy with his girls. A *female* Bond might love ’em and leave ’em (although women’s adventure tends to seek soul mates rather than sequential lovers, but sequence sometimes leads to soul mate) but she’s going to *talk* to her lovers. She’s probably going to chat to her girlfriend (Ms. Monypenny?) about her life and loves, too.

And, yes, adventure can even be found in one’s own neighborhood.

Not all paranormal romance is adventure, of course. Sometimes the stories are about the journey taken that we call “love.” Characters learn and grow on this journey and it can end in any number of ways. When it does end happily, “happy” may or may not mean life with someone else in a continuing monogamous relationship. Sometimes happiness comes after the sadness in recognizing a couple must part. “Ever after” is often impossible and sometimes “forever” can be a fearsome thing.

When I set out to select stories for this anthology and the novels for the entire Juno line, I did not confine myself to Romance. If forced to supply a label for all the stories selected for *Best New Paranormal Romance*,

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“fantasy” probably fits best—but that doesn’t provide enough specific information. How about “supernatural women’s fiction”?¹¹ That’s not only awkward, it’s inaccurate. These stories certainly weren’t intended *only* for women. Most of them came from publications read by both men and women. “Paranormal fantasy”? What fantasy isn’t paranormal? “Sf/f/h with an element of romance or vice versa” isn’t too catchy and “sf, fantasy, and supernatural romance” is unwieldy, too. “Speculative Romance”? “Romantic fantasy”? “Fantasy romance”? (I tried that last one and got shot down.)

When looking at the projected cover for this anthology, a buyer for a major chain covered the word “Romance” with his hand and said he wished we could just drop it from the title. That would leave us with, of course, *Best New Paranormal*—and yes, you often hear pr called just *paranormal* or the novels termed *paranormals*—but in a bookstore, that might land us somewhere in nonfiction with “Mind, Body, Spirit” books near the Tarot cards.

Oh well. Paranormal romance it is. (For now anyway.)

There’s one more aspect involved in considering a paranormal romance anthology—or paranormal Romance, for that matter—of the short form I’d like to mention. Twenty-first century Romance is overwhelmingly published in novel or short novel form. And, although sf/f/h writers complain at a lack of markets, Rich Horton, who reviews short fiction for *Locus* magazine and edits *Science Fiction: The Best of the Year* and *Fantasy: Best of the Year* “guesstimates” there are still at least 2500 sf/f stories “published in some at least vaguely semi-pro form each year,”¹² and I imagine he isn’t counting all the horror. The tradition of “year’s best”-type anthologies featuring short stories is well-established in science fiction, fantasy, horror, erotica, even “literary” fiction and poetry, but there is no equivalent for literate Romance. Some independent presses are producing anthologies, both print and electronic, but few offer professional-level writing. (One that was on the professional level in 2005 was *The Journey Home*, edited by Mary Kirk for ImaJinn Books.)

Quite a few anthologies are published by the major Romance im-

prints but they, in general, feature three or four novellas/novelettes in the 20,000-40,000 word range. *Best New Paranormal Romance* wouldn't be much of a showcase of "best stories" if it were confined to only three or four stories.

Such Romance anthologies are meant primarily to promote the publisher's books and authors. Nothing wrong with that. But, unlike other genres in which short (and shorter) fiction is more commonly published, these Romance novellas are not usually available to be re-printed elsewhere.

The situation in the *sf/f/h* field is just the opposite. Writers' contracts frequently stipulate that, despite other re-publication restrictions, a story may be re-published in a "best of" anthology. Some authors even command a financial "bonus" if their story is selected for such a compilation.

Different worlds.

Whatever you want to call them, here are a dozen excellent stories of love and wonder. They come from fantasy publications, literary publications, and fantasy, literary, and romance anthologies. (I read elsewhere, especially in erotica, but the final choices did not happen to come from elsewhere.) One unintentional subtext that arose by chance is that three of the stories, albeit greatly varied, deal with soldiers who have returned home from war. Considering the times in which we live, perhaps this should not be surprising.

Whether you read paranormal-romance-as-the-subgenre-of-Romance, paranormal romance, "regular" *sf/f*, or have never heard of any of it—I think that you will enjoy them.

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*Please share your views on paranormal romance and Juno Books at
www.juno-books.com or by e-mailing editor@juno-books.com*

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Notes

1. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) This is evidently the only work available that actually looks at the history of the genre as a whole and does not draw broad (negative) conclusions from a very narrow range of investigation. Regis may be the only person to present a valid discussion of contemporary romance novels at all. If you are interested in Romance, I highly recommend it.

2. Also from Regis.

3. Information is from the RWA Web site: www.rwanational.org. The RWA appears to have fought some definitional wars as well and, for 2004, introduced a “Novel with Strong Romantic Elements” category. Is this romance that is not Romance?

4. Quoted from Diana Gabaldon’s website: www.its.caltech.edu/~gatti/gabaldon/. She is referring to an essay found at: www.salon.com/books/feature/1999/08/12/outlander/index.html.

5. Quoted from Diana Gabaldon’s *The Outlandish Companion* (Delacorte, 1999).

6. Gabaldon, by the way wrote Chapter 19 of *Writing Romances: A Handbook by the Romance Writers of America*: “Paranormal Romance: Time Travel, Vampires, and Everything Beyond” (Writers Digest, 1997, edited by Rita Gallagher and Rita Clay Estrada).

7. Nielsen Bookscan says it aggregates point-of-sale data from about 70% of US bookstores, including Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Borders, and many smaller chains and leading independent bookstores. It is generally accepted in the publishing industry that Bookscan undercounts mass-market books. Hearsay estimates of the number of mmp books that are counted vary from 33% to 50%.

8. “Romance fans: Vampires are just our type,” *USA Today* article by Carol Memmott, 28 June 2006.

9. “The Process of Genre: Authors, Readers, Institutions,” TEXT: Vol 9, No 2, October 2005, Kim Wilkins. [<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/oct05/wilkins.htm>]

10. Also from Wilkins. Do read the article!

11. “Women’s fiction does not have to have the happy ending that is synonymous with romance novels. Neither does it have to end with the heroine and hero developing a relationship. Women’s fiction is simply that, fiction that appeals to women and is aimed at entertaining. Romance fiction ends in a way that makes the reader feel good and reinforces the idea of innate emotional justice—good things happen to good people the couple that struggles for each other and their relationship is rewarded. The conflict in the book centres on the love story. The climax of the book resolves the love story.”—Definition from “The Social Significance of the Romance Novel” by “Cynthia” (www.aromancereview.com/columns/theromancenovelparttwo.phtml)

12. Quoting Rich Horton from the *Black Gate* website: http://www.blackgate.com/articles/years_best.htm