

Writing the Long Contemporary--It Isn't Just a Longer Word Count by *Roxanne Rustand*

11/07 note: This was prepared for a workshop presented at the Romance Writer's of America National Conference, 2002. Though some lines have evolved--for instance, Intimate Moments is now called Silhouette Romantic Suspense, and some may have shifted focus--there are wonderful nuggets of writing wisdom here from some fabulous, award winning authors! For that reason, I am continuing to post this article. But by all means, do check the current guidelines and read stacks of current releases in any line that you wish to write for!

Because of the wide range of stories within each long contemporary line, aspiring authors sometimes find it hard to pinpoint the differences between those lines. This makes it difficult for them to develop a salable story that will meet editor--and reader--expectations. Long contemporary authors were asked to tell how their line differed from the others, and to offer advice to writers hoping to make a first sale.

HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE:

Rita award winning author **GAYLE WILSON** has written thirty books and novellas for Harlequin Intrigue and Historicals. She says..."Intrigue is unique in that it is the only HS line that is totally built around romantic suspense... each Intrigue must revolve around the hero and heroine falling in love in the midst of danger. Also, they must both take an active role in solving the mystery or foiling the villain's plans. In the process, they put themselves at personal risk. The suspense escalates as their danger increases, and of course, so does the sexual tension as they join forces to stay alive. Intrigue has the strongest women characters across the board because of the requirement that the heroine take an active role in the suspense plot.

Intrigue editors are looking for a well-plotted suspense thread that makes the reader turn the pages, a breathtaking love story, which develops as the hero and heroine work together to survive the threat, and an emotionally shattering ending, in which everyone receives his or her just reward. In other words, the bad guys get theirs, and so do the hero and heroine! J Read the line, especially the newer authors. See exactly what they are buying. Understand the unique requirements--like the heroine's more active role. Make sure that both the romance and the suspense aspects of your story are integral and intertwined. You can't fudge on this one!"

LISA CHILDS is also a newer Intrigue author, with two sales to the line. "In an Intrigue, the mystery and romance have to be closely tied together. The h/h both have to have a stake in the mystery as well as the romance. In the synopsis, I list all the turning points for the romance as well as the mystery."

JOANNA WAYNE has sold twenty-three books, and currently writes for Harlequin Intrigue and Special Projects. Her advice to aspiring authors: "Since I primarily write for Intrigue or Special Projects, I know going in how to target my proposals. When writing for Intrigue, I try to find a very suspenseful story that I think will meet the guidelines...a story that I find both romantic and suspenseful and try to make the heroine a person I'd like for a best friend, the hero someone I can fall in love with, and the villain someone I can enjoy giving his just desserts.

The first thing all editors are looking for is a well-written story that holds their attention from the beginning to the end. That means no sagging middles or scenes that go nowhere. Something new and different is a real plus. I think Intrigue is constantly moving into new territory. I was thrilled to be part of the Moriah's Landing, the Modern Gothic series. I found the stories different than anything I had done for them before."

PATRICIA ROSEMOOR has written thirty-six books for Harlequin Intrigue and three for Blaze. Her advice to aspiring authors: "Think love and danger...strong suspense elements with a love story

that works into it. Both h/h have a stake in the suspense -- the internal conflict (romance) reflects the external conflict (suspense). I don't know about trends. I write what I write and they buy it, I think because I always strive to create compelling characters and conflicts and let the stories come from the result."

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN

MINDY NEFF has sold twenty-one books, and has two Harlequin Americans coming out this year. "In the Harlequin American line, stories are usually about family and community spirit themes. Stories that could happen in your own back yard--in America. I think the Harlequin American Romances blur the lines mostly with Silhouette Special Editions, which are also family oriented. Harlequin American's are often a lighter touch than SE's, and don't often contain suspense elements. They're more character driven than plot driven."

How does she prepare her selling proposals? "When I write a proposal, I list the traditional best-selling hooks up front--i.e. Secret baby, Marriage of Convenience, Brides, Babies, Cowboys, pregnant heroine, Single Dad, etc. And I mean list every single one of them that's in that particular story! Then I focus mainly on the conflict and romance and how it plays out in the story. In the synopsis, I concentrate a great deal on the emotional characterization, and less on the plot."

What does she feel the editors of Harlequin American are looking for? "Multiple best-selling hooks. Used to be they'd ask what the hook of the story was. Now they want to know how many hooks. The marketing department wants those best-selling elements right up front. ...a light, fast read with plenty of emotional depth to the characters--but nothing heavy, mind you. Drugs and dark issues make them nervous. I've put darker issues in my books, but I downplay them in the synopsis and don't make them the focal point of the book. More like a character layer, something that happened to the character in the past that shaped them into who they are today and put them into conflict with the hero/heroine. For me, plot comes from my characters."

What advice would she offer to someone hoping to sell to Harlequin American? "Come up with a story revolving around several best-selling hooks (marriage of convenience, brides, babies, amnesia, etc.) Drench your story and characters in emotional detail, yet keep the story upbeat and fun. Use all five senses in your writing. Make sure your conflicts are personal, the stakes are high, and motivation is believable.

The characters in a romance are obviously going to fall in love, but it's the conflict that will keep them apart until the end. That's where the stakes come in. What terrible, or emotional thing will happen if the heroine allows herself to have her heart's desire--the hero. Will she lose the farm? Break a promise? Ruin someone's life? Cause harm to her child? Lose her child? These are obstacles that can't be solved by a simple conversation. That's what will create the tension and keep the readers rooting for them to find a solution.

I usually ask myself two questions to test the strength of my conflict and what's at stake--(1) Why is he/she the last person heroine/hero should fall in love with. (That gives me my conflict) and (2) What dire thing will happen if hero/heroine allows themselves to have their heart's desire--hero/heroine. (That tells me what is at stake.) When I get stuck in the middle of the book or in a scene, I stop and review those two questions, and it will usually put me back on track so that the tension remains strong and the conflict doesn't waiver. Most of all, though, is to persevere, read copiously, and keep writing. I wrote for ten years before I became a published author. And I wrote six completed manuscripts."

SPECIAL EDITION

THERESA HILL aka SALLY TYLER HAYES has sold eighteen books, and is currently writing for NAL and Silhouette Special Edition. Theresa says, "The best description I ever heard about the differences between Intimate Moments and Special Editions is that "A Special Edition story is something that could happen to the woman who lives next door to you (it's a very ordinary woman kind of story.) An IM would never happen to the woman next door. When IMs says larger than life, I think that's what they mean. It's something that happens outside our ordinary world. That's not to say there are no IMs that are ordinary-world kind of stories. Just not the majority of them." What advice would she offer to someone hoping to sell to Special Edition? "Read, read, read. Read all the lines until you find one that you love. If you don't love the stories, don't try to write them, because it will show. Special Editions are long books---75,000 80,000 words." What makes them different from a single title other than word count? "There probably are some people who could write a single-title with the amount of plot some people put into a Special Edition. It's all about where you put the emphasis -- how much you can do with characters and a relatively simple plot. Plot gives you something to do. If you don't have much plot, in a longer book, you run the risk of falling into little situational complications or contrivances, one after another, that can get silly or boring, especially since you don't have that driving element of a plot. The first single title I sold was a proposal Silhouette rejected, and it was definitely plot-heavy. But when I went to write it as a single-title, I knew it needed more layers, more characters, just about more everything. The difference between long contemps and single title isn't so much the differences between plots so much as in the tone and the writer's focus. Category is much more tightly focused on the hero and heroine. It demands a more disciplined approach, in that you can't take the kind of side-trips you have room for in single title. It's not that one's better than the other or harder to write, just that they're different. You could probably give ten people the same basic plot and half of them could make it work as a category and half as a single title."

JANE TOOMBS has sold over seventy books...Special Editions, Desires, Shadows and one Harlequin gothic. How does she describe Special Editions? "SE focuses on family and relationships almost exclusively. By this, I don't mean there's no plot, but the actual plot is secondary to the relationship motif. While sensual scenes are essential, the sex scenes don't take center stage. This line concentrates on family as well as romance, so don't throw out the baby and the children because 'There've been so many of those books.' Which doesn't mean you can't write a good SE without a baby or a child in sight. There actually are no new plots, just different takes on them. Be different, but don't dismiss everything else."

Jane's hints for making a sale to Special Edition: "I still struggle to remember to concentrate on the relationship progress in my proposals, instead of external plot. Internal motives for conflict are especially important to establish. What in the heroine's background makes her so wary of men? Why has the hero vowed never to marry? Think relationship, relationship, relationship. A few warm and fuzzy thoughts don't hurt either. Other lines feature more sex, more sensuality, more suspense. If that's what you write, don't focus on SE. Which, of course, doesn't mean there can't be sex or a certain amount of suspense. In your proposals, keep the plot from overwhelming how you describe the way the relationship is progressing."

KATE WELSH has written thirteen books for Special Edition and Love Inspired. How does she describe the two lines? "Love Inspired are inspirational aimed at the Christian audience, but over and above that, the latitude given us is a little greater as far as the subject matter we tackle. My first book for instance centered around a child with leukemia. I had a hero who was a divorced, recovering-alcoholic minister who had not seen or had contact with his ex-wife and child in 8 years. And the one I

just finished for them has a heroine who was a rape victim. The introduction of faith into these books helps them work. I see Special Edition as a similar type of stories, but of character and personal growth driven more by life and circumstance than the faith driven motivations in the LI's. There can be suspense but not so much that character is overshadowed."

ANN ROTH has made her fourth sale to Special Edition. She says. "Special Editions are emotionally intense love stories, with multi-layered characters. They often take place in small, fictitious towns, and can contain elements of humor, as well as suspense. The most important factor in a Special Edition is the emotion."

How does this influence the writing of her proposals? "I always focus the synopsis on the emotional aspects of the story. Editors want to see how the characters grow and change, and they want to know that keeps the characters apart and what draws them together, what odds are against them, and how they surmount their difficulties. External plot is important, too, but is always secondary to the emotional plot."

SUPERROMANCE

Barbara Keiler writes as **JUDITH ARNOLD** for Superromance and most recently, MIRA. She has sold over seventy-five books. How would she describe Supers? "Supers strike me as the most "mainstream" of all the long contemporary lines. I can't think of any subject areas that are out of bounds. There are no requirements in Supers; we don't have to include a suspense plot, we don't have to include cowboys, we don't have to write comedy or tear-jerker. Oh--I take that back. There are two requirements: a strong, believable love story, and top-quality writing. Other than that, the line seems wide open to me."

Her advice to aspiring authors: "Editors are looking for a strong, believable love story and top-quality writing. Write the whole book to make sure you can do it and it will work. Write books for the line(s) you read. Don't target a project to a specific line because your critique partner told you that line earns the most money. You need to write the kinds of books you love to read."

KATHRYN SHAY has sold sixteen books to Superromance and two mainstream books to Berkley. Her advice to aspiring authors: "I'm not sure Superromance can be clearly delineated. I think the editors want different things from different authors. For example, romantic suspense from Kay David, humor from Judith Arnold. I know from me they expect emotional stories, often family oriented, usually well researched. Therefore Super is a great place for new authors to break in because they are looking for a lot of different things. Whereas Intimate Moments hits heavy on suspense and larger than life situations primarily, Super does that as well as other things. I think Super gets more and more edgy as time goes on. They see that readers like authors to tackle important issues (I've written about gangs, teen suicide, infidelity, and currently, a series on a home for troubled girls) or different professions (like my firefighters)."

My Supers and my single titles feel a lot different to me. First, my STs are about 200 pages longer than my Supers. Second, my characters (Hero and Heroine) are much more flawed. They make bigger mistakes within the course of the book, and they can behave badly. They do, however, redeem themselves, like in Supers. Third, the language is edgier. Last, I think the plots are edgier, too. Though I tackle some pretty heavy stuff in Supers, my Berkley books are even edgier. This August the book deals with school violence and the kids are rough. My writing style remains the same, though again, language can be grittier in Berkleys."

MURIEL JENSEN has written seventy-eight books for : Harlequin American, Superromance, and special projects. She says....."I've approached Harlequin American Romances in a similar way to Supers in that I try to provide a solid foundation for conflict - some deeply personal loss or other issue

that makes a profound difference in the hero and/or heroine's life. I'm a very laid-back individual, so small things never bother me. When I'm plotting, I try to remember that love is so strong that the story will require an element equally strong to prevent the hero and heroine from falling easily in love - the whole point of the romance novel. From then on, Harlequin Americans allow me to deal a little more lightly with the issues than a Super would because Supers are longer and therefore require the conflict to live a little deeper inside. Whatever line I'm writing for, I approach it the same way, then try to adjust to the line's particulars as I'm moving along."

Her advice to aspiring authors: "Study the line, write the best book you can filled with characters the reader will want to stay with. Remember that for the most part, criticism is your friend. Every once in a while, there's an editor who's thoughtlessly cruel, but usually they want the best for your book. So if changes are suggested, reread and see if you can implement them without compromising your dreams for the book. Be strong! Writing is the most fun and the most misery you will ever know. And be sure to maintain your life while you're doing it. Love your family, love your friends, love the world - they'll still be there when your book is pulled off the shelf and next month's books arrive."

DARLENE GRAHAM has sold nine books to Superromance. She says, "Superromance stories have what I call the "more." More complex plots, more emotions, more human drama, more family backstory, more ... well, more everything! Because of that, it is very hard to pigeonhole these stories. I do lean toward suspense, but in my stories the readers often sense who the villain is early on. They turn the pages because they worry about whether the H/H will ever figure it out. "

Darlene gives workshops on Power Revision, and in them she notes that "Super seems to want: An individual quality in story and voice, a high caliber of writing, a compelling plot, a strong romance, complex, believable characters, a realistic feeling, action vs. narrative, and a cut to the chase pace!"

Her suggestions to aspiring authors: "Devote yourself to your craft, so that later you don't have to think about it much. I have heard authors claim that learning too much craft destroys your creativity. On the contrary, applying the discipline of craft will ultimately free you to become more creative with your stories, because you will have the craft hurdle safely behind you."

LAURA ABBOT has written ten Superromances. She says... "I believe Superromance is open to a number of plot lines and tones, ranging from light humor to suspense to exploration of significant issues to heartwarming. However, at the heart (pardon the pun) of the book **MUST** be an engaging, believable romance. Strength and complexity of characterization are vital. In addition, subplot and secondary characters should be interesting and well-developed, but not to the extent that they overshadow the romance itself or detract from the reader's identification with the hero and heroine." Her advice to aspiring authors: "Write **YOUR** story. Superromance writers have distinctive voices. When you try too hard to write toward what you think editors are looking for or what the market seems to be or in the style/manner of an author you are emulating, you lose the distinctive edge you and you alone have--your voice. I would not have sold if I had not finished the book. Have a marketable manuscript before you attempt to sell. Present your work in a polished, professional manner and be open to editorial comments and suggestions."

LINDA BARRETT has written four titles for Superromance. She says: "In addition to working with terrific editors, (and I mean that), I feel that one of the biggest advantage to writing for Superromance is that **ANYTHING GOES** regarding plot content. Aspiring authors with a yen toward mystery or suspense can write for Supers. A yen toward emotional family stories can also find a home there. Heavy on the humor? It's okay! The feeling at Super is one of "inclusion" rather than "exclusion" and I think an aspiring author could benefit greatly from this line's philosophy. Another big advantage to many writers, aspiring ones included, is that the length of the novel encourages both interesting subplots and/or in-depth character development which many shorter lines cannot accommodate. Basically, I think the editors at Super are looking for a good story written by people who approach their writing as professionals. They are looking for voices that complement the line so they can offer readers a wide variety of stories."

DEBRA SALONEN has sold eight books to Superromance. How did she target the line that bought her?

"An editor at another publishing house once turned down my proposal with a very detailed letter explaining how the work I'd submitted fell between their single title line and their series line. That was the first inkling I had that it is vital that you know your market before you submit. After that, I went to a used bookstore and bought two or three dozen books from various lines before I found a book that had a similar "tone" to the one I had in mind to write. It was a Superromance. I then went to Borders and bought all six of the current releases to get an overall feel for the line. I knew right then that the Superromance line was where I wanted to be -- where my book needed to be, and that's how I approached the writing of that book. The clues that told me my story would at least be looked at seriously were: the depth of the back story (which was vital to my story), the honesty displayed between characters (no easy fixes or exasperating coincidences), sexual tension versus on-page love scenes (important in my first book because of the age of the children), and the way the characters dealt with the secondary characters, in my case, my hero's daughters. Also, some books used more than two point-of-view characters -- also an important part of my book."

CJ CARMICHAEL has sold twelve books to Superromance. She says, "Superromance, editors are looking for the same favorite romance hooks that are popular in other lines (amnesia, twins, secret babies, etc.) however, they want the story--and more importantly the characters--to come across as realistic. The situation should reflect contemporary issues of the day and while characters may do some pretty outrageous things, their motivations for doing so must be well established.. While Silhouette seems to have used SIM and SSE to differentiate between their action/ adventure/suspense romances and their family/hearth romances, in Superromance you see all of these types of stories." What does she feel the editors of her line are looking for? "One thing you can be sure the Superromance editor will not be impressed with is the use of clichés. Not in language, not in plot and not in character. What they are looking for, from my experience, is complex, layered characters, compelling story lines, and deep emotion. If the person has a familiarity with the line, but has not yet conceived of characters and a story line, I would advise them to take a look through many different women's magazines. Identify the current topics that absorb and interest contemporary women. See if any of them spark story ideas for you. I believe Superromance strives to speak to the contemporary woman about real life issues that are important to her. In Superromances you may encounter stories that range from the heartbreaking scenario of a parent surviving the death of a child, to dealing with the tricky ethical issues involved in surrogate pregnancies."

BRENDA MOTT has just made her second sale to Superromance. "I think that Harlequin Superromance novels are more mainstream than any other category line out there. The stories are so varied in tone and subject that it makes for wonderful fun in both reading them and writing them. How does this influence my proposals? I simply try to get to the heart of the matter in my stories. My books are "deeply emotional" to quote my editor and many reviewers out there. :-) For that reason, I really have to get into my characters' feelings and motivations to let my editor understand exactly why I am telling a story about these characters. My goal is to make her and the reader just as excited to find out where the story leads the hero and heroine as I am about telling their story. It is all about becoming my characters for the duration of their tale. To live and breathe them as I write. And to do so again with the next book and the one after that.

Supers are more mainstream than many of the other lines, and the stories told by Superromance authors are usually deep and often complicated and take a longer word count requirement than other lines overall. When you pick up a Harlequin Superromance, you can find any or all of these things (to name a few): humor, intrigue, heart-tugging emotion, sizzling love scenes, and a good story overall." What advice would she offer to someone hoping to sell to the line? "Write the book of your heart!! This may sound simple, but you'd be surprised how many people don't do this! Instead, they try to "fit in" by writing something they think editors of a certain line want. They may think this certain something is a secret baby story or a cowboy book or an amnesia story or whatever, so they "tailor" their story to fit that tone and think and hope it will sell. Wrong! Study the lines to see which tone they

have, because you do need to keep things like word count and certain facts in mind) but at the same time, you have to write the story you truly love and want to tell. "

INTIMATE MOMENTS

LESLIE WAINGER, Senior Editor of Silhouette Intimate Moments, says...."The most obvious difference is that Intrigue is solely a romantic suspense/mystery line, while Intimate Moments features a variety of story types, with about 70% of the books (a rough guess) being romantic suspense and adventure. Tonewise, and thanks to the slightly longer length, Intimate Moments is a more mainstream read. The line can a bit grittier, and has more room for relevant subplots. It's crucial that all the books in the line are strong romances first and foremost, no matter whether there's suspense or paranormal or who knows what in the story. The other keyword to describe the line is excitement. I want the books to be real page-turners, catching the reader up in both the progress of the plot and the developments in the relationship. "

Award-winning author **KYLIE BRANT** has sold over seventeen books to Intimate Moments. Her take on the difference of IMs and Intrigues is, "IMs have a slightly more mainstream feel to them, due to the slightly longer page length. This gives the author more space to develop subplots that there would not be room for in Intrigues. The other major difference is that Intrigues are always mystery/suspense stories. Roughly 60-70% of the IMs are mystery/ suspense, and the rest are family drama or relationship stories. The keywords for IM are excitement, emotion, adventure. Larger than life is a phrase usually seen in their marketing. So even those stories without suspense feature exciting plots with lots of emotional impact."

Her advice to someone hoping to sell to IM: "Keep the focus on the relationship. These are romances, first and foremost. Emotional reads are a must, whether they feature suspense or not. The most frequent problem I see is poorly thought out character motivation. Characters must have good reasons for doing what they do, they must be consistent in their actions, and the reader must find their motivation compelling. "

Rita award-winning author **MERLINE LOVELACE** has written fifty-five books for Mira, NAL, Intimate Moments and Desire. She says, "I love writing for IM because they're the fast-paced, danger-filled kind of stories I enjoy reading AND writing. IM's generally have less introspection, more action, and lots of sizzling romance. These books sweep the reader into both the romance and the story quickly and increase in intensity as the book progresses."

MELISSA JAMES is a newer IM author with two sales. Reading newer people and hearing how they sold can be very helpful for someone looking to make a first sale. "Intrigue is known as the similar line to IM, but I find IM has the stronger romance focus in it. IM has romance with an edge - a strong edge. It can be intrigue, suspense, or just a heart-deep emotional tug - and within that, you're free to explore. I don't know about all editors, but mine likes something different, more a mainstream romance - a real adventure, a roller coaster ride. "

What advice would she offer to someone hoping to sell to the line? "Go for it! Don't hold back, don't let anyone say 'They won't take that'. This was said to me many times about my first book, Her Galahad - I'm so glad I didn't listen! Explore what you want to say, and so long as it's woven with a strong romance (and I cannot stress this enough), say it your own way. Every single scene must have romance, relationship, strengths tested, emotional stakes lifted. The characters, and their hearts, must have more to lose with every plot twist. In that, feel free to run with the plot! Let yourself go. But keep the romance tight!"

DAPHNE CLAIR / LAUREY BRIGHT has written sixty books for Presents, Silhouette Romance, Intimate Moments, And Special Edition. When asked about expectations of the lines she writes for, she said, "Probably the greatest mistake a writer can make in the IM line is to get caught up in the story events at the expense of the emotion. Because it's longer than other lines, it's easy to get into subplots and minor characters, and not focus on the emotional development of the two central characters. That needs to be put across in the proposal if you write one, and if not, it needs to come over in the first pages.

Pacing is another thing - the longer the book, the more difficult it is to keep pace and intensity, so you need a really good tension or inner conflict, and good character insight to keep the reader's interest. It's no good padding a book with scenery or subplots that don't have a direct influence on the love story." What does she feel the IM editors are looking for? "Emotion, emotion, emotion." Her advice to aspiring authors: "Read lots of the latest books and see what they have in common, then try to do something original and different within those parameters. Dream up an opening line that suggests strongly one of the classic themes/plots so marketing can get a handle on the story. If there's a convenient marriage, a virgin bride, a secret baby, say so - then show the editor how you are going to make this convenient marriage, virgin bride or secret baby different from all the others. Don't write slavishly to the market, but never lose sight of it either. Writing romance is like trampolining. You have to stay within certain parameters or you'll risk breaking your neck, but within that framework, learn to twist, turn, somersault and invent new ways of doing the same old thing. Always try for the next difficult feat, but **STAY ON THE TRAMP!**"