

Genre: A Slippery Subject Essential to Fiction Report #117

By Bobbie Christmas

“What’s so important about sticking to genre guidelines?”

“Do I really have to write according to someone else’s formula?”

“What’s my genre?”

Many writers whose novels I’ve edited have asked me questions about genre, because genre confuses people. Some writers assume it confines them. Many writers balk at the misconception that they must follow a formula, and even worse, people and publishers often disagree on matters of genre.

First let me explain genre. The term refers to a category defined by the subject matter of a novel. Romance, for example, involves a romantic relationship, whereas mystery has the main character or characters unraveling some sort of conundrum.

Sometimes the genre specification gets muddled and difficult to identify. One of the best novels I’ve edited could fit into the genre of fantasy, sci-fi, or romance. Genre gets slippery when a mystery novel includes a romantic relationship or when a romance novel has characters solving a mystery. The overriding theme of the book, however, establishes the genre.

Let’s start at the beginning, taking the broadest view of books. First there’s nonfiction—books that incorporate true stories, essays, or educational information—and fiction, which has fabricated stories. If it’s true, it’s a nonfiction book; if it’s invented, it’s a novel, and all novels are fiction. Maybe in the future I will write another report on the various designations of nonfiction, but this report focuses on fiction.

In the fiction category, we have literary fiction and genre fiction. Literary fiction incorporates more flowery writing, broader subjects, and usually has exotic titles. Literary fiction also often appears in hardback form. It is shelved in a section separate from genre fiction, which sells at a much higher rate than literary fiction. Bottom line: You have a better chance of selling genre fiction than literary fiction.

Why do we even have genres?

Bookstores and libraries categorize books so they can fit into a system, and publishers and agents specialize in handling specific genres, subjects about which they have an

interest. Potential buyers gravitate toward the areas in a store (or online) that carry the genres they like to read, too, so if you want to sell your novel, you have to categorize it.

I learned my lesson firsthand when an agent said of one of my early submissions, “I don’t know how to categorize your book, so I can’t sell it.” In my query letter I had not stated the category—or genre—of my novel, and my oversight led to rejection.

Genre affects marketability because readers expect specific things of each genre. For example, some folks like a good romance, while others gravitate toward mysteries.

Let me give you a quick rundown of the main genres in fiction, keeping in mind they represent the places in a bookstore where a book will be shelved. These main genres can be broken into dozens of subgenres, which I’ll touch on later.

The main genres of fiction include crime, fantasy, horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, suspense, and thriller. When you look into these genres, you may find some of them lumped together, such as science fiction/fantasy, suspense/thriller, and crime/mystery. I’ll break them out separately, to explain a little about each one.

Crime

Crime novels involve the obvious, crime, but not necessarily murder. Think in terms of Dashiell Hammett’s novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, for a perfect example of a crime novel.

Fantasy

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien typifies fantasy, in that fantasy covers subjects that are magical, mythical, or in some other way not real. Fantasy often includes made-up creatures, societies, and settings. You may ask if the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling fits under fantasy, and it does, but in the subgenre of young adult.

Horror

Horror may involve graphic murders, mutilation, apocalyptic events, and sometimes the supernatural. Steven King’s *Carrie* epitomizes a horror novel.

Mystery

As in *The DaVinci Code* by Dan Brown, a mystery involves finding a solution to a riddle, or it can involve solving a crime. You can also find subgenres in this category, such as cozy mystery, where a murder takes place in a setting where people know each other, such as in a small town or a resort hotel.

Romance

Romance novels, playfully called “bodice rippers,” focus on love and relationships. I edited a romance novel where the male protagonist turns out to be a werewolf. Should the book be classified as horror or fantasy? No, it was romance, because a relationship was the main theme, but the subgenre was paranormal. The male shifted into a wolf on the full moon, but the romantic scenes overshadowed and outnumbered the fantastical scenes.

Jane Austin novels fit into the romance genre. Her books today might fit the subgenre of Christian romance, where characters never have sex outside of marriage, or historical romance, where the story takes place in a prior era.

Science Fiction (also called Sci-Fi)

Science fiction usually takes place in the future, but not necessarily. It can involve space travel, futuristic technology, alien invasion, or time travel, as in the case of *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells.

Suspense

The suspense novel *Misery* by Stephen King has people guessing from beginning to end what might happen next, and no matter what happens, it comes as a shock and surprise.

Thriller

Thrillers encompass stories of intrigue, often among spies, police officers, or members of the military. The story takes place amid chaos, danger, and action. Thrillers rely on a high degree of suspense, conflict, and tension. Robert Ludlum’s novel *The Bourne Conspiracy* exemplifies thrillers.

A Look at Subgenres

Each genre has many subgenres. When classifying a novel, the subgenre often comes first, followed by the genre. For example, you might have a young adult romance or a historical horror. You can have a supernatural thriller or an Arthurian fantasy.

Let me enumerate many of the subgenres available to writers.

Under the genre of romance, you can find chick-lit, Christian, contemporary, erotica, gay/lesbian, glamour, historical, multicultural, paranormal, comedy, suspense, sensual, spicy, sweet, and young adult.

Under the heading of horror, you’ll discover child in peril, comic, creepy kids, dark fantasy, dark mystery, erotic vampire, fabulist (in which objects, animals, and nature deliver a moral lesson), gothic (which takes place around the Middle Ages), haunting, historical, magic realism, psychological, quiet horror, religious, science-fiction horror,

splatter (which takes horror to the extreme), supernatural menace, technology, weird tales, young adult, and zombie.

The thriller and suspense genres include the following subgenres: action, comic, conspiracy, crime, disaster, eco-thriller, erotic, espionage, forensic, historical, horror, legal, medical, military or police procedural, political intrigue, psychological, romantic, supernatural, and technological.

Wait! Horror, a genre unto itself, is also a subgenre of thriller novels? Yes, and that's exactly one of the reasons why genres confuse people, and I'm not even through yet. Let's go on to the subgenres of science fiction.

Science fiction and fantasy subgenres comprise alternative history, Arthurian fantasy, Bangsian fantasy (named after John Kendrick Bangs, it covers famous literary or historical individuals in the afterlife), biopunk, children's, comic, cyperepunk, dark fantasy, dystopian (the opposite of utopian), erotic, game-related, hard science fiction, heroic fantasy, high (or epic), historical, mundane, military, mystery, mythic, new age, post-apocalyptic, romance, religious, science fantasy, social, soft, space opera, spy-fi, steampunk (wherein characters in the Victorian era use twentieth-century technology), superheroes, sword and sorcery, thriller, time travel, urban, vampire, wuxia (incorporating Asian philosophy and martial arts), and young adult.

The mystery and crime genres consist of these subgenres: amateur detective, child in peril, whodunit, comic, cozy, courtroom drama, dark thriller, espionage, forensic, heists and capers, historical, inverted (readers know who did the crime, but they watch the detective unravel the mystery), locked room, medical, police procedural, private detective, psychological suspense, romantic, techno thriller, thriller, woman in jeopardy, and young adult.

I could go on all day about subgenres, but as you can see, enough exist that writers are not pigeonholed into writing by formula; they simply have to discover which genre and subgenre corresponds with their work.

Where Does Your Book Fit In?

A single report cannot possibly relate all the details of every genre and subgenre, but I hope I've relayed enough information to allow you to identify your genre. Now you can spend time investigating your specific subgenre in depth.

If you still have no idea of the genre or subgenre of your novel, perhaps your subject matter needs to be more focused. Perhaps you need the help of an editor to refine the novel or classify it for you. If nothing else, ask for help from a friend familiar with your type of book.

Here's a final, fundamental tip: If you are looking for an agent or a publisher, check all their websites to see what genres they handle. You'll save time, trouble, and money by

sending your manuscript only to places that handle your genre. Also, always mention the genre and subgenre of your novel when pitching it to an agent, publisher, or bookstore. It shows you're knowledgeable and gives folks important information.

Every step of the way, from conception to execution to publishing to marketing, genres are vital to a writer's success. Don't recoil at the idea of having to fit your writing into a category, because the categories are vast. If you want to sell your writing, familiarize yourself with genres, classify your novel, and accept genres as a fact of the writing life.

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, owner of Zebra Communications, and author of award-winning Write In Style, offers even more free advice at www.zebraeditor.com. She welcomes your writing and editing questions. Contact her at Bobbie@zebraeditor.com.

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