Selling Books with GLBTQ Characters

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I spent a long time trying to write this essay on GLBTQ fiction—or, rather, getting GLBTQ fiction published at a mainstream house.

First I ran into the difficulty of what to call it. Trust me, I spent way too much time trying to figure out how to refer to it—except the semantics seem extremely important, and that's part of what the essay needs to be about. For example, "queer fiction" seems like it should be "fiction about the queer experience". But what if the book isn't *about* "the queer experience"? What if it's just about a person who happens to be queer? Suddenly, calling the book "queer fiction" seems like it's pretty marginalizing.

(Not to mention the word "queer" hits some squick buttons, so maybe GLBT is better? Sheesh.)

Then I ran into the difficulty of needing to interview people to find out their experiences. I've talked to *a lot* of *extremely* bitter people, who blame mainstream publishing's anti-gay bias for their inability to get published by a mainstream publishing house. Now, in my experience—both before I started working at Tor, and since—people who blame the industry for not publishing them are kind of like people who blame their Scrabble tiles for making them lose the game. Usually their writing (or Scrabble playing!) is just crappy.

So how to separate people who have had genuine problems with homophobia from people who just suck?

Plus, oh, how much of publishing is luck vs. good writing vs. good marketing vs. an excited editor's personal tastes?

The agents and editors I spoke with all told me exactly what I thought they would: if a book is marketable, they'll take it on. This doesn't mean "If the book has heterosexual characters" nor does it mean "If the book has cookie-cutter relationships, gay or straight" nor does it mean "If the book is 'safe'."

But "marketable" means a lot of things—a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Genres have constraints that the reading public don't want broken. The two most

constrained genres I can think of are mystery and romance. (Feel free to post your own opinion in the comments, though.) Mysteries have to have a mystery with a beginning, a middle, and an end, otherwise the mystery reader feels cheated.

And romance novels, the ones stocked in the romance section of your bookstore, pretty much have to have (a) a heterosexual couple in the foreground and (b) a happy ending.

No, seriously. *Romance novels* that do not have a happy ending do not sell. End of story. Romance novels by Unknown Author X *particularly* have to have happy endings. Otherwise they do. Not. Sell. And they get shitty reviews, and people write nasty letters to the publisher about how cheated they felt.

(Yes, personal experience is talking here.)

You might be sitting there thinking, "But I really like romance novels that don't have happy endings." Guess what? You are in the minority.

Now, of course, there are exceptions to this. Patrick Nielsen Hayden pointed out to me that liking fat fantasy novels is a minority taste, yet Robert Jordan is still rich. He also said:

> What you really want to say to people who say they like genre romance novels with downbeat endings is, 'there aren't enough people who share your taste. Or, at least, nobody has yet figured out how to (1) find and (2) sell to enough people who share your taste.' There may well be enough people to make for a viable market! The problem is HOW DO YOU GET THEM TO ALL LOOK IN THE SAME DIRECTION so you can sell them the book they'll like? Flourishing genres mark the success of someone's long-ago effort at GETTING A BUNCH OF PEOPLE TO ALL LOOK IN THE SAME DIRECTION. Like when Hugo Gernsback got a motley collection of home tinkerers and self-taught cranks and ARGOSY adventure readers and bright 12-year-olds to buy AMAZING and sign on to the idea that there's this thing called 'scientifiction.' It's entirely possible that someone will figure out how to sell "Category Romance With Excitingly Downbeat Endings!" as a hot new genre or subgenre, but the hitch is: this trick is REALLY, REALLY HARD.

And he is entirely right.

And if you are saying to yourself, "But I want to read a gay romance novel!" . . . well, you're still in a minority. It's just a larger minority than you're used to, which is why it doesn't feel like a minority.

This past weekend I went to Con.Txt, where there were a goodly number of people who wanted to know how to get their "original slash" published. I have some problems with that term—namely, what the heck does it mean? All it means, from my standpoint (fandom and fan fiction terminology and issues aside), is that it's a story with a gay love story of some kind. So is "Brokeback Mountain" an original slash story? Yes, just as much as *Stone Butch Blues*. But what these women were talking about were their gay romance novels.

My agent friend and I both tried to explain, as nicely as possible, that there's just not a market in mainstream publishing for this (and most of the people got really annoyed, and some kept asking the same question over and over, just phrased slightly differently, as though the answer would change).

I suggested e-publishing—a much more forgiving medium for pretty much anything. The overhead is low, authors generally don't get advances (instead receiving a larger royalty percentage), and a book that sells 500 - 1000 copies can be considered successful. Small presses would also consider that a successful (or, at least, *not un*successful) run. However, if a book I edited only sold 500 - 1000 copies, that would not only be considered unsuccessful—it would be considered a complete, dismal failure. This is because I work for a big corporation that needs to *make money*.

Writing is *an art*. Publishing is *a business.*

Now: step to another genre. SF/F, for example! There are plenty of books published in sf/f that have GLBTQ characters (main characters, secondary characters, tertiary characters . . .). Mystery? Horror? Historicals? Same deal. Westerns? Not so much. Why? Because, like romance novels, westerns go to a very specific audience who want very specific conventions.

If you think about it, sf/f, mystery, historicals, etc., are not genres in which the genre conventions are about the characters and their interactions. Sf/f, mystery, historicals—they are all genres in which the conventions have to do with plot, plot devices, story, framing, etc. For example (you knew I'd bring it up!) Candas Jane Dorsey's *A Paradigm of Earth*. Main character? Bisexual. There *is* a love story in it, but the primary story is an sf story, and it was sold as sf, because it didn't have the conventions of a romance novel. (Well, and for other reasons too, but come on, work with me here.)

Selling your GLBTQ sf novel as "sf with GLBTQ interest" is *not*homophobic—it expands the audience for your story, rather than contracting it. Which is more important: labeling

your book as gay! gay! gay!, or getting as many people as possible to pick it up and enjoy it? More people are going to pick up a book stocked in the sf section than they will a book stocked in the GLBTQ section—that's just a fact, because more people will *be in the sf/f* section than the GLBTQ section. Seriously.

Another question that my agent friend and I got at Con.Txt was something like "How will genre conventions ever change/expand if people don't challenge them?" This answer is two-fold:

One: There has to be an *audience* for the change. Not 500 people, not 1000 people—but more like 30,000 people. 40,000 people. *That* is a successful number (at least, for a mass market paperback). 5,000 people for a hardcover, 7,000, 10,000! It is*not* a matter of just knowing the books are out there. It is a matter of getting people to pick the book up—and read it, and enjoy it, and recommend it to friends and family, and then buy the next book by the author.

And most people *just don't do that.*

A lot of people *don't want* the genre conventions changed, because they like reading books that are comfortable.

Two: People challenge genre convention all the time. For example, Cathy Clamp & C. T Adams wrote a romance novel in the first person male POV! Who ever freaking heard of that? But they did it *so well* that it was extremely successful. Another example is Laurell Hamilton. Hate her or love her, she certainly pushed some boundaries. Samuel Delany. Octavia Butler. Come on, people. You just don't notice that they are pushing boundaries because they do it *so damn well.* And if they don't do it well, they at least do it *interestingly.*

This actually seems to really make people crazy—but it's the best advice I have to give. Write a really good book. Write a damn good book. Write a frelling amazing, crazy-ass book.

The rest will sort itself out somehow—or it *won't,* and that will suck. But you know what a good revenge will be? Write an even better book next time. If you're a famous best-seller, your publisher will have to publish whatever you want to write.

NB: This article is woefully out of date, being from 2006. Things have changed in various parts of the publishing industry since I posted this to my LiveJournal! However, I'm leaving this up for people to read, partially because it does have some good and relevant information, and partially for historical reference.