Genre as a Marketing Category

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Disclaimer: It's really easy to get stressed out over this. *Don't.*

There are two ways writers can think about genre:

1. Writers need to know about genre conventions and genre stereotypes because you, as a writer, need to decide what you want to *do with them*. Whether or not to use them to structure your writing, what other people have tried already, where you can experiment with your narrative… etc.

2. It is not your job to know all the ins and outs of genre. If you can peg the right category for your book to get stuck in so that you can get it to the right editor/publishing house/agent, then just forget it after that. The editor/agent/publisher will decide how they want to publish the book—should it be a mystery or a thriller? Should it be a historical or a historical romance? Should it be fantasy or magical realism? Forget it—that's not your job.

So which is it? #1 or #2?

It's both.

The disclaimer to this entry is that it's really easy to get stressed out over this. *Don't.*

Genre is a difficult thing. If you want to be pedantic and/or academic about it, we can say that genre is just a construct, that there's no real way to tell if something belongs to a genre because, of course, the only way to identify if something is in a genre is to first figure out what the characteristics of that genre are. And the only way to figure out what the characteristics are is, of course, to look at what is already within the genre. That is how we chase our tails.

Let's skip that part. Normally I am all for academic discussion and finding ways to work around the system, but this is one time when we really want to work within the system and make the system work for us.

Genre is used by marketing and sales to say to readers, "If you liked this one thing, you might like this other thing too, since they are similar in certain ways."

A question I get a lot is: How do I know what genre my book is?
The short answer is this: Figure out what story you are telling and how you are telling it.

For example, are you telling a story about technology used in a war that takes place in the future? Or are you telling the story of two people who fall in love during a war that takes place in the future? Or are you telling the story of a crime that has to be solved during a war that takes place in the future?

If you're telling a story about technology used in a war that takes place in the future, your book is most likely SF.

If you are telling the story of two people who fall in love during a war that takes place in the future, and the balance of the book is about the people, and the war/future is just window dressing, your book is most likely a romance. (A paranormal/futuristic romance, sure.)

If you are telling the story of two people who fall in love during a war that takes place in the future, but the balance of the book is about the technology and the war, and the two people are the plot device used to push the story along, your book is back to being most likely SF.

If you are telling the story of a crime that has to be solved during a war in the future, and the war and the future are both window dressing, because the story is about the crime and the solving of it, your book is most likely a mystery. (A paranormal/futuristic mystery, sure.) But guess what? If the crime is the device used to tell the story of the war . . . your book is probably SF.

However, as Patrick Nielsen Hayden noted to me after reading this, it is very often a question of sensibility—we are back to the first instance of thinking about genre: its conventions. SF conventions are different from romance conventions, and the books are written with emphasis on different things. The stories are told differently. However, identifying these sensibilities and conventions is a different article about the craft of writing and creating content. Let's stick with over-generalizing for the sake of ease of organization for the moment.

Yes, it gets complicated.

But it's not *hard*. This is your book! You know what it's about. You are a responsible writer, who has taken several months away from your manuscript so that you could read it with fresh eyes. You have seen its reality. You know that despite your one true desire to write an epic love story, you have written a locked-room mystery.

"Anna," you say, "I still am unsure."

“Well,” I say unto you, “go forth and read many books!”

Here is a secret trick: find one author who is similar in some respect to you. They should tell the same type of story, have similar themes, use the same setting. Then take a look at who has blurbed their book! If you feel that your book is similar to *The Robot Cheerleader Wars* by Samantha Carter, but you've never read anything else like it, look at the cover, or that very first inside page (that is called the "front sales"). A-ha! It says:

> "*The Robot Cheerleader Wars* is a work of unparalleled genius, giving readers a hitherto unknown or as of yet not fully realized glimpse of what life will be like in the future for the theoretical astrophysicist cheerleader archetype."—Dr. Daniel Jackson, author of *It's Not Door to Heaven—It's StarGate!*

and

> "Totally awesome. Also, Sam is hot."—Col. Jack O'Neill, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Where There's a Will, There's an 'Or'*

Now go buy those books and read them. See if they are like your book, and if they are, check who published them. Look on the copyright page for the editor's name (sometimes it's there) or in the dedication for the editor or agent’s name (sometimes it’s there, if the author is nice).

When all else fails, go to amazon-freaking-dot-com and see that customers who bought *The Robot Cheerleader Wars* by Samantha Carter also bought *Keeper of the Winds* by Jenna Solitaire, and *Tithe* by Holly Black.

"But, Anna," you say, "my book is a beautiful and unique snowflake butterfly that must fly free. It cannot be constrained by your notions of genre!"

“Well,” I say unto you, “too freaking bad.”

Here's the story: I say to Waldenbooks, "This book doesn't have a genre." Walden says, "So what are we supposed to do with it?" I say, "I dunno." Walden says, "How about we just skip this title and buy twice as many of that romance novel?" I say, "All right." Then your book nets, oh, 6,000 mass market copies, and you don't ever sell another book again. The end.

Sad, right?

People like categories. Categories make us feel safe. They help us know that we are getting what we want. Most people do not buy books wanting to be shocked or appalled or surprised.

For example, I know that if I buy a book by Joan Didion, I will be sad when I am finished with it. I know that if I buy a book with a dragon on the cover, there is probably magic in it. I know that if I buy a book from the romance section, it probably has a happy ending—and if it has a cartoony looking cover, it's probably funny, whereas if it has dark body parts, it's probably sexy and a little scary. I know that if I go into the "fiction" section and buy a book with a cityscape on the cover, it's probably a thriller. If the White House is on the cover, it's a political thriller. If there's some kind of representation of DNA on the cover, it's a bio-terrorism thriller.

It is a sad fact that the majority of people no longer are willing to experiment. Books are expensive. I don't know about you, but I don't have seven dollars to spend on an author I've never heard of if I don't have the faintest clue where to slot the book in my head.

A lot of books straddle genres. The way you figure out which genre the book fits into is this: Which genre would provide the book with more satisfied readers?

Let's use *Hunter's Moon* as an example. This is a book by Cathy Clamp and C. T. Adams. When it was sent to me by the agent, she did not say, "This is an SF novel" or "This is a shapeshifter novel"—she said that this was a novel sent to her by another one of her clients who just happened to be Laurell K. Hamilton. Laurell had loved the book.

When I read it, I loved it too. It's the story of a man named Tony who is a Mafia assassin. He's been turned into a werewolf. He's lost track of the days. It's the full moon. There's a woman, there's a lot of money, and there's a lot of gunfire.

With a slight editorial push, the book could have been SF. It could have been horror. But as I read the book, I decided that the focus was actually Tony's relationship with the woman he meets at the beginning. The romantic relationship is at the forefront through everything, and the

romance readers, I thought, would really go for it. Plus it was a little different from all the other romance novels on the market—yeah, it's got a first person POV narrator . . . but it's *Tony* who is narrating, not the heroine.

Sure enough, romance readers love the book.

And, yeah, plenty of SF and horror readers have emailed the authors proclaiming their love, too—but the book's main audience are those romance readers. It's not just a difference of a few hundred—it's a difference of *tens of thousands*.

Sometimes books straddle genres too much. This goes in a few directions:

1. **Too many genres**—i.e., "My novel is a western historical fantasy romance crime novel."

What this tells me is that you can't focus, and your novel is probably all over the place. How many really good crime novels have you read? It takes a couple hundred pages to tell a really good crime story. So in between that really good crime story, you're going to work in the historical detail needed to have a true historical novel, all the tropes of a western, the world building necessary for a fantasy . . . and a romance? Pick one to focus on—two if you have to—and do justice to them. And even if it turns out that you've got all that stuff in there, and you think it works really well, when you tell an editor or agent about the book, focus on one genre and one subgenre.

It's okay to say "This is a historical fantasy with a strong romantic element" or "This is a crime novel set in the Wild West". It's okay to keep it simple.

2. **Neither fish nor fowl.** Eventually I am going to have to pick a place for your book to go. It is either going to have to be sold to the romance market, or sold to the fantasy market. We can put advertisements in as many publications as we want, but it's got to be stocked on either one shelf or the other.

"The perfect balance" of genres actually means that the book isn't balanced at all—the "perfect balance" is a book that is targeted! Yes, it is hard to know when you've done this. No, we do not expect you to be able to tell. Even editors who have been in the business for thirty years will sometimes have problems with it.

(That is because publishing is a subjective business. It is a business of opinions. When I read *Point of Honour* by Madeleine Robins, I am reading a mystery novel; others are reading a novel of noirish alternate history about a female P.I.)

It is worthwhile to note that I know a couple of editors who use the phrase "neither fish nor fowl" to mean that a book is straddling genres in a very mediocre way. Straddling genres is hard—like I said above, you need to make sure that you're really giving a genre all you've got. If you're writing a historical romantic suspense, you've gotta hit everything note perfect—your history's gotta be perfect, your suspense has to be suspenseful, your romance has to be sexy and intriguing, and your characters have to be compelling.

That is not easy.

You might receive a rejection letter that says:

"This is neither fish nor fowl—I couldn't sell this as a romance, but I also couldn't sell this as a historical, or as a mystery."

It is not always code. Sometimes a rejection is just a rejection. But check yourself anyway—if you are getting the same rejection from two or three people (or more!), you might want to pay attention to the subtext.

Genre is hard, because it is not intuitive a lot of the time. That sucks. Do the best you can.

“But, Anna,” you are still asking me, “what if my manuscript doesn't fall into generally understood genres?”

Honestly, this is not a stupid question. This is a good question. The answer is: every manuscript falls into generally understood genres. It really does. Genres *are* general. Whether the manuscript fits comfortably once it's there is another question.

The way to figure out what genre your manuscript should be classified as, for the purposes of submitting to editors, is to *pick one* and then ask yourself: would the readers of this genre be satisfied by the story I am telling?

For example, “Christopher Moore Genre: amusing stuff with weird woo-woo things happening.”

Where is Christopher Moore in a bookstore? One of two places: in SF/F near Neil Gaiman (who also writes amusing stuff with weird woo-woo things happening), or in General Fiction near Tom Robbins (who also writes amusing stuff with weird woo-woo things happening). Pick which one your writing most closely resembles.

Ultimately, if you're really uncomfortable listing the genre and subgenre in your cover letter . . . don't.

Use the line, "The irreverent humor and wacky plot twists in this novel will appeal to fans of Christopher Moore and Tom Robbins. I know you've edited similar things in the past, which is why I've directed this proposal to you—I hope you enjoy it. The full ms. is available upon request."

The worst that can happen is a form rejection.