

In *The Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler suggests that "the dramatic purpose of the hero is to give the audience a window into the story. Each person hearing a tale or watching a play or movie is invited in the early stages of the story to identify with the hero, to merge with him and see the world of the story through his eyes." Those of us who write romances would argue that the dramatic purpose of the hero is to embody a character with whom the heroine (and by extension, the reader) can fall in love. In fact those who write erotic romances contend, as does Angela Knight in *A Guide to Writing Erotic Romance*, that the hero is responsible for the 'sexual heat' of the story. The heroine may determine, as Knight posits, when and how sex ultimately takes place, but it is the hero who pushes the agenda. He creates the erotic focus of the work. He is also, however, constrained in certain ways by societal mores—both those of the story in which he finds himself, and those of the author who creates him. Scholar Jay Dixon asserts in her review of the romances of British publisher Mills and Boon that "social reality necessarily colors the portrayal of heroes in all popular literature." As a consequence, since most romances are written by women, the portrayal of the hero is most often influenced by the social reality of women.

There can be little doubt that the hero is both a reflection of socially acceptable characteristics prevalent in a particular historical period as well as an idealized construct that has endured essentially unchanged for centuries. As a result, the hero embodies traits we respect and honor while at the same time manifesting behaviors we might not necessarily embrace outside the confines of fiction.

Romance fiction allows us to create heroes who may not be "socially acceptable" within contemporary social and cultural parameters, thereby freeing the reader to embrace psychosexual experiences in a defensible forum. The alpha hero illustrates this inherent duality of social un-

acceptability and secret desirability more clearly than any other. As noted by Jayne Ann Krentz in "Dangerous Men and Adventuress Women," "these men are the tough, hard edged, tormented heroes that are at the heart of the vast majority of best-selling romance novels ... They are the heroes who carry off the heroines in historical romances. These are the heroes feminist critics despise."

Who are these heroes and how have they been impacted by social change, and what happens when they aren't men at all, but lesbians?

Heroes, writes Vogler, possess "universal qualities, emotions, and motivations that everyone has experienced at one time or another: revenge, anger, lust, competition, territoriality, patriotism, idealism, cynicism, or despair." Prior to the last half of the 20th century, most heroes in romance fiction could have been called alpha heroes, although the term wasn't popularized until after this time. The alpha hero, as with most heroes, is depicted as intelligent and supremely confident—a leader and a warrior. What critically defines him however is his ultra-protective, overtly territorial, controlling, and domineering nature. Sexually he is aggressive and often compels the heroine to accept his sexual advances by overpowering her emotionally and psychologically, if not outright physically, earning him the reputation of being "a brute, an abuser, or a jerk." No surprise, he appeared frequently in the historical romance, the most popular form of romance fiction until the late 20th century, as Lord of the Manor.

As with all heroes, what prevents the alpha hero from being despicable and allows the heroine (and by extension, the reader) to embrace him is his hidden vulnerability—his secret need, his private torment, the wounds that only the heroine can heal. With the rise of feminism in the last quarter of the 20th Century, the alpha hero fell out of favor. Women in a fight for equality, recognition, and self-actualization rejected the dominating male persona along with the

need to be protected, either from the outside world or their own inner impulses. Virginity was no longer an essential requirement for the romance heroine. The male, the hero, no longer held all the power in the sexual arena. In fiction, as in life, women sought partners, not father-figures, saviors, or knights in shining armor. Women and romance readers sought heroes who were partners with a focus on communication, sensitivity, shared responsibility, and a fierce need to protect the heroine's independence, giving rise to the "beta hero." In contradistinction to the alpha male, the beta male was more of a friend than a protector—more able to communicate his feelings, more sensitive, less controlling, less dominating. Forced seduction scenes disappeared.

In a parallel evolution in romance fiction, the 20th century saw the emergence of the lesbian hero in romance fiction, with an explosion of lesbian romances ushered in by the pulp fiction era of the 1950s and 1960s. Until this time, the hero was presumed to be male. How then did romance authors adjust for a female hero? The lesbian hero is not an exact replica of the male hero, except with different body parts. She is in fact, her own archetype, in early works closer to the classic "butch" lesbian persona that pre-dated the sexual revolution and gay liberation movements. Just as the portrayal of the male hero was colored by social reality, so was the early lesbian hero a reflection of the social-sexual butch-femme dynamic within the lesbian community of the early to mid-20th century. Butch lesbians assumed the attributes/roles traditionally reserved for men—emotional reserve, sexual aggression, provider and protector while self-identified femme lesbians expressed the socially designated feminine role of caretaker, nurturer, and seductress. The lesbian hero emerged initially in detective fiction and gained popularity in intrigue/adventure romances featuring traditional hero figures: warriors, law enforcement agents, soldiers, and business tycoons.

In 1928, Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall wrote "The Well of Loneliness," in which her hero, Stephen Gordon, a daughter raised to be a surrogate son, is described as "handsome in a flat, broad shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful, having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete. In face she had ... the formation of the resolute jaw [of her father] Sir Phillip." Stephen typifies the butch lesbian hero emotionally as well as physically, when she says to the woman she loves, "For your sake I'm ready to give up my home.... I want the whole world to know how I adore you. I am done with these lies [...] we will go away, and will live quite openly together, you and I, which is what we owe to ourselves and our love." She is ready to sacrifice her name, her legacy, her inheritance, and her social status for the love of a woman. Self-sacrifice is a fundamental trait of the romantic hero.

In the 1970s and 1980s, we see the clear emergence of the lesbian hero in mystery and romantic intrigue, a subgenre that provided a perfect vehicle for merging the socially acceptable, newly independent female hero with the butch lesbian archetype. In "Amateur City" by Katherine V Forrest (1984), the first work to feature a lesbian detective, the hero, Kate Delafield, was characterized as "... Taller and stronger, more aggressive than the other girls; in look and manner hopelessly unfeminine by their standards. Among similarly uniformed women in the Marine Corps, she had been resented for her unusual physical strengths and command presence. ... And always there had been that one most essential difference: she was a woman who desired only other women."

The lesbian hero was rising in popularity in lesbian romance fiction as the alpha male hero was simultaneously losing his place. Many similarities existed between the two, however. The lesbian hero of the 60s, 70s, and 80s was often a loner, often assumed responsibility for others, willingly sacrificed herself, and was the driving force behind the erotic tension in a work. Unlike

the alpha male hero, however, the lesbian hero would always stop short of any kind of physical encounter in which she was not invited. Micky Knight, the lesbian hero of JM Redmann's detective series widely considered to be the first lesbian noir, says, "I never, ever touch virgins unless they're very sure of what they want and they practically begged me. (This happens more often than you think.)"

While the lesbian hero found her voice, what then became of the alpha male? Did he slink back to his cave (or his castle), relegated to a footnote in the history of romance fiction? The heart of romance fiction is conflict, and the more accessible to the heroine the hero becomes, the more difficult it is to create compelling conflict or to create a larger-than-life hero whom readers can secretly lust after and through whom they can realize their secret fantasies. Fortunately, the alpha hero wasn't alpha for nothing and he did not go quietly.

He exploded back onto the romance scene a changed man—literally—in a form more acceptable to the liberated woman. He got bitten by a vampire, clawed by a werewolf, infected by a demon virus and became even more of an alpha-creature than previously—larger, more dangerous, darker and more deadly—and he resumed his controlling, territorial, and dominant ways. The paranormal romance genre provided a stage upon which it was once again permissible to write a hero who was dominant, aggressive, protective, and controlling, and who claimed his woman for all the world to see. The alpha male had returned with claws, fangs, and wings and readers went wild for him. When the alpha male reemerged in heterosexual romance, he was paired with a strong, independent, aggressive heroine, re-igniting the essential conflict at the heart of all good romance fiction.

This "new" dynamic is evidenced in this passage from *River Marked* by Patricia Briggs, which illustrates the instinctive aggressiveness of the alpha male countered by the willing

acceptance of his aggression and the control over it exerted by the heroine. She's not dominated by his sexual drive or his territorial aggression. She welcomes it even as she tempers it.

Beside me, Adam rose with a snarl. I lowered my head to show that I was not a threat. After a bad change, it would be a few minutes before Adam had a leash on his wolf. . . . the wolf put his nose just under my ear. I tilted my head to give him my throat. Sharp teeth brushed against my skin, and I shivered.—Patricia Briggs, *River Marked*

In this passage the alpha hero is literally an alpha – in this case an alpha wolf, and the heroine recognizes and accepts his innate need to claim her. He in turn recognizes her independence (he seeks her acceptance with his nose just under her ear). Her submission is willing (she GIVES him her throat) and his dominance (teeth at her throat) is both consensual and sexually arousing.

In lesbian fiction, the hero has never been male, but that does not mean the lesbian hero is not alpha. The lesbian butch hero slowly underwent a transformation, just as did the alpha hero in heterosexual romance fiction, as the romance genre diversified and as societal gender roles blended. Romantic intrigue, swords and sorcery, space opera, and other romance subgenres where women could be placed in position of power became more and more popular. Then the paranormal romance revolution hit lesbian fiction a decade or so after the surge in mainstream fiction. Suddenly, we have lesbian heroes who are Werewolves, Vampires, demons, and other preternatural beings. These heroes are as alpha as any alpha male hero ever hoped to be. Like the male alpha hero, the lesbian alpha hero is driven by her primal instinct to mate, to protect her young, preserve her species, and defend those she leads. She is also most effectively paired with a strong heroine, which generally creates a great deal of the internal conflict that drives the romance. Like her male counterpart, she is often a loner, secretly wounded, and in need of healing or redemption. Perhaps most important within the context of lesbian romantic relationships, the lesbian alpha hero has given us, for the first time in our romance fiction, what

the alpha male always brought to heterosexual romance fiction—the opportunity to write (and experience) unfettered sexual aggression. Just as is true in heterosexual paranormal romance fiction, the inherent sexual aggression of the alpha hero, male or female, has been validated by their very nature—these are not humans, but preternatural creatures driven by inhuman instincts, needs, and desires. No one can fault an alpha werewolf for being excessively territorial, for claiming her mate with a bite or demanding submission from a lover. We can't criticize a vampire who entralls the object of her desire when she prepares to feed and forces her lover to orgasm in the process. Forced seduction becomes biologically permissible and most importantly, consensual.

The lesbian alpha serves the same function in a romance as does the alpha male—she presents a larger-than-life hero with unquenchable erotic power, a dominant personality, and a proprietary attitude toward her mate likely to infuriate an equally strong heroine—all within a context that allows the contemporary heroine to embrace her, even when she bites.

To illustrate the alpha's sexual aggression, and the subsequent desire unleashed in the heroine by the primal instincts of the alpha, I will use a passage from L.L. Raand's *The Midnight Hunter* series:

Sylvan, a phalanx of Weres behind her, stalked out of the woods into the clearing. She wore skintight black jeans and nothing else. Her breasts rode high and proud, the muscles in her chest and abdomen rippling seductively beneath moon-kissed skin. I could smell her across the clearing, her scent so heady my mouth literally watered. My sex tightened and desire choked my senses. She was all I could see, all I could smell, all I could sense, and I took a step forward, my eyes fixed on her face. I barely registered the flash of silver before my legs were cut out from under me and I fell hard, face first to the forest floor. The weight on my back crushed me into the rich loam, and I tasted blood where a tooth cut my lip. A knee in the center of my back kept me pinned, and one iron-tight thigh rested alongside my hip.

An arm bar on the back of my neck prevented me from raising my head, but I didn't need to see. I could scent her, sense her, feel her heat—some part of me beyond words, beyond thought, knew her. ... I felt the hard points of her nipples against my shoulder blades as she leaned close. Flame surged from deep in my core and poured into my chest, driving my breath out on a moan.

By creating a female alpha in whom dominance, aggression, and territoriality are innate and not assumed (ie not only beyond her control but admirable and acceptable in certain circumstances), we set the stage for the ultimate romantic challenge—the literal taming of the beast within—by love. Only a heroine strong enough to maintain her own identity in the face of the alpha's power can be a worthy mate, thus establishing the core conflict—the alpha's need to dominate and protect is at odds with the heroine's fierce need to maintain her autonomy and sense of self. Sexually the two are often equally aggressive, allowing a dynamic exchange of power within fluid gender boundaries. Ultimately, the heroine will come to trust that being cared for will not diminish her, and the alpha will learn not only to rely on her mate's strength, but to protect what her mate values the most—her independence.