

## BREAKING THE RULES IN ROMANCE WRITING

By Lori Foster

*“You need to know the rules. You need to understand them. Then you need to forget them.”* A direct quote from Harlequin Temptation editor, Susan Sheppard. Deliberately breaking out is vastly different to stumbling in the wrong direction.

The “rules” we’ve all heard so much about, are not really rules at all. They’re gentle guides that you need to be aware of, but not necessarily conform to, especially when they fall in direct opposition to your natural voice. When handled with skill and talent, breaking the rules is one of the best ways to distinguish yourself.

Lori Foster wrote ten complete manuscripts before ever selling one. She tried to follow the rules in order to better her chances, and continually got rejections. On her tenth manuscript, she got an idea and decided to jump in with both feet. Against everything her friends told her, against every contest judge who rated that manuscript horrendously low, Lori held the faith. It was a story written on gut instinct rather than preconceived notions of what might sell, and it was a story she loved, a book that held every bit of her creativity.

An editor visiting a local conference had just delivered the bad news that they were rejecting Foster’s ninth book, so she got up her nerve, mentioned the multi-cursed non-conforming book that more than one contest judge had told her was entirely *unsuitable* to category, and held her breath. The editor, who suddenly looked more enthusiastic said, *“That is something that just might work for us.”*

The book was risqué, more so than most categories. But the critiquers and judges and well meaning friends who’d told her, “You can’t do that in category!” were obviously wrong. In fact, Foster’s second book launched the new Temptation Blaze subseries of more explicit, sensual books, and Lori’s career finally took off.

She not only found her niche, but she helped to create it.

Just about everyone has heard the dozens and dozens of rules listed as the criteria for getting published. How many writers have actually printed them out, determined to fit ‘the mold’ in the hopes of selling a book?

In truth, there are very few definite rules to publishing romance. One, of course, is the happy ending. Readers pick up a romance novel to find the satisfaction that comes from a happy ending. Another is the romance be between a man and a woman.

No first person? Well, Karen Harbaugh, a writer for Signet Regencies, said, “At the beginning of my career, with my first two books, I wrote plain vanilla Regencies because I felt moved to write them. Those were published despite the fact that the first one was in first person, which my contest judges told me would never sell.” Note this was for Karen’s *first* book, so we can’t fall back on the cop out that *of course an established writer can do it!* Karen wasn’t established at that time.

There’s also Joan Wolf’s recent single title releases, *The Deception*, *The Guardian*, *The Arrangement*, *The Gamble*, and *The Pretenders*, all done in first person, as well as Megan Chance’s, *A Season in Eden*, and Anne Stuart’s, *Cameron’s Landing*.

What about those highly taboo sports’ heroes? We need look no further than the incredibly successful and incomparably humorous Susan Elizabeth Phillips who has managed to get non-sports minded women to fall in love with jocks in general, and football players in particular.

Hebby Roman's recent *Summer Dreams*, has a minor league baseball hero, and Tami Hoag's, *Straight From The Heart*, has a baseball-playing hero.

Even in restrictive category, we find authors who can break the 'no sports hero' rule. Donna Kauffman's, *Illegal Motion*, with a football playing hero, got rave reviews, and Catherine Coulter's timeless, *The Aristocrat*, has a football hero.

The conclusion, of course, is that what really sells your book is your individual voice, not the rules you obey or break.

So, what is voice? To Foster, it's your perspective. "The way you see things, how you interpret them, the way you like words to come together and the method you use to put your thumbprint on a story."

Karen Harbaugh, known for her *Vampire Regencies*, said, "Voice always comes naturally to people, once they have the tools to express it. That's what voice is. For me, it's how my creative mind works. My natural bent seems to be toward the spiritual or toward fantasy; it was there when I grew up – I was raised with it. And of course, because I like it so much, and also have an analytical mind, I like to know why it is, and how it works, and so I take it apart. What I learn gets put back into my writing and I think my writing might just be richer for it. I know what voice is, what my voice in particular is, and I can look at other people's writing and say, yep, there's your voice, right there. Voice is not an elusive thing any more, but something very exciting."

Karen has created a very successful niche for herself. If you ask about the supernatural or Regency romances, you'll invariably hear Ms. Harbaugh's name. If you mention the two together, it's like a trademark. By being different, by doing what she loves most, Ms. Harbaugh has made her stamp in the romance industry.

When explaining some of the difficulties she first faced, Harbaugh said, "My first two Regencies were with HarperCollins when they had a Regency line. They wouldn't take any that had fantasy elements in them, and in fact, I was asked to take it out. Then my agent sent two others to Signet (Penguin/Putnam) and those sold almost immediately – within a week of submitting them to the editor, in fact. The difference was that Signet Regency's editor had the authority to take risks, whereas HarperCollins's editor didn't, so far as I can tell.

"Certainly the difference caught people's attention," Harbaugh added. "A Regency vampire? Good heavens. But that book was also my best selling book, and this year went into a third printing."

Jennifer Crusie, a highly successful author currently with St. Martin's press, said, "I never thought, 'Gee, there aren't too many people doing romantic comedy so I'll write romantic comedy.'" In the beginning, I didn't even know I was writing romantic comedy. The last three books I've finished haven't been comedies at all, so I'm always amazed (and delighted) when people say they laughed. I'm just trying to get the truth on the page, my vision of the truth in my voice."

Jennifer's novels for St. Martin's Press, *Tell Me Lies*, *Crazy For You*, and *Welcome to Temptation*, have made her a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller. "Having a strong voice," Ms. Crusie said, "gave me not only an identity but a selling point because nobody else can sound like me, just as nobody else can sound like you; that's the beauty of voice, it truly is unique in the dictionary sense of the word. If other writers try to imitate you, they're just wannabes, vague echoes. I had an editor once who said she kept getting query letters that said, 'I write just like Jenny Crusie' and it was

always clear from the letter that they didn't so she never asked for the manuscript. If they said, 'I write better than Jenny Crusie,' she asked for the manuscript of course."

Anne Stuart is a grandmaster of the genre, winner of Romance Writers of America's prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award, and a survivor of more than twenty-five years in the romance business. "If I have a niche," Stuart said, "it's a combination of my gothic background and my over the top heroes – many of them are, by average standards, immoral, some are lethal, most of them with a questionable set of values. A lot of my books are very dark, almost impossibly so for some readers, but for those who can handle it, the rewards are considerable."

So, can one aspect of an author's writing define her?

"Yes and no," Stuart said. "The dark, dangerous hero and the strong, almost gothic sense of place will probably always be integral to my work. But there's a lot of creative space involved around such things. And actually, a hidden aspect to my work has always been familial issues. Not as obvious to the casual reader, but it's an ongoing theme and I expect I'll keep up with that too. I have a sense of humor that people often don't expect. It's dark humor, but effective. I call those books my black-hearted romps (as opposed to other people's light-hearted romps)."

Crusie added, "Sharp humor is my life, as anyone who's ever been stuck with me in an elevator or at a dinner knows. I have no desire to write Deeply Serious Books. Probably because I'm not Deep. I write black comic community-based mystery romantic women's fiction. Lot of space to grow there."

And Ms. Harbaugh also contributed, "I've written enough to establish myself, and I've written books where the fantasy is very, very light, and one where there is no fantasy at all. My natural bent at this time is toward writing in historical periods as well as toward fantasy. If the muse hits me with another two-by-four, I have to pay attention or else she'll bludgeon me until I do. That the only way, in my humble opinion, to stay fresh."

"The focus can change from day to day," Foster concluded. "Your voice stays the same, but you try new and different things, new lengths, new settings, new character types. You don't ever want to get redundant, or worse, boring! But publishers like you to give them the expected. For me, that was a secret fantasy hook, or a hidden identity. I've managed to put my own spin on those plot devices, and I have a lot of fun with each and every book. If I wasn't having fun, I wouldn't write it."

When asked if she met with any initial resistance to her style, Stuart commented, "When I started in Gothic I could pretty much go as dark as I wanted with my heroes. But when I began writing series romance I ran into problems. There was a time when series romance editors (though not necessarily the readers) wanted beta heroes, kinder, gentler men. They missed the point that these are fantasies, and while the dark heroes are fun to play with, to read about, most readers know the difference between reality and fantasy. So the series editor tried to tone me down, with only marginal success."

In some instances, Ms. Stuart was forced to make drastic career changes, but she refused to change her voice. "In the middle of my career," Stuart explained, "during some of the Harlequin years, I had to tone down some of my books. One of my historicals was toned down a bit too – the editor wanted the hero softer, I wanted him darker – and I simply ended up rewriting him (and the story) in a third way. At this point, I doubt I would do it. Even back then I tried to buy the books back when I couldn't particularly afford to do so. If an editor and I disagreed strongly on the direction of a book or a

character, then I would either buy the book back or come to an agreement to write a different book in its place. I have a brain brimming with wonderful ideas – If I can't do one right then, I'll find something else we can agree on. I take intelligent editing gratefully, but I won't let someone mess with my innate vision."

It's a common problem in the publishing industry – voice versus marketing. How much should an author bend in order to sell her book? If an editor insists it must be changed, what can an author do? Foster has personally withdrawn books rather than make requested revisions that she felt would change her voice in the book. "I'm lucky in that I now have a wonderful Harlequin editor – Susan Sheppard – who truly understands voice. She makes suggestions and more often than not, she's right. In fact, she's a creative genius. But whenever I've felt strongly about something, she's listened and taken my objections seriously. I've never had to cheap out on my voice."

Foster, who first sold to Harlequin Temptation in 1996 and has since sold twenty-seven novels to five different publishers, believes very strongly in protecting her voice. "It's what defines me as a writer. Whether I'm writing a single title, a novella, or a series book, I want readers to know it's me. I've been incredibly fortunate that the editors I've worked with have understood my style. I've gotten a lot of support and encouragement. But if I had to put up a fight, it would be over voice, not so much over advances and time frames. Yes, I want to grow in all areas, but I believe if the voice is there, if you're pleasing your readers, the rest will come."

"I've had stellar editors, too," Ms. Crusie said. "Birgit Davis Todd let me take risks with sexual tension, Beth de Guzman let me do insane things with multiple points of view, and Jennifer Enderlin... oh let me count the things for which she's closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and said, "Okay, go ahead."

Anne Stuart added, "It's more a case of finding a house who knows how to present my voice than finding one who appreciates it. I've had many editors who loved my books, but their houses botch the marketing.

So, what should we do about those rules? Ms. Harbaugh says, "Forget 'always' and 'never' and 'ever.' There is such a thing as art and rhythm and using your ear to figure out what works and what doesn't. There comes a time when you have to look at the art, and that always means bending or breaking the rules, to use them in a way nobody else has thought to try before."

Bend away! And good luck on finding your niche.