

## 14 Sure Fire Plot Points

*This article is written by IRENE GOODMAN on "Fourteen Sure-Fire Romance Plots" in the Agents Corner section of the Romance Writer's Report for December 1998, Volume 18, Number 12.*

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Almost all romance novels break down into fourteen classic plots. If you use one of them or a combination of more than one, you can't go wrong. I have developed the following handy guide. It is by no means carved in stone, and there are probably other plots I haven't thought of. But it's a good start, and it's a sure-fire tool when facing a tough market.

### 1. The Lady and the Cowboy

This is an all-time classic. It has to do with class differences, which for some reason are very sexy. It is also referred to as the Lady and the Carpenter. You don't have to take these labels literally. They don't have to be actual cowboys or carpenters, and the ladies don't have to be high class or rich. They do have to come from different worlds in a way that makes the sparks fly. For an off-beat example, consider the romance in Ayn Rand's "The Fountainhead". She's the rebellious daughter of a newspaper tycoon, and he's a dedicated architect working in a quarry. Of course she doesn't know he's an architect. She hires him as a labourer. It doesn't take too long for him to captivate her and soon the tables are turned.

### 2. Marriage of Convenience

Another great class. Try to avoid obvious contrivances here, but the conflict is ready-made and the sexual tension is built in.

### 3. Beauty and the Beast

One of them is physically marred in some way. It doesn't have to be the hero. In Pamela Morsi's "Courting Miss Hattie", the heroine is known as "Horse-Face Hattie" because of her rather equine countenance. The hero is the best-looking guy in town. This creates an immediate emotional pull, because the heroine is vulnerable. We feel for her and we are also rooting for her.

### 4. Cinderella

Everyone loves a good Cinderella story. If you do one of these, make sure there is at least one elaborate shopping spree. They used to say Judith Krantz was successful because she wrote about the two things women liked best: sex and shopping. Again you can do a gender reversal here. She could be the duchess and he could be a mountain man who either learns how to become a gentleman, or successfully charms everyone as he is, as in Crocodile Dundee.

### 5. Three Trials

In mythology, you often find a story in which the characters must pass certain tests of strength and character before they are allowed to be happy. In a romance novel, this usually takes the form of some kind of adventure, in which both characters must use their wits in order to outfox mutual

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enemies. This makes for a fast-paced story. Just be sure that the core of the relationship and its conflicts remain vivid and clear. A wonderfully entertaining example of this type of story is Linda Lael Miller's "Princess Annie".

### **6. The Home-maker and the Rover**

I love this one, because it calls upon one of the essential natural differences between the sexes. He is a consummate rover, often with no address, and she is the consummate homebody, someone who creates a warm and loving haven. Because romance novels are for women, the female fantasy always wins out, and the guy finds he can't live without her lover and care. A beautiful example of this plot is Nora Roberts' "Born in Ice".

### **7. Good Girl/Bad Boy**

This is similar to the Lady and the Cowboy, except that class differences don't need to be involved, and the hero needs to be redeemed in some way. She could be the preacher's daughter, and he's the wayward man. Of course he will reform as necessary in the name of love, and she may need to loosen up a bit.

### **8. Bad Girl/Good Boy**

She's usually more kooky than bad, but he's a squeaky clean Peter Graves type and she drives him crazy. He needs to be shaken up and she needs to be grounded. He may be a lawyer or an accountant, she may be an artist or a funky café owner.

### **9. Environmentalist vs. Developer**

He wants to build a theme park right next to her family's pastoral estate. Or she wants to open a pizza joint in the middle of an idyllic town. This device has gotten pretty old, so try to come up with something very fresh and original.

### **10. Mentor/Protégé**

One of them has something the other needs to learn. The two work together on some kind of project. Many Jayne Krentz books feature this kind of story very effectively.

### **11. He Killed Dad**

Romeo and Juliet revisited. Two people or families are on opposite sides of an issue. It could be north and south, feuding Scottish clans or Indians vs whites. This creates a very strong conflict. Just be sure that the conflict isn't so strong that you can't figure out how to resolve it.

### **12. Amnesia or Mistaken Identity**

This is one of the classic Shakespearean devices. You can get a lot of mileage out of these if you are clever and remember to keep the core of the relationship humming.

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### **13. Reunion/Secret Baby**

They had a romance years ago, but something went wrong and they went their separate ways. Now they come together again after a long absence. This one often works well because it is so close to life. Not many women once disguised themselves as men in order to sneak onto a pirate ship, but most people have someone in their past who may still intrigue them if given the opportunity. This plot leads naturally to the secret baby device, in which a pregnancy resulted from the long-ago romance but the guy doesn't know about it.

### **14. Ashley Wilkes**

The conflict in this type of story is that one of them is carrying a torch for someone else. The someone else could be deceased spouse or sweetheart, or it could be someone living. We wait eagerly for the torch to be toppled and for the character holding it to come to his or her senses. This can be expanded into another level. For example, one of them may be engaged to someone else, and feels honour bound to keep that commitment, even when true love comes along in another form.

Classic stories become classics for a good reason – everyone likes them, and they have stood the test of time. Of course you must come up with a fresh approach and a strong voice, but if you apply your unique style to a proven hit, you may find the waters easier to navigate.

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