



*Man, Oh Man!*

**WRITING  
M/M FICTION  
FOR KINKS & CASH**

**JOSH LANYON**

Lambda Literary Award Finalist & Winner of the 2006 USA BookNews Award for LGBT Fiction

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

**MLR Press, LLC**

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mlrpress

First Edition

2008

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

By the time *Man, Oh Man! Writing M/M Fiction for Kinks and Ca\$h* makes it to press, almost certainly something will be out of date. And I'll have thought of a half dozen things I should have mentioned—not to mention authors, editors, reviewers, publishers I should have interviewed or asked to participate. That's the nature of writing books. So I've decided to view this as the first edition of a work in progress.

I want to take a moment and thank all the editors, publishers, reviewers, authors—and, of course, readers—who were so generous with their time and thoughts. Only two publishers and two authors failed to deliver on their commitments; and I'm truly appreciative of the help and cooperation I received. I hope it pays off for all of us in better written M/M fiction and the continued health of this vibrant market.

In particular I want to thank my wonderful publisher, Laura Baumbach, for letting herself be talked into this project; my editor Judith David for her unfailing patience, tact, and encouragement; Kris Jacen for her clever and painstaking formatting wizardry, which literally shaped my words; and my frequent partner-in-crime Sarah Black for her always unstinting enthusiasm.

Finally, I want to offer special thanks to Lise Y., who inadvertently inspired this project, and then went on to help in numerous and invaluable ways.

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## CHAPTER 1: NOT THAT THERE'S ANYTHING WRONG WITH THAT

### Introduction

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, Author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

I love writing male/male romance. I have been a social activist almost all my life. My novels have dealt with such social issues as discrimination, "coming out", gay marriage, gay adoption, testicular cancer, internalized homophobia and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". Through my stories and novels, I try to make my readers think about these issues and look at them on a personal level through my characters.

\* \* \* \*

What this book is *not* about: Although there's a clear link between slash fan fiction and the rise of original Man on Man (M/M) fiction—as well as a direct correlation between the Internet and e-publishing, and the mainstreaming of M/M fiction—the intention here is not to trace the history of M/M writing as a commercial enterprise. Nor is this an effort to analyze or justify M/M writing. It is not an attempt to figure out what M/M literature means for gay letters in general.



Although, in the course of interviews and discussions, all those topics were brushed on, this is not a scholarly work or a philosophical treatise.

This book is a writing tool, plain and simple. It's designed to help those who wish to write for the M/M market figure out the best way to do that—and, ideally, help those already working in this genre hone their skills.

While I hope this book will be useful to writers of slash fan fiction, fan fiction is its own art form, and many of the concerns of professional writers are not shared by fan fiction authors. Obviously many of the techniques and processes discussed here will be useful to writing M/M fiction in any application, but fan fiction has unique and specific requirements which are not addressed—at least in this edition.

What this book is also *not*, is all me, all the time. Yes, you're going to get plenty of my thoughts based on my own writing—and reading—experience. But the opinions expressed within do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the management, and I've included plenty of management. You'll hear from publishers, editors, reviewers, readers, and other writers. Mostly other writers; in fact, unless otherwise indicated, quotes *are* from other writers—many with whom I'm guessing you're already familiar.

While each section of this book builds on the previous section, you'll find that we're often doubling back or leaping ahead to other facets of the M/M story. That's because, in writing, it all works together. No single element stands on its own. Characterization intersects with plot, plot dovetails with

theme, theme often leads back to characterization, which leads to point of view....

The majority of excerpts I use to illustrate my points are taken from my own work—published or soon to be published. This isn't just to appease my fans or because I'm an egomaniac; it's a practical consideration as well. How do you know you want to take my advice if you have no idea what kind of writer I am? These excerpts serve as my credentials. If you don't like my style or the techniques I use in any given writing component, then you know what to ignore—the deliberate choices you make, the conscious decisions—of *how* you will tell your stories is all part of honing your craft. The best writing is usually not a product of happy accident.

I'm not trying to give you one definitive answer to any single question, so don't look for that. That's not the reality of writing or publishing. I wouldn't have included all these quotes from other learned folks if I wanted you to sit unquestioningly at my feet while I bounce pearls of wisdom off your noggin.

By the time you finish this book you should have an understanding of the steps involved in getting published—and the different options open to you. You'll almost certainly have a better, more realistic understanding of how this business—and it is a business—works.

Equally important, you should have a refined appreciation for what constitutes good M/M writing—yep, as I define it. We're going to examine the elements necessary to any work of fiction, but our focus will be how these elements apply specifically to M/M writing. There are plenty of wonderful,

useful writing books out there (and I'll be sure to recommend some of my favorites), but the M/M genre has its own requirements, and those are the gist of this book.

I hope that no matter where you are in your publishing career, you'll take away a few tips and tricks to improve your own work. I admit that this is a self-serving motive. Like most fiction writers, I'm first and foremost a lover of stories, and the more wonderful M/M books there are to read, the happier I'll be.

One final thing. When I mentioned on various lists and forums that I was writing this book, I received—in addition to the general rejoicing and much feasting—a couple of interesting reactions. One or two people expressed the belief that a man was the ideal person to write such a book because he would have unique insight into masculine thoughts and emotions. Others felt the opposite: that it was somehow inherently unfair that a man should write this guide when M/M fiction is primarily written for, and by, women. In my opinion both reactions illustrate what's wrong with a lot of M/M writing: namely, the notion that creating realistic and complex male characters would somehow be a different process than creating any other character or that what would be true of one man would be true of all men. If you take away one thing from this book, let it be the commitment to creating individual and nuanced male characters rather than stereotypes and clichés.

My sole qualification for writing this book is that I'm a skilled and successful writer of M/M fiction; don't look to me

for answers to the secrets of the universe because I'm still trying to figure those out myself.

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, writer and reviewer, Author of *Captain's Surrender* and *The Witch's Boy*

I personally would also like to see a bit more "realism"—a bit more awareness that life is sometimes rough, particularly if you're GBLT, and that it isn't all swooning into the arms of some hard muscled chap who will solve all your ills with his magic penis. (Or at least, that and the werewolf/vampire bite which will magically mean you instantly lose a stone in weight, never age and stay beautiful and soul-bonded forever.)

\* \* \* \*

You'll notice that there's no separate chapter on the relationship. That's because nearly every element that we're going to discuss ultimately works toward romance and relationship. M/M fiction is romance fiction. The M/M relationship represents the central homoerotic relationship: two men falling in love against the odds. As such, it is genre fiction.

By genre fiction, we mean fiction that falls into distinct literary categories: mystery, fantasy, westerns, military, paranormal, science fiction, historicals—and, of course, pure (or impure) romance. The M/M titles that initially "broke out" (all things being relative) were almost exclusively genre fiction: *Swordspoint* by Ellen Kushner, *The Fire's Stone* by

Tanya Huff, the historical novels of Mary Renault, and almost anything by Mel Keegan, to name a few examples. M/M itself is kind of an umbrella term for a strong gay or Man/Man romantic plot (or subplot) in what could well be a genre novel. Is Lynn Flewelling's Nightrunner series fantasy or M/M or both? The answer really depends on whom you talk to and what they love about her books.

By the way, genre or escapist fiction is not the same thing as Fiction for Dummies, and just because a novel is a fantasy or a western or a mystery needn't mean it has nothing of importance to say. True, looking at some of the bestsellers on any given day at Fictionwise you might be tempted to draw that conclusion, but it would be a hasty one.

The M/M market is expanding rapidly, which means it's already evolving into something more than a read for ladies with time and vibrator on their hands. While it's still a long way from mass market fiction, bestselling mainstream authors like Suzanne Brockmann are introducing the concept of man love as acceptable literary fare to a whole new audience.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I believe the M/M genre is a tremendous opportunity for authors to positively influence society and affect individual thinking.

\* \* \* \*

Our challenge is to write an entertaining book that will appeal to a lot of readers, both male and female, and have something meaningful or memorable to say about life and love.

Think about the M/M novels that have moved you—made you laugh or cry or even managed to change your mind—think about the M/M novels that inspired to want to write your own homoerotic romance.

For me that book was *The Charioteer* by Mary Renault.

On one level the novel is a wartime love story among three men, but it's also an exploration of sexuality, identity and disability, power dynamics within romantic relationships, the role of the individual in society, etc. I read *The Charioteer* in college. It genuinely moved me, changed my mind about a number of things, and set me on my course to write M/M fiction.

This is not to say that every work of M/M fiction needs to change someone's life. There's nothing wrong with providing someone a little amusement at the end of a hard day's work. It is a reminder, though, that an erotic novel can be more than a stimulus for masturbation.

While it's important to familiarize yourself with what's been done within any genre in which you hope to write, it's equally important to anticipate what need has not yet been filled by those of us already working in the field. Remember, when you check out what's available at your bookstore, you're seeing what editors and publishers were buying *one to two years ago*. Chances are good they aren't still buying those kinds of stories: the need for them has been met. It's a little different

with e-publishing, but even so, you want to be ahead of the curve, not behind it. The best way to anticipate what editors will be looking for next is to study the industry and stay current with developments within the genre.

By the way, it's hard to write the kind of books you don't like to read.

If you want to know what editors will be publishing next, *listen to readers*. I don't mean your friends and your mom and the pals who "beta" or critique your fiction; I mean listen to readers in general. Take a look at what's hitting the bestseller lists on the publishers you're submitting to. Listen in on those reader discussion forums. Check out what's hot in mainstream publishing.

When I first mentioned to friends that I was thinking of putting together a book on writing M/M fiction, reader and aspiring writer Lise Y. wrote me and said, "I think you should open the book with a note similar to the one you sent me once: that the writer's objective is to weave a cocoon of make-believe around the reader and keep them totally engaged in the story—and that every bit of advice you give will be to make sure that end is achieved."

Lise, I couldn't have said it better myself.

\* \* \* \*

*Is there a difference between M/M and Gay Fiction?*

The essential difference between M/M fiction and all other gay genre fiction is that regardless of the genre—mystery, military, paranormal, historical—the romantic relationship

between the two male protagonists is going to be of paramount importance. *All* M/M fiction is romantic fiction.

In M/M fiction, the romance is the foundation. The superstructure is whatever genre you choose to build on that foundation. So you can have an M/M mystery or an M/M paranormal or an M/M contemporary romance, and the story will have to meet all the requirements of that genre *plus* it will have to meet the requirements of an M/M romance.

There are other differences as well. But this is the main one to remember: you're writing about a relationship between two men. The story you tell is the story of that relationship, regardless of the context in which you choose to place it. Don't lose sight of that fact. Don't get carried away with your world-building or your social relevance or your who dunnit puzzles to the detriment of developing that central relationship.

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

I suppose M/M is not traditional and is often written by women. M/M may not even be romance. Slash fiction traditionally goes back to the 1970s and Star Trek so it has its roots in fan fic, not romance. Yaoi is a whole different thing which is also associated with M/M and gay romance.

I've been told Oscar Wilde is credited with writing a gay romance but then not much happened until possibly the '70s. 1970's, I mean. The Romantics line of books talks about providing an outlet for gay genre romance when there wasn't much to be found ... and that line started only a few years



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ago. I have gay male authors at LI who assure me that you couldn't find it not long ago.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

In our business, we publish GLBT romance and romance genres. We do not publish more mainstream gay literature or hardcore gay erotica.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I'm not sure if this is the answer you're looking for, but on our website the genre listings are: Gay-Lesbian (under the mainstream heading), and Gay-Lesbian Romance.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

Yes. For me, "gay" fiction can be F/F as well, although the market is really about M/M right now.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press (Note AQP is invitation only.)

To us, there's no difference whatsoever. A good story is a good story ... case closed.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

No. We really don't care, as long as it's hot. But remember, we're short, super hot, sci-fi and paranormal. *(Niche-niche publishing, in other words.)*

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

We only use M/M in our blurb warnings, and do have a couple F/F books that again, are in the warnings. Right now all our GLBT stories are filed under our Molten Silver line.

\* \* \* \*

*So I guess the next question would be: Is there a difference between M/M romance novels and gay romance novels? I'm going to generalize here and say yes, there is. Usually. Not always. The stand-out thing about M/M versus gay romantic fiction is that there's a distinct sensibility to M/M fiction. In effect, it's gay men in love and making love versus gay men fucking. It's about sensual and evocative details. It's about the choice of language. It's about emotions rather than mechanics.*

For years I heard from readers (mostly male) that there was something different about the gay mystery series I wrote; I suspected it had to do with the ongoing and troubled relationship between my protag, Adrien English, and his closeted cop boyfriend, Jake Riordan. But it wasn't until I picked up a large, female readership that the difference was explained to me—repeatedly. In addition to a mystery, I had written a *romance* novel. Sure, there was sex in it, but the sex was minimal compared to much of what was produced by

my counterparts at Gay Men's Press (GMP). What made the books stand out for these readers was that complex romantic relationship—NOT, as it turned out, my fiendishly clever mystery plots.

So it's a more sentimental and romantic approach to love and sex than you might find in a gay romance novel—let alone gay porn. It is—forgive me—a more feminine approach. And no, I'm not saying I write like a girl. Or that you need to.

You do need to understand and appreciate your audience, however. Essentially what we're doing here—and I apologize in advance for wiping the fairy dust off—is creating a product. Unless you're planning to write for yourself alone, in which case I don't understand why you're holding this book (but please go ahead and buy it anyway), you hope to share your stories and your vision with others. And the odds are good that you want to be paid for the privilege.

In effect, you're in the business of producing stories to sell to readers. Chances are you will choose to go through a middleman, also known as a publisher.

There are numerous publishers, especially e-publishers, of M/M or gay genre fiction. The M/M market is still in its growth phase and currently shows no signs of slowing. It's a great time to be writing M/M fiction, however it's important to be aware that any time a market experiences this kind of explosive growth, a flood of inferior second-rate product is in the offing and will soon swamp readers in derivative mediocrity. And what happens then is that readers grow jaded and bored with the genre in whole and move on to something new.

Remember those fat, racy historical romances back in the '70? Or the original paranormal boom in the '80s? The publishing paradigm is unfortunately a self-destructive one.

But take heart. The best writers survive regardless of market fluctuations. If you've concocted original and well-written stories and nurtured your loyal readership by consistently providing them with quality fiction, you'll weather any eventual glut.

Respect your readers and constantly strive to improve your craft, and you're investing in the best insurance policy a writing career can have.

\* \* \* \*

*What percentage of your list is devoted solely to M/M Fiction?*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing

Kensington doesn't publish any M/M fiction.

(Note here that much of Kensington's gay fiction line is gay genre fiction, including gay romance.)

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

At this point we have about one M/M fiction book a week.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Ninety-eight percent.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Samhain is a general publisher. As such, we publish a wide variety of genres, from romance, to sci-fi/fantasy, to mystery, etc. We don't have a set rule on how many of a particular genre we release every month. We're looking for good stories across all genres of fiction and non-fiction. One month we might have four to five fantastic M/M stories release, the next month, only one or two.

That said, I'd surmise that M/M fiction makes up 5-7% of our catalog.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

Twenty-five percent. Roughly.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

We have recently opened Amber Allure—our GLBT fiction and erotic romance imprint. Now, our release schedule for this imprint consumes approximately 40% of our monthly company-wide releases (another 40% is dedicated to heterosexual erotic romance, while the remaining 20% is dedicated to "non-erotic" genre fiction, including single title romances and every other "non-erotica" genre imaginable). Each month since July of 2007, we have concentrated on expanding this genre/building this imprint, and, to the best of my knowledge, we are currently the only small press that has actually created a separate imprint for this thriving genre. By this time next year, we hope to increase our overall output,

keeping the percentages the same (based on current numbers), just increasing the number of actual new manuscripts released overall each month.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Coincidentally—about twenty-five percent—because of course that's based on what we receive. We don't really care if a story's M/M, M/F/M, M/M/M/M ... whatever. We're looking for good stories, not numbers.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

Our M/M fiction is under our Molten Silver line, and I think the percentage is around 45-50% of that line.

\* \* \* \*

*How does M/M fare in comparison to other lines/genres?*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Quite well in e-book form, obviously, or we wouldn't have that much.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

M/M is, of course, our best seller. Our readers come to us for M/M romance, counting on a happy ending and a good story.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

M/M fiction is an incredibly popular genre. Since our first M/M fiction title released in May 2006, I've seen the genre grow by leaps and bounds. In my opinion, M/M fiction is the market with the largest growth potential, as more and more readers are turned on to those books.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

If you are talking about sales, in book form, M/M outsells most of our titles with the exception of anthologies.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

No question about it ... the genre has exploded! Several years ago, any book not considered "erotic romance" became a "hard-sell." Today, any book that is not "M/M erotic romance" has fallen to an "iffy-sell." Granted, erotic romance overall still has a definite fan base, but "gay erotica" is now front and center when it comes to e-book readers, and also for many paperback readers who like their M/M fiction "steamy."

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

In the beginning, back when saber tooth tigers freely roamed the Internet, we saw slightly lower sales volume in M/M as a whole. However that's turned around dramatically in the last four years. Again, the story line wins out.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

It sells well and they've been highly reviewed.

\* \* \* \*

Just as writers have different motivations for choosing to write what they write, readers read for a variety of reasons. Understanding the appeal of M/M fiction better enables you to write the kinds of stories that will keep readers coming back for more.

I asked Treva Harte of Loose Id who the target audience was for M/M fiction? Her answer: Whoever likes well-written M/M stories? I would guess that most of our audience is straight females but we have a solid contingent of gay readers as well.

Kensington's John Scognamiglio

It's two different audiences. Readers who are reading M/M fiction aren't reading gay fiction. It's two different types of books.

Well, yes and no.

\* \* \* \*

Kellie W., reader

I am first and foremost a mystery buff. For some reason I also appreciate relationships between men and went off in search of gay mysteries. Most of these disappointed because they were either just simply mysteries with a gay character and not entirely well done or because any relationships were



dealt with rather badly—like a flat-mate or friend rather than a lover. I began to sympathize with writers of fan fiction! So I craved some relationship stuff with my mystery and thus I was very lucky I found you! It satisfied me in having a great mystery and also having a character that has a love life and a tangled one at that. But so few writers do what you do.

\* \* \* \*

Speaking from own experience, I started writing gay mysteries for Gay Men's Press back in the '90s. GMP was soon swallowed up by Millivres Ltd., which ultimately merged into the Millivres Prowler Group (MPG). MPG published everything from gay porn to literary fiction. They ran a very successful gay genre fiction line featuring writers like Mel Keegan, William Maltese, and Chris Hunt.

My readers at that time were almost exclusively gay men, but as the years passed I noticed that the e-mail I received from readers was changing; a lot more women were writing—frequently trying to explain or excuse why they liked my books so much.

At the time of this writing, I'd say my readership is about half and half.

Will this prove true for most M/M writers? Or gay genre fiction writers? Are we all writing potential crossover material? Probably not. But the possibility exists—and the smart writer will nurture this potential.

And there, frankly, I believe the M/M writer has the advantage. While many women readers are likely to be disappointed by the lack of emotional intensity in much of gay

genre fiction, there's a great deal to appeal to gay male readers in M/M fiction. After all, the common complaint about porn (assuming you're a guy who *has* a complaint) is the lack of plot or character development, and what M/M fiction attempts to do—even the worst M/M fiction—is remedy that. Sexy adventure, westerns, mysteries, sci-fi, historicals, fantasy and contemporary romance may provide the framework, but M/M fiction is all about the relationships.

\* \* \* \*

Ken W., reader

You write (even more so in the case of *A Dangerous Thing* than in *Fatal Shadows*) good novels in which murders happen to occur. In *Dangerous* I am especially enjoying the tentative, guarded, and often wry regard that is growing between Adrien and Jake. The deaths in your books are not just incidental and almost negligible (as they are in Stout) but they are not what chiefly keeps me reading on. I want to find out how the two men get along.

\* \* \* \*

True, for the most part, gay male readers have not yet, in significant numbers, discovered M/M fiction. Partly I think that's due to the fact that so much of it is published online and through e-books. Men have never been a huge part of the slash fandom, and slash fiction was the spawning ground for original M/M fiction. Many, many of the women currently writing M/M graduated from fan fic.

Most gay men are still finding their love stories and erotica in brick-and-mortar stores. They're buying print books—they *prefer* print books.

However, the reaction to M/M fiction has been largely positive from male readers familiar with the genre, leading me to believe this market is a long way from being tapped out—and is, in fact, a long way from peaking.

Well, think about it. The mother of M/M fiction is, in my opinion, Mary Renault, who wrote the gay classic *The Charioteer*, along with a number of beautifully written historical novels featuring homosexual relationships.

I asked gay activist and celebrated author Victor J. Banis, who started out in the gay pulps back in the '60s, and who's written over one hundred and fifty novels, why he thought a book written by a woman perennially makes the Top Gay Novels of All Times lists:

*The Charioteer*—gosh, it's been so many years—well, I can see gay men loving it. I love her books. They are so romantic, and gay men have that romantic side as well. We aren't just horn dogs—well, okay, most of the time—but, more than straight men, we too have our romantic side—it's just that in my opinion, neither side of our nature is being well served by gay publishers today. We have the artsy fartsy books (read, dreary) which leave me snoring, and we have the hard core erotica, which has about as much story value as a Wheaties box. And, almost nothing in between. Why can't a gay novel include good writing, a story worth following, and seriously hot action as well? I have no idea, but this is an idea that seems foreign to gay publishers today—and, in my opinion,

explains why gay fiction is in the doldrums that it is. If I knew nothing about gay fiction but the stuff being published today I would have long ago turned in my merit badge. I'm sorry, but I don't think "gay" has to equal "tiresome." But, hey, I'm just a word junkie. I write what I would like to read.

When gay male readers do finally catch on to M/M fiction, I think the market will morph once again. In the meantime, most of our readers seem to be women. And if women have a hard time admitting to reading *straight* heterosexual romance and erotica, how much harder a time do they have acknowledging enjoying something considered perverse by a vocal and sizable percentage of society?

Anyway, back to understanding what makes this genre popular with readers. I threw the question of *Why Do You Enjoy Reading M/M Fiction* out to my Live Journal, and received a broad spectrum of answers:

\* \* \* \*

Liz, reader

Why do I read it? Because men fascinate me. Men are beautiful. I like the passion in M/M stories. Because it's about men. (Am I repeating myself?)

\* \* \* \*

Txliar, reader

There is slash and M/M that is completely free of formula and cliché, offers readers and writers freedom to explore, reflect something more real for them, and yes, dabble in something new and faintly taboo.

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\* \* \* \*

Mei, reader

Perhaps because I'm only 17, slash also relates to me more. Het relationships in fiction are romanticized to the point where it just seems unrealistic and ridiculous. Slash has the drunken fumbings, the underlying sexual tension and the doubts and uncertainties. All het people ever care about is whether they have a chance. There's more *stuff* in slash.

*(We could go into the problem of underage readers accessing erotic stories on the 'Net, but I'll leave that subject for another day.)*

\* \* \* \*

Eve, reader

Another possible reason why I am drawn to M/M fiction is that I want to read about the sensitive side of men, I know this is slightly stereotyping, it's just that in a M/F fiction, it's not that often we get to see men opening their heart or struggling with their emotions etc. This is partly due to all those "chick-fics" written mostly from a straight woman's (whining) perspective. I think they killed off M/F romance novel for me.

\* \* \* \*

Another reader stated, "I grew up when fiction was written by men with men as main characters. This would sound very strange to people who know me as I have been raised to be very strong and trained to physically kick butt, but I got tired

of all the female characters, it was overload, I wanted the familiar again."

\* \* \* \*

Midnight Owl reviewer—and winner of the Linden Bay Romance's 2007 Starlight Writing Contest—Alex Beecroft summarized the reasons she's heard as follows.

1. Men are hot, two men are hotter.
2. Female characters are boring.
3. M/F romance is constrained by all sorts of societal baggage which M/M romance is free of.
4. It's an oblique way to examine power inequalities in relationships in a "purer" form than is possible in M/F fiction. (because of the societal baggage.)
5. It's a feminist dig at the heterocentricity of fiction.
6. It's transgressive and therefore cool.
7. It's a way of examining sexual relationships which are removed enough from your own experience to be safe to handle and examine.
8. Het is icky.

\* \* \* \*

In short, the reasons are as individual and varied as the readers themselves. You don't necessarily need to share or identify with all the reasons for enjoying M/M fiction, but you do need to be aware of the demands of the genre and reader expectation.

Probably the single best example of a writer who has successfully crossed from M/M fiction to gay genre fiction—and then back again—is the legendary Mel Keegan.

Starting out in fan fiction, Keegan was able to translate wildly imaginative character dynamics and original world-building into effective genre fiction featuring man-loving protagonists. Quickly becoming one of Gay Men's Press best-selling authors, Keegan was also one of their first—and only—authors to appeal to female readers in significant numbers.

Keegan's work has the robust physical action and adventure designed to appeal to male readers—not to mention explicit sex—balanced by intensely romantic, emotional relationships and character dynamics popular with feminine readers.

Whether you like or dislike Keegan's work—or are even completely unfamiliar with it—there's no denying that kind of success is worth analyzing.

\* \* \* \*

Mel Keegan, author of *Fortunes of War*, *Death's Head*, *Nocturne*, etc.

I'd have to say I don't short-change readers of either gender. The stories always pivot on a gay romance of some kind, which makes them of interest to most gay guys and quite a large section of the female readership. A lot of straight guys enjoy a lesbian romp ... same difference. A good many women enjoy a romance for its own sake, as witnessed by the big, busy "romance of the month" type marketplace.

To thoroughly enjoy a book, lose yourself in it and stay up all night to finish it, it must strike a chord. There has to be some common ground between the world of the novel and the world inside the reader's head. Human emotions, the struggle to survive, the need to be loved, a desire to better oneself, a yen for adventure, our dread of failure, our sense of humor, the ambition to change at least our corner of the world into a better nook ... these elements are our common ground. Male, female, gay, straight—we're all the same, when we're expressed in these terms. If I were to craft a completely gay novel, as outlined above, I'd be investing in the characters all the same traits, and I'd hope that the work would be rewarding for *all* readers. The real question is, would most women even buy the book, having read the blurb? Some most certainly would, since their affinity, for whatever reason, is for gay men and perhaps the "scene."

Yet I have a strong intuition that women readers—and for all I know, gay guys too—key on some indeterminate combination of the gay romance *and* its interaction with the bigger picture—which is to say, how it fits into the puzzle of the rest of the world. Take *Fortunes of War* as an example. It's one of my most dedicated romances, but it's also a historical with aspects of the murder mystery, the political thriller, and the wide-canvas adventure. If Robin had been a girl (and perish that particular thought, incidentally), *FOW* could have been a plot for Errol Flynn. Making the romance gay added another dimension to a story that already worked well on almost every level. So I'm speculating that women readers are attracted by several aspects of the work.



First, straight women and gay guys all love a handsome hero. Next, there's not many of us who don't enjoy the romance aspect of an otherwise strong story. (It's worth mentioning here that not merely guys, but also a lot of women can't read pure romance, which is romance for its own sake, be it hetero or gay.) Then, since het guys often turn on to lesbian romance, is it so surprising that women get a kick out of M/M romance?

Regarding my own work, I can only say that without any conscious intention, I was drawn to the recurring scenario—in limitless re-stagings and re-dressings—of gay romance interacting with the world at large, of gay guys taking on a more or less straight world, and beating it at its own game. My historicals certainly fall into this mold, with *Fortunes of War*, *The Deceivers*, and *Dangerous Moonlight* being my best examples. The SF and fantasy stories are not so close to the mold, because I love to play with social models. The *Narc* and *Hellgate* novels deliberately portray a time when the question of male, female, straight, gay is of no concern anymore. Humans are liberated—and people have much bigger problems to worry about than their sex lives. So in the SF works you have the gay, lesbian, and feminist scenes completely integrated with society at large, which is tremendously attractive to both guys and women. Still, at the root of all these stories is the romance ... and here's something interesting. There is enough "other stuff" in my novels for a minority of straight guys to be reading them!

\* \* \* \*

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

Hey, there's hope for us all yet.

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## CHAPTER 2: YOU GOT A BETTER IDEA?

### Coming up with a Story Concept

New and aspiring writers have a tendency to wonder if they are "doing it right." We're talking writing here, by the way.

Anything that helps you get that first rough draft down on paper is the "right" way of doing it.

I get questions about whether I write in long hand or at the computer (I started out in long hand and I now write directly to my laptop); whether I outline (sometimes); whether I work on more than one project at a time (yes); whether I listen to music when I write (no); whether I think critique groups are a good idea (usually); whether I do what Stephen King does (what are we talking about here?); whether it's okay to write during a full moon (if you can type with furry paws, go for it).

*Anything that helps you get that first rough draft down on paper is the right way of doing it. Period.*

Does it help if I confess that every time I start a new project I have moments of genuine panic when I wonder if it's always this hard, if it's going slower than usual, if I always have these moments of genuine panic, etc.?

Writing is hard work; don't kid yourself. We keep writing because we love the stories. We love finding out what happens next.

Every story starts with an idea. A hook.

*What is a "hook?"*

No, it's not some kinky sex toy gay guys use.

The hook is the distilled essence of your story. In TV and film it's known as the tagline. It's your one-minute elevator pitch. It's the second paragraph in your query letter. It's the first paragraph of the blurb on the back of your book. It's the foundation of your New Author's ten-minute pitch to publishers at writing conferences.

The hook is what the story is about: who, what, when, where, why, and how. It's the characters and their conflict. But most importantly, it's what sets your book apart from everyone else's.

*Every story must have a hook.*

You should be able to recite your story's hook in your sleep—in twenty-five words or less.

Okay, fifty words or less. But if you can't explain what your book is about in a couple of sentences, you've got a problem.

Ideally, the hook should be strong and original. It should be commercial. It should convince a publisher that she or he wants to invest time and money in you and your work.

*Fifty years ago a glamorous Hollywood party ended in murder—the only clue a bloody tarot card. Timothy North is trying to find out what happened that long ago summer's night, but when a tarot card turns up pinned to his front door, the only person Tim can turn to for help is his ex-lover, Detective Jack Brady.*

*Cards on the Table by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)*

(Uh, now that I think about it, fifty-seven words is perfect for the hook.)

*Coming up with great commercial ideas*

I don't think coming up with ideas is the hard part for most aspiring authors. I think ideas are plentiful. Great ideas are a little scarcer. Great *original* ideas are hard as hell to come by. Don't worry about it.

Seriously. I'm sure you've heard the saying, *nothing new under the sun*. It's essentially true. There are no new ideas. In fact, according to Ms. Matsukado, my tenth-grade creative writing teacher, there are only seven basic literary plots:

man vs. nature

man vs. man

man vs. society

man vs. machines/technology

man vs. the supernatural

man vs. self

man vs. god/religion

And I've seen that condensed to Joseph Campbell's monomythic *Hero's Journey*.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about, again, don't worry about it. I'm just hoping to convince the kids in the back of the class that I know what I'm talking about.

What makes an idea original and fresh—or commercial—is in the execution. A big part of execution is your writing. Your skill as a writer. Your voice, your facility with language, your sense of humor—or ability to create gut-wrenching angst—your psychological or social insights. Writing skills have to do with a lot more than mechanics and a grasp of basic grammar.

The other part of execution has to do with stage trappings or motif. The framework of your story is where the commerciality comes in.

Here's an example of how you take an ordinary plot and make it topical and commercial.

Let's start with a basic tried and true story idea: hero rescues former lover from danger.

We've got a million possibilities (and at least five of the seven basic literary plots at our disposal), and how we decide to spin this yarn will determine whether publishers, reviewers, and readers will find it fresh or not.

What we do is take some "hot" elements in M/M fiction—ex-lovers, foreign lands, and the military—and combine them with what's newsworthy or currently selling well in mainstream fiction and—pay attention—non-fiction. Like ... the war in Iraq.

So the new and improved plot is: the leader of a Special Operations force is sent into the wilds of Iraq to rescue his missing ex-lover, a Navy SEAL.

Lots of potential there for both internal and external conflict—and that's crucial. You want strong ideas that

support a meaty story. Ahem. And in romance, conflict equals plot. (We'll talk more about that later.)

Our Special Ops protagonist rushing to the rescue of his ex-lover has lots of potential for action and adventure—there's nothing like shared danger to bring two guys together—and what's sexier than Navy SEALs or Special Ops? Just looking at that tagline I'm wondering why these guys broke up, and why did the Navy SEAL's mission fail, and will he be glad to see his ex-lover or will it be too tough on his ego having his ass saved by his ex? Is the SEAL injured? Who dumped whom?

There's a story here—lots of story. It's hot, it's topical, and it's commercial.

But how do you know what's currently selling in mainstream publishing? Visit your bookstore. Check out Amazon's bestsellers list. Check out *Publisher's Weekly*. Even better, subscribe to *Publisher's Lunch* through Publisher's Marketplace. [www.publishersmarketplace.com/](http://www.publishersmarketplace.com/)

In fact, our soldier sent to rescue his ex-lover scenario was based on a couple of deals I saw in *Publisher's Lunch*.

The first was a US marine captain's *Band of Brothers* account of his platoon in Iraq "showcasing how love and faith prevail even in the darkest hours of the war." The second was for another nonfiction memoir by the leader of a Special Operations force sent to rescue a missing Navy SEAL in Afghanistan.

Now, while it's true that much of our work in M/M fiction is never going to appear on the mainstream publishing radar, I'm not advising you to steal your concepts and ideas wholesale. Obviously, you would need to tweak such ideas,

make them your own. Change the names and faces and setting and military rank to protect the innocent.

Still, military rescues are not news in the history of the world. Soldiers have been sent to retrieve missing comrades since man first started crunching heads with handy dinosaur bones—we've all read the books and seen the movies—everything from *Gunga Din* to *Saving Private Ryan*. It's not a new idea, but there are ways to make it fresh. Turning it into an M/M love story is one of them, but in itself not enough.

Again, when you're looking for a concept or motif for your story, pay extra attention to the elements that are selling well in non-fiction. For example, flipping through my recent copy of *Publisher's Weekly*, I'm seeing books out on underwater photography, an Italian-American pastry chef with a bestselling book on desserts, and the story of two male slaves who escaped to freedom in the 1800s.

That's some good, workable stuff. There's a dearth of realistic ethnic and minority M/M stories; underwater photography hasn't been done much, if at all; and chefs, cooking, and all things culinary are trendy right now. Just check out Polly Z. Brite's New Orleans series or the Romantics *Hot Sauce*.

Read the newspaper, watch the news, scan the Internet for those goofy, off-beat tidbits. These are all good sources for timely and interesting plot ideas.

\* \* \* \*

*What are you tired of seeing in submissions for M/M or Gay Fiction?*



Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing

I'm really tired of submissions focusing on child abuse/sex abuse and pedophile priests.

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

I like M/M stories to have a more male POV, even if much of what we get is still female fantasy.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Poorly written/spell-checked subs. Pornography masquerading as romance. The assumption that BDSM is a necessary part of the gay erotic and romantic experience.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I'd love to never see a submission again where one of the men in the relationship might as well be a woman with a penis. Men are different from women. I don't want to read a book marked as M/M when it seems like the author just took a het romance and changed one of the names and the subsequent body parts. That doesn't work for me, or for readers.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I don't care for a couple where one of the partners is basically like a female with a penis.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

At this point in time, there is no "sub-genre" we are tired of seeing. However, we cannot express strongly enough that emotion and drama, whatever the story, are key factors. We only publish manuscripts that contain a firm storyline—in other words, an endless string of meaningless sexual encounters based around a flimsy plot will not interest us in the least. The stories we publish must be able to stand on their own, even if an author were to remove all the actual sexual content—take it off-screen, so to speak. Therefore, when we see a story with absolutely no plot or character development or emotion, we consider it a firm "reject." Adding sex for the sake of sex might work at some publishers, but not at AQP. Each story must justify its content.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Honestly, nothing. I don't ever want to read another F/F written by a guy who thinks he's not only welcome to watch but hopes to join in, but if it's M/M and fits our guidelines, bring it on.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

So far I'm not sick to death of any M/M themes. Just more.

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, Night Owl Reviews

The plot where there is no conflict at all—they meet, they fall in love, they find a nice apartment, they discuss the curtains they're going to buy, everyone is friendly and accepting, and a convenient female relative dies in childbirth so they can adopt a baby and live cozily ever after. It's pure wish fulfillment, for sure, but as a story I'd prefer it if they earned their HEA by actually doing something to deserve it.

\* \* \* \*

Kiren Hanson, Two Lips Reviews

I haven't come across anything yet—the genre is booming and bringing with it a lot of variety so there always seems to be something new.

\* \* \* \*

Tara Renee, Two Lips Reviews

Melodrama for the sake of following a tried and true formula brings the book down.

\* \* \* \*

A couple of things to keep in mind. Editors and reviewers are people too. They bring their own likes and dislikes to the table. This is why one reviewer will dislike a book that another reviewer gave five stars/roses/lips/bonfires/wee genitalia.

Because something doesn't click for one editor, doesn't mean it won't work for another. Cut down on your chances of rejection by paying attention to the writer's guidelines that all

publishers offer. This is so basic it shouldn't need to be said, but if a publisher indicates they don't accept stories with underage characters, rape, incest, adultery, or M/F/M pairings then either don't send that submission or don't whine when—best case scenario—you're asked to make some changes.

The other thing to remember is that, for the most part, neither publishers nor reviewers are sick of particular plots or concepts *per se*. Most of their complaints have to do with characterization and execution and structure—that's all fixable stuff. So if you're burning to pen the story about an adulterous werewolf, and it's well-written enough, likely someone will be willing to publish it.

\* \* \* \*

*What would you like to see more of? (Simmer down class, we're talking submission ideas.)*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing

Coming of age stories; family dramas.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

We're always looking for engrossing, character-driven romances with an eye to interesting, individual author voice.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I'd like to see more well-developed characters and worlds. I'd like authors to step away from gay clichés to write stories where men, acting like men, fall in love. Since we're a general

publisher, I'd love to see an epic sci-fi, space opera series written where the main character is gay, and over the course of his adventures and many books, falls in love. Any author interested in writing and submitting that to me? Please?

\* \* \* \*

Kimberly Swan, reviewer *Affaire de Coeur*, Darque Reviews, Literary Nymphs

More mystery, dark suspense, more variety in paranormal.

\* \* \* \*

Bella, Two Lips Reviews

Shapeshifters. I would love more M/M shapeshifter stories.

\* \* \* \*

Tara Renee, Two Lips Reviews

I also love shifter stories—but I'm not a fan of sex while in shifted form.

\* \* \* \*

I admit I read Tara Renee and Bella's responses with raised eyebrows. *Shape-shifters*? Isn't the market crowded to capacity with shape-shifter stories? At the time we went to press with this book, I counted over eighty-seven shape-shifter novels, novellas and anthologies at the first six e-pubs I checked—and those are just the strictly M/M pairings. I didn't count M/F or M/F/M. Eighty-seven shifting shapes seems like all the shape-shifting anyone could require, but

then I'm not a big fan of shape-shifting. Clearly there's still a healthy demand out there.

By the way, if you don't enjoy vampire stories don't try to write a vampire story simply because vampires sell well. And don't *not* write about shape-shifting pirates because there are so many shape-shifting and/or pirate stories out there. (Actually, there aren't that many pirate stories out there, which is surprising considering how popular pirates are in the mainstream media these days.)

Jot down a note to self: *You need to write the kind of thing you enjoy reading.* Otherwise, it shows in the writing. You're just kidding yourself if you think it doesn't. If you're planning to write M/M fiction because you think it's a sure money maker, take it from me, there are easier ways to make money.

\* \* \* \*

*Any thoughts on trends in M/M or Gay genre fiction? Any feel for what might be the next big thing?*

Asking a publisher to identify The Next Big Thing is really sort of a joke because by the time a trend has been recognized, it's already cresting—which means the market is about to get hit with tsunami-like waves of more of the same. More paranormals fulfilling readers' fantasies. More military men falling in love. More college romances between roommates, between teammates, between coaches and players, between professors and students. You get the idea. We *all* get the idea. Making the idea your own is what matters.

Still, for the record, here's the word from our panel of experts.

\* \* \* \*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing  
No.

\* \* \* \*

Sean Michaels, Torquere Press

M/M fiction in general is a trend right now. It's very hot in all subgenres, though naturally, what's hot in traditional romance at any given time does well in M/M as well. Historical appears to be making a comeback, and the paranormal is shifting from werewolves to less traditional magical creatures.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Yaoi is gaining in popularity with both readers and writers. I've noticed more authors trying their hands at it, and a couple of my current authors have told me they're interested in writing yaoi stories.

Although probably not what you're asking in regards to trends, one thing I've noticed a lot of is authors wanting to jump onto the popular M/M fiction bandwagon without doing their homework. It's very clear to me when an author is just trying to make a buck writing what's currently popular, even though they're not comfortable with what they're writing.

As for what's the next big thing—I think M/M fiction is going to be more widely accepted. With several big-name

New York published romance authors including M/M couplings in their books—Suzanne Brockmann and Emma Holly come to mind—it seems that New York may be tentatively dipping their toes into the M/M waters to see how this genre will be accepted. I can't guess whether NY will embrace the genre entirely, but I do think it will get more readers interested in M/M fiction. The popularity of yaoi will probably play into this as well, since many yaoi readers are also graphic novel readers, which, according to recent studies I've read, is a market publishers are desperate to cater to.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

A lot of M/M is written in first person; some of the more successful titles are written in a more futuristic world where M/M relationships are more readily accepted. I look for M/M to really hit science fiction hard, and I know I am looking for exceptional M/M written in third person. A high number of M/M titles are written in first person. A writer has to be exceptional to stay in the head of the main character in a first person story and keep the story interesting.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

In actuality, overall M/M fiction is the current big thing, regardless of subgenre. We are in the middle of the explosion, but it will be anyone's guess what will be the next hot ticket on the horizon. There's truly no predicting. Several years ago, customers could not get enough of vampire erotic romance,



but these days, you can't even give those books away. Trends change, fast, and without warning, depending on the influx of new books within the genres ... in other words, it depends on how many companies jump on the bandwagon to flood the market. Once customers grow tired of a trend, they will certainly look for something else, but unfortunately, no one possesses a crystal ball to predict what it will be.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

Trends are hard to track as it's very reader based. I think the erotic romance industry was a bit surprised at the enthusiasm for M/M from a mostly female readership. Our policy is if it's a good story, well written, and smokin' hot, we'll add it to our library. Of course, those are very loose criteria.

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, Night Owl Reviews

Very few historicals. Lots of vampires and werewolves—an inordinate amount of people who shape-shift into animals of various kinds. And recently there seem to have been quite a few "soldiers come home from Iraq and overcome post traumatic stress through the power of true love" stories.

\* \* \* \*

Kimberly Swan, reviewer Affaire de Coeur, Darque Reviews, Literary Nymphs

When I first started reading M/M there were mostly single title books. Now there are more released as a series (both by single authors and multiple authors). What they're calling "twincest" is gaining more popularity and yaoi continues to have its own niche in M/M fiction. I think that there will be more ghost/psychic stories added to paranormals, as well as more crime/drama. There have been PI stories, but not nearly enough government agencies with their agents and detectives.

\* \* \* \*

Kiren Hanson, Two Lips Reviews

It seems like there are a lot of "heroes coming back from the war" type stories.

\* \* \* \*

Bella, Two Lips Reviews

Military M/M stories.

Tara Renee, Two Lips Reviews

I have noticed that some authors are getting more daring in the bedroom with their characters—they are doing more than just penetration. As to the next big thing—no clue, but maybe more graphic sex scenes or more kink in mainstream M/M erotic romances. I love stories that feature the sense of discovery of the first time—of gay sex or sex when in love. My favorites are stories that feature men who discover the magic of sex with another man while wrapped in emotion but not too heavy on the angst or anguish. Sarcasm, wit and quirky humor are always winners.

\* \* \* \*

Love never goes out of style. Romance still controls the lion's share of the popular fiction market. Classic plot dynamics are as reliable and serviceable as that little black dress of yours, but you have to ... er ... accessorize ... to keep that classic from seeming faded and overworked. Sex sells, but as reviewer "Water Nymph" AKA Kimberly Swan points out, it's "very important if there's a new or growing romance, but it has to work in the overall plot, not just be thrown in. Gratuitous sex scenes aren't going to make a book, but love scenes, even if they're spontaneous and wild, can definitely add to a good plot."

By the way, I'm sure you've noticed that the opinions of reviewers and editors and publishers often contradict each other—not to mention me. No book is right for every reader, and that's important to remember when you start getting rejections—or reviews.

The wonderful thing about storytelling is that no matter how many times a tale has been told, if you can tell it in a fresh and exciting way—if you can make it your own—someone, somewhere, will want to read it.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Ya know, they've gotten pretty good at predicting the weather these days, but that's as far as I'd venture—we never try to predict what people will buy, because any hot trend is going to be yesterday's news way too fast.

Werewolves, vampires, cats ... again, it's the quality of the writing that makes the most impression on sales.

\* \* \* \*

Truer words, etc. Genuinely original ideas are easier to sell, but the strength of any idea ultimately relies on your ability and execution. Almost any element can work if you can figure out a way to ... er ... "romanticize" it.

Publishers don't know what will be the next hot thing any more than you do. Remember that. The best ideas are the ones that fill you with enthusiasm. The ones you can't wait to work on. The ones that almost seem to write themselves.

*Write your passion.*

\* \* \* \*

*Where do you get your ideas?*

The question "Where do you get your ideas?" is one of the big clichés on the writer's circuit. But so many people ask it, I guess there has to be some legitimacy to it.

\* \* \* \*

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.

I like to look at everyday situations and skew the players involved. I'll sit in an airport or mall and watch the people around me. Many times an idea will form by watching how two people laugh and interact with each other. I also get inspiration from music and my dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

God only knows! I had one novel that is twenty-eight chapters that came to me, as a whole, one morning stepping out of the shower at 6:30am. Some of them come at the strangest times. Some come easily, some come like birthing a child.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell*, *Purgatory*, etc.

Everywhere! Someone was telling me a story about a famous musician the other day and I started thinking "well, what would happen if a fan happened to...?" We were in the grocery store just today and I saw two guys together and wondered if they were gay and what their story was. I heard the bridal march as it was played on *Rocky Horror Picture Show* one day and got a vivid image of a guy in a wedding dress, which made me wonder why he was wearing it. The ideas come out of nowhere and everywhere. Most of them go no farther than temporary amusement. A lot of my ideas come out of previous stories. I like to write in series, so as I'm writing one story, I tend to wonder about the secondary characters.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

Hmm, well I should start by saying I only write M/M or gay fiction. I'm just wired that way, I guess. There is more risk

involved in homosexual relationships, so they entice me more than their heterosexual counterparts. All the story ideas I come up with revolve around gay men. Anything else falls flat and doesn't seem to work for me.

As for where I get my ideas ... I'm very cognizant of the world around me at all times. The simplest phrase or briefest touch may spark an idea that will one day find itself in a story of mine. I once wrote a story (*For the Boys*) based on something Carol King said about the USO when I saw her at a concert. I wrote another (*Henry and Jim*) inspired by the observation that in certain light, the veins in my wrist looked like faded ink. I find inspiration everywhere—in nature, in other creative works, in the beauty of everyday life, cheesy as it sounds. Those wanting to write need only look around for something to spark their muse.

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of the Vampire Magic series, etc.

The melting pot that is my mind. LOL. Usually random bits of conversation with friends collide with bits of my science fiction past ... and then the questions come. What if these two guys were having this conversation in this setting? What would bring them to that point? What would they do next? And when the answers start coming from the characters themselves, I know I have a start of a new story.

\* \* \* \*

Scott Pomfret and Scott Whittier AKA The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

Mostly from everyday life. That is another advantage to being a gay male couple. We live openly gay lives and go to gay resort towns for vacation. Any person we meet, location, or situation can spark an idea. Romance can be created out of most any concept. It's just exaggerated, dramatized, and focused on the relationship. We have based characters on friends and relatives, but by the time we've turned it into a romance they are no longer recognizable. We have also taken simple facts of gay life like coming out or online dating and created entire romance novels around them.

Also, there is an opportunity to take classic themes and turn them into gay romance because it hasn't been done to death as in the straight market. We have done gay twists on Romeo and Juliet, city mouse/country mouse, rags to riches, amnesia thrillers.

I'm glad Scott—and Scott—brought that up. Another really, really easy way of coming up with ideas—in fact, it's so easy you should be ashamed of yourself if you have to resort to this—is lifting the plots of old heterosexual romance novels.

I bring this up because so many M/M writers have such a hard time constructing a decent plot—as though all readers want is to watch two guys fall into bed together repeatedly. True, I believe the falling into bed together is a big *part* of what readers want, but given the current spate of M/M books, it's going to take a bit more to command reader loyalty.

In fact, in answer to the question, Do you believe the market has been flooded—or is about to be flooded? Treva Harte of Loose Id, responded, "I think readers will be more picky. The novelty of reading about two men in love and

making love is over, and now they are looking for a good plot, characterization ... what readers look for in all books."

In other words, yes, you need a story.

Back to stealing from The Masters. Here are a couple of book blurbs from old Harlequin romances.

*When her father mysteriously disappeared searching for the Lost City of the Incas, Charley was set on finding him. And, infuriatingly, she needed the help of Braden Quest, the brilliant anthropologist.*

*Bittersweet Pursuit* by Margaret Mayo (Harlequin Books, 1988)

So how hard is it to change Charley to Charles, and Braden Quest (*Braden Quest*???) to Jack Martin, brilliant archeologist/explorer/kidnap expert? The father becomes Charlie's partner—hell, it could be his brother or best friend or mother, for that matter. Just shake up the dynamic. Move the locale. Now the partner/mother/brother is searching for the legendary Arabian city of Ubar—or Atlantis. Actually, please not Atlantis. That's been overused, though possibly not in M/M fiction.

But keep in mind that M/M fiction doesn't exist in a vacuum. Most of our readers read other things as well. When M/M was a novelty, they were more patient, tolerant of the clichés. That's changing because there's so much to choose from. Remember, readers vote with their PayPal accounts. You need their votes.

*Everything was going wrong for Alison. Her job was in jeopardy, and she was going to have to sell her beloved family home to a stranger. As if that wasn't enough, Niall*



*MacBain had come home; Niall, her arch-enemy, whom she had not seen for nine years but for whom she still felt nothing but hatred.*

*Black Niall* by Mary Wibberley (Harlequin Books, 1977)

Alison becomes Andrew, struggling to keep the failing family business afloat and facing having to sell to hated corporate raider (and maybe ex-boyfriend) Scott Harper.

*"Fear not the desert, nor the destiny you deny," the sand diviner told Melissa when she came to Morocco in search of her missing sister. But Melissa feared the dark arrogant Raoul Germon even more. And he was the only man who knew the truth behind her sister's disappearance.*

*The House of the Amulet* by Margery Hilton (Harlequin Books, 1971)

Huh? What the hell is a "sand diviner?"

Anyway, Melissa becomes Mark, now searching for his twin brother who disappeared during a photo shoot on the Navajo Reservation. Raoul Germon becomes Ralph Goodeagle, tribal police officer. Ralph is rumored to have started an affair with the missing man shortly before he vanished.

A WORD OF CAUTION.

If you're lifting heterosexual romance plots, it's crucial that you make these stories unique and masculine in every detail. The characters—and their goals and motivations—must be male. If you do it right, they'll bear little if any resemblance to their previous incarnations.

\* \* \* \*

Some books look like first time efforts that haven't been well developed or thought out. Some recent books I've come across feel like the story came out of one of the NY publishers and just changed the gender of the characters—no originality to distinguish the work from others.

\* \* \* \*

It's important to remember that not every idea is a good idea. The best ideas are the ones that seem to write themselves both because of the enthusiasm you feel for the story, and the complexity and possibilities within that plot.

Also, I want to point something out that shouldn't need saying, but I'll say it anyway. It's one thing to crib an idea and make it your own. It's something entirely different to plagiarize another writer's work. Don't do it.

Some ideas are better suited to a shorter format. A novel (50,000 + words) requires a lot of plot—and several subplots. A novella (20,000—50,000 words) usually requires a plot and a subplot. My personal preference is for the twin plots of mystery and romance. A novelette (10,000—20,000 words) or longish short story (5,000—10,000 words) may not require anything more than a complicated love story. But make no mistake; the short story is a demanding art form. You don't have room to wander or ramble. Regardless of length or format, every story requires some kind of conflict—or there is no story. The exception is flash fiction (usually under 1,000 words) which merely requires the ability to write memorable (often erotic) scenes with the suggestion of a backstory.

Ideas are where you find them. This afternoon I happened onto a blog about disability. The title was "Lord Chatterley Abandoned Once Again," and the writer was talking about how contemporary reviewers of the recent French film *Lady Chatterley's Lover* simply took for granted the traditional premise that because Lord Chatterley was disabled and in a wheelchair he was no longer a sexual being.

I thought that was an interesting point, and I started thinking about how poor Clifford Chatterley might have amused himself while his good lady was romping with the gamekeeper. Like ... what if Lord Chatterley was gay? What if he got rid of that female nurse and had his own virile and earthy manservant to tend to all his needs?

Reasonably original, and it has the advantage of being historical, featuring a disabled protagonist, and using a famous literary character, which is very hot in mainstream publishing right now.

Basically that's how I come up with my ideas. I browse around and something catches my eye, and then I start thinking about the characters. I always start with characters, and then I think ... *what if?*

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

I love writing male/male romance because, despite what is believed in society about females, I think that males are far more romantic. They just have greater difficulty in expressing it. That's how I write. I develop two male characters in my

mind and then think up a difficult situation for them and see what happens. I also love the feedback that I get from males who find themselves, without expecting it, crying over my stories. That is one of my major goals in writing is to touch my reader's deeper emotions. I treasure one e-mail that was sent to me about one of my very romantic novels. All the e-mail said was, "I've got a hard-on and I'm crying. What do I do now?"

\* \* \* \*

Don't you hate it when that happens?

Take your time picking the right idea. It'll save you trouble and grief later.

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## **CHAPTER 3: GENTLEMEN, START YOUR ENGINES**

### The Writing Process & Outlining

That thing you do—Finding time to write

Nothing irritates me more than people who say things like, "Someday, when I have the time, I'm going to write a book."

Yeah. Whatever. When I had a day job I worked sixty hours a week and still managed to do a book a year. Granted I also shot my blood pressure through the roof and nearly gave myself a nervous breakdown, but ... the point is, writers write.

If you really want to *be* a writer, then sooner or later the writing must become one of your priorities. It doesn't have to be the entire focus of your life, but it does have to be in the Top Five Things to Do Today list.

I used to write before work, on my lunch, and after work. I usually managed to cram in about four hours per sleep-deprived day that way. And I used to average about a thousand words daily.

Now that I write full-time, my schedule is a little different. I wake up at five, stumble into my office and do e-mail for an hour, then go do yoga or tai chi, work in the garden for an hour, then have breakfast, then write straight through—no interruptions allowed—to five or six o'clock. I work out, have dinner, and, depending on how well the day's writing went, I either relax a bit, read, blog, spend time with the guy I'm

married to—or get back to work. I now produce anywhere from one to three thousand words a day.

That's on the weekdays. On the weekends, I focus on the business of writing—and there's a great deal of it, but that's material for another book. For now we're just focused on getting you published.

That's my normal schedule. I'm writing for a living. I'm self-employed, and my business is writing. I have to take it seriously; my financial survival depends on it. I happen to love my job, but it's still hard work and I get bored and frustrated like anyone else. So, yes, I do occasionally play hooky or have sick days—and some day I'm sure I'll have another vacation.

There are a couple of things about my schedule I want to bring to your attention. The first is that I try very hard to avoid doing e-mail during the day. I also try to avoid Live Journal or discussion lists, or any of the fascinating Internet playgrounds. This is because these things will eat up your writing time like Pac-Man on a rampage.

The other thing to note is the physical activity I try faithfully to work in. Sitting on your butt all day is really hard on your body. What you might not be aware of is that it's also hard on your mind. Breaking up the writing day with physical activity is good for all your muscles, including the creative ones.

I'm reasonably productive, but I'm not in the Nora Roberts class. Heck, I'm not even in the Laura Baumbach class.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I do set a minimum word goal of 2,000 words a day if I have a lot of time to get done. If I have a deadline looming, I break things up so it looks less daunting to me by dividing the word final count I think I have yet to complete to finish the story by how many days I have left to write in. I exclude days I do the nurse job, because I can't do anything else but that on those days. 32,000 words in 9 days means I need to shoot for a minimum of 3,556 words a day. It makes it look manageable. Yes, I can trick myself into thinking it's all doable.

My schedule is set up around my job and my family. I get up around 4 am to write. I get the kids up at 7am and off to school and then by 9am I go back to writing and business matters until around 1pm. Then I nap until around 4pm when the kids come home from school. Then I do housewife things like dinner, dishes, laundry, and help with homework. I take the youngest to bed at 9pm, and then I write until around midnight. On the days I work as a nurse, I work double shifts so I can get it all over at once, and it doesn't interfere too much with my other projects. I don't to anything but work and sleep on the days I work at the hospital. My husband works as a computer programming consultant from his office at home so I have a support system in place. He screens my calls and takes messages if I'm working or asleep. My male secretary.—g—And yes, I have sex with him, too!

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

I do about two scenes a day when I'm working full out—somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 words. I haven't had much luck doing more than that, because the quality goes down. I work every day—can't stop.

And I think I'm prolific because I'm afraid to stop writing, and I feel like shit and act like a bitch when I'm not writing, and only James is more important. Not the dishes or the bills or work or exercise or anything. The writing is most important and I figured I better just concentrate on one thing. Too many dreams, and the power to make them come true gets diluted. I don't care about marketing or chats or sales. Sorry, but it's true. The writing is everything, and I don't care about the publishing or anything else. Oh, the other thing is when I'm between stories, I write flash—both for its own benefit, and sometimes to work out character things.

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

I don't really have a schedule but try to write everyday. I've always got at least a dozen projects going at one time. The novel, *Rock Paper Scissors*, which was published in December 2007, actually got started in 2004, while the novella that is to be released in November was written, start to finish, in three weeks and it's over 45,000 words.

The daily wish, rather than a goal, is to complete a chapter a day. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't, and sometimes I



do two chapters in a day. It just depends on how smoothly the words are flowing that day.

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

When we're into a novel, we write every morning for a couple hours and several hours on the weekend. Shoot for 1000-1500 words for a productive morning session. We also take "writing vacations" when into a novel (and up against deadline). A long weekend or a week away when at least half the day is spent writing and we can finish as much as a chapter in a day.

As you see, we've all got different writing styles and schedules, but we all manage to do one thing: we steadily and consistently produce publishable-quality work. Doing that requires writing every day—or as close to every day as you can get.

\* \* \* \*

The main lesson to take away from this section: *Write Every Single Day—or as close to it as humanly possible.*

Remember, if you only wrote one page a day, at the end of a year, you'd have completed roughly 91,250 words. That's a complete novel—or two novellas—or a slew of short stories. Of course, if you're Sarah Black, you'd have completed *all* of those and you'd be working on some flash fiction just to keep your hand in.

*To outline or not to outline?*

Like I said earlier, anything—any *process*—that enables you to get the rough draft down on paper, is the right approach to writing. All the same, I'm repeatedly asked whether I outline or not.

For a novel-length work, yes, I do outline. Sometimes I wait to outline 'til I'm halfway through and things are getting complicated, but I think it's ideal to outline before you start writing. Especially if you're inexperienced.

I don't outline for novellas or short stories. However, if I find myself getting stuck, I stop, chart out the rest of the book as I envision it, and that usually solves the problem.

I tossed the question "Do you outline?" to the usual suspects.

\* \* \* \*

*Do you outline?*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I write a detailed synopsis. Usually 3-6 pages long depending on whether I'm writing a short or a novel. I break each paragraph up into a scene. I plot it out so that I set up enough factors and obstacles that my characters have issues to overcome. If it's a book in a series, I need to add elements from the last book that made their characters grow. I can see where they fall naturally into a new story if I look at the elements now. Outlining helps me see holes in my logic before I start writing and makes sure I provide clues and signals for my men to arrive at the final destination I want them to be at both emotionally and physically in the story. It

helps me balance the erotic scenes and the action scenes. In my erotic romances, I work for a 50-50 mix in my writing.

There needs to be a good tight story but it needs to be balanced with erotic moments. An outline keeps me writing when I don't feel like it and I never get that "I don't know where to take the story next" stumbling block occurring. But I also make the outline loose enough that when my men take over there is plenty of room for unexpected events to develop which always happens in my writing. The characters take over and reveal something about themselves that I hadn't planned on writing. Sometimes secondary characters become bigger parts of the story than I had intended or a main character shows a personal habit or preference I didn't plan on letting him have. I especially want all those things to be a part of the story. An outline keeps me writing and keeps the story on track for me.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

Outlines have been totally useless—because the characters reveal themselves to me during the writing, so I have to go with what I know now, not what I knew then. I usually have some idea how things are going to end, but I let that go if the story isn't going in that direction. So it's hard for me to write a blurb for a story I haven't written yet, because that story always always changes during the writing. It seems to me as well that this issue is getting worse—the stories are getting more organic, which is not the way to make publishers happy, to change titles and story blurbs after they are written.

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

Never. I write by the seat of my pants, my emotions raw and real. I know where the readers will cry because I'm crying when I write it. I call what I do "method writing". I put myself the same place emotionally as my characters by drawing on my own life experiences.

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

Yes. It's incredibly helpful, especially for romance novels. Since romance novels by nature have a specific ending, it is easier to outline toward that point to create an arc with planned benchmarks along the way. It helps with pacing and plot development. Certainly things change along the way, but romance does not benefit from an open-ended exercise to simply see what happens. Also, being able to work on different sections of the outline/novel prevents writer's block because we can always jump to another section or flesh out elements of the outline if we get stuck.

\* \* \* \*

So obviously opinion is pretty evenly divided on whether to color within the lines or fly by the seat of your pants.

Judging by the letters I get from perspiring—er—aspiring writers, I'm going to guess that most newbie writers don't outline—which could be why most first novels don't get

finished. And why most first novels that *do* get finished, don't get published.

Consider your outline to be a kind of roadmap. I don't know about you, but I don't jump into the car and start driving across country before I've decided where I'm going and the best way to get there. Like the prudent motorist I am, I pick my destination, and I decide on the various scenic spots that I want to see along the way. I figure out how long the trip's going to take and how to pace myself—and *then* I start driving like a maniac.

I hear writers complain that they want to keep the writing process spontaneous and joyful. Speaking for myself, I'm plenty joyful when I finish a project right on schedule—or even ahead of time. And, to belabor a metaphor, using a TripTik doesn't mean I can't go off-roading or take a short cut when required. Writing is an organic process; once you start, things begin to happen. Plans change. That's part of the fun. Part of the magic. Better ideas replace the original plan. But having the original plan helps you decide whether any given side trip is really going to enhance your travel experience or merely end with you lost in the woods chewing on your tires while the snow drifts quietly, quietly down.

Not that I'm trying to tell you what to do.

Oh. Wait a minute, yes I am. I strongly suggest that if you are inexperienced enough to be in doubt about whether you should outline, you *should* outline.

Another reason you should outline is because the basic manuscript proposal to a prospective agent or publisher consists of three sample chapters and your outline. Once

you've worked with a publisher for a while you'll actually sell stories based on proposals, so learning to outline is a useful skill indeed.

And because beginning writers always fret about the following—don't. Other than the bare basics—one inch margins all around single-spaced, error-free 12-point Courier or Times New Roman font on one side of three to fifteen pages of *white* paper—there is no one definitive outline style or form. Agents and editors are used to seeing a variety of formats. They're looking to see that you've worked out a competent, complete, and commercial plot with a satisfying resolution, that you appear to understand structure, pacing, character arcs—in short, that you've got more to offer than three great opening chapters. The decision to see the rest of your manuscript will be based on those three chapters and the outline. Yes, yes, I know it's unfair, and no one can truly appreciate the genius of your work without reading the entire manuscript, but that's the way the game is played—and, by the way, there's no crying in publishing.

*What does an outline contain?*

One thing it contains is the ending to your story, so don't get coy and say something like, "And to find out how it all ends, you'll just have to read the rest of the book!" Your outline will have the ending, and all the clever twists and turns—all the very best bits of the story laid out in black and white. You're going to cover all the highlights. All the main points of the story, starting with the pivotal opening scene.

Yeah, that's the first thing: your story should begin at a pivotal point in the main character's life. Don't build up to the

story. Catch the wave and ride it in. Think up a great opening line or a great opening scene. Start strong.

And give a little thought to the ending. Yes, right now, while you're starting the story. Plan ahead, think it through. Your ideas may change—they'll almost certainly change—by the time you're tying up the loose ends, but chances are the *essentials* will stay the same. Put some thought into the ending because it's the final impression a reader takes away from the book. How many great stories are spoiled by a weak ending? Too many.

Of course, you also need a really strong *middle*, but I don't want to throw too much at you at one time. At the very least, for the purpose of your outline, you'll need to know what the climax or turning point of your story will be. Then, start filling in all the scenes that have already occurred to you—plug them in where you think they should fall in the story timeline. Don't worry, you'll think of additional scenes, you'll cut some of the ones you first thought of, you'll move things around—that's fine. That's how it works. The outline is a tool for you to use. Make it work for you.

I've included a couple of samples—the synopsis and the original outline for *The Hell You Say*—in the Resources Section. I usually start by writing out a synopsis of the story as I envision it, and then I break it down into a rough chapter by chapter outline. I outline knowing it's going to change, and if you're familiar with the novel, you'll notice that the outline did change a bit from what I'd originally planned, although the ending stayed the same in spirit.

Remember, you're not chiseling any of this into a stone tablet. Laptop, paper, index cards, crayons and storyboard, I don't care what you use to outline. Just remember that you can—and should—cut and paste as necessary. Your working outline is flexible. New and better ideas may well replace the original ideas. The outline is your plan, your roadmap, not a contract signed in blood and mailed to the Devil. *That* paperwork only gets filed once the manuscript is complete.

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## **CHAPTER 4: WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?**

### Point of View

While you're putting together a breakdown of the important scenes and story highlights, give some careful thought to who is telling the story. Whose story is this? As your characters take form in your mind, so should the Point of View—POV in authorspeak.

POV is one of the most important decisions you'll make regarding the telling of any story. And here's a tip: If you're finding it difficult to nail your main character's voice, or find the focus of the story, try writing from a different POV.

You have several options for POV: first person, second person, third person omniscient and third person limited (also called tight third). Each has its advantages and disadvantages. There is no one method better than another, it all depends on the requirements of the work and your skill as a writer. Whichever one you choose, remember that your aim is to get deep inside the character's head. You want a subjective and personal viewpoint. The more your readers can see, taste, smell, feel, hear what your characters do, the better.

First person: A character within the story narrates. A surprising number of readers don't like this technique, and when it's done badly, it's distancing, but when it's done well it creates a sense of immediacy and empathy with the main character. The disadvantage here is the story is limited to

those scenes and events where the narrator is actually present or which are related to him through dialogue with other characters. This is especially tricky in writing crime and mystery novels, although it can be fun creating an unreliable narrator.

First person is especially good for developing character "voice," and I've seen it recommended to new writers for that very reason. At the same time I've heard editors say this is tricky for beginners.

Example of first person narration:

*"We're lost."*

*Luke came up behind me. I pointed, hand shaking, at the cross carved into the white bark of the tree.*

*"We're going in goddamned circles!"*

He was silent. Beneath the drone of insects I could hear the even tenor of his breathing although we'd hiked a good nine miles already that autumn afternoon—and no end to it in sight. My head ached and I had a stitch in my side like someone was jabbing me with a hot poker.

*I lowered my pack to the ground, lowered myself to a fallen tree—this time not bothering to check for ant nests or coiled rattlers—put my face in my hands, and lost it. I mean, lost it. Tears ... oh, yeah. Shoulders shaking, shuddering sobs. I didn't even care anymore what he thought.*

*"In a Dark Wood," by Josh Lanyon, Arresting Developments (Aspen Mountain Press, 2007)*

You've got the immediate first-hand sensory experience of the main character, you're privy to his thoughts and reactions, and you've got a strong sense of his voice.

Second person: You see this used a lot in poetry, speeches, letters, and how-to books like this one. It's rarely used in prose fiction because it's extremely stylized and comes off as a bit artificial. An unknown reader or listener is being addressed by the narrator, as in *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* The idea behind it is to create reader identification with the character of *You*. The advantage is it's chatty and informal, which can work well when you're trying to impose your iron will on unsuspecting aspiring writers. The disadvantage for fiction is it's noticeable; it puts focus on your writing itself, and unless you're quite good, you may not want to turn a magnifying glass on your literary gymnastics.

Example of second person narration...

*Uh ... actually, I couldn't find an example of a published M/M novel written in second person POV, so my partner in crime, Sarah Black, cooked up this snippet. I'm thinking of titling it Lassie Come Home. Has a ring to it, don't you think?*

*You stare up into his eyes, clear amber, like cold fire. You lower your head. You've seen your reflection at the edge of the lake. Your eyes are a bitter, sulfur yellow.*

His paw lands next to yours, twice as big, the muscles in the sleek forearm bulging under his weight. He leans a shoulder into yours, but you can't look up at him. You're swamped suddenly with your muddy eyes, your small paws and thin fur, so unworthy, so unworthy, and he leans into you again, knocks you to the ground.

You roll over, give him your belly, hoping for one glance out of those eyes. He straddles you, a low growl in his throat, playing, takes your ruff in his teeth and shakes you back and

forth. He flops to the ground, your neck still in his jaw, sighs and closes his eyes.

His body is so warm and heavy. You can feel the tears gathering behind your eyes. You try to inch away but he raises one of those huge paws, just a little, and you freeze. He takes your ruff in his teeth again, drags your body into his until he covers you, and he watches you with those eyes until he falls asleep.

*Lassie Come Home* by Sarah Black

Third person omniscient: Most M/M fiction is divided fairly evenly between third person omniscient and third person limited. Third person omniscient allows the all-knowing narrator to comment on events, characters, etc. This technique, Gentle Reader, is still very popular in historical fiction. Most modern narrators are expected to keep mum and restrict their omniscience to what the characters think and feel. The advantage here is obvious. The narrator is only limited by what he chooses to reveal to the reader. This can be a lot of fun in a romance where the reader is privy to each of the protagonists' (that would be your two heroes') innermost thoughts about each other. There is no real disadvantage, but you have to watch for awkward POV changes within scenes. In fact, a roving POV and omniscient commentary are very out of favor these days, but for an example of a romance writer who did it very well indeed, check out any of Georgette Heyer's historical novels. While Heyer didn't write overtly gay characters, the masculine friendships within her novels could inspire many a slash fic.

Example of third person omniscient narration:

*The cops arrived while they were having coffee. The coffee was laced with brandy, which was a mistake in Nick's opinion, but clearly the whole night was a mistake as far as he was concerned. Calling the cops was the biggest mistake, and he had waxed loud and eloquently—but mostly just loud—on the topic.*

*Now he was brooding in silence, taking up half of Janie's horsehair sofa. The cops having heard Perry out, tramped upstairs to investigate. Nick Reno had been right. There was no forensics team, just two weary and wet sheriffs in yellow slickers, looking mighty unamused.*

Before the sheriffs headed upstairs, Nick filled them in about the mud smear on the tub and the scuff marks on the tile.

"How come you didn't mention those things before?" Perry accused when the door closed on the officers of the law.

"Those are clues."

"Let the cops decide if they're clues or not," Nick returned.

"More brandy?" offered Janie. He held his cup out and she topped off his coffee.

Perry stared down at his coffee. He knew the other two were irritated with him for insisting on phoning the cops; it was like they were operating in an alternate universe. Of course he had called the cops. Any normal person would call the cops.

*The Ghost Wore Yellow Socks* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2008)

We have insight here into both Nick Reno and Perry Foster's thoughts. The scene that preceded this action was

written in Nick's limited third person POV, and now we're transitioning into Perry's limited third person POV. But, during the transition, we're in an omniscient third person. I think the key to making it work is to put enough room between Perry's thoughts and Nick's thoughts. It would be jarring to move directly from Nick's mind into Perry's.

Third person limited: This is also known as tight third POV. Though told in third person, the story viewpoint is as limited as first person, and can be as unreliable (in a good way). There are some advantages in that the author can describe the character in less intrusive ways than can be done if we're actually in the character's head. No need to trot him over to a mirror or have someone else comment on his looks. The author can simply state how terrifically good-looking he is. How terrifically good-looking the *character* is, I mean. Again, there are no real disadvantages to tight third POV, except that there can be absolutely no switching POVs and no author insight or commentary. If you are going to switch POVs, it needs to be following a scene break or a chapter break.

Example of third person limited narration:

*Situation defused, Nick thought. Rack time at last. "I guess that's it," he said. "I guess I'll say good night too."*

*Foster's head jerked his way. "You're going?"*

"Yeah." Nick was elaborately casual in response to the note he didn't want to hear in Foster's voice. "It's all clear here."

Foster was a frail-looking kid. He lived on his own and presumably held a job, so he couldn't be fourteen, though that's how old he looked. His wrists were thin and bony knees poked out of the holes of his fashionably ripped Levi's. There

were blue veins beneath the pale skin of his hands. Nick thought of the Fruit Loops cereal and the asthma chart on the refrigerator.

Hell.

"Thanks," Foster said huskily. "I know you probably think I'm nuts too, so I appreciate your helping me."

"I don't think you're nuts." Actually he had no idea if the kid was nuts or not. "I think you saw something. But whatever it was, it's gone now. It's over." Nick thought of the shoe with the hole in it. Someone had switched shoes after he left. Someone had swabbed down the tub and the floor. Someone had balls of steel. But it was not Nick's problem. It was not his job to save the world. Not anymore.

*The Ghost Wore Yellow Socks* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2008)

You can still get a strong sense of character voice through a limited third person POV because, done correctly, we're right there in the POV character's head. You'll notice that Perry is called *Foster* in this scene. That's because we're looking at him through Nick's eyes, and Nick thinks of, and refers to Perry, by his last name.

One additional thought on omniscient or roving POV. It does lessen the romantic tension—the suspense—if your reader has access to both protagonists' thoughts and feelings. You and your reader play a little game; the reader pretends uncertainty as to whether these men will end up together. If there's nothing left in doubt, no question of what each man is feeling, you take away a large part of the fun. We don't have

access to each other's minds in real life, which is one of the reasons that falling in love feels so exciting and perilous.

My personal preference is for first person or limited POV, but in all cases I make sure I don't give everything away. I try to preserve a little mystery, a little suspense. Not everyone—writer or reader—feels the same. Choose the POV you're comfortable with and which best suits the story and the characters.

\* \* \* \*

K.M. Frontain, copy and content editor, Freya's Bower, Wild Child Publishing and Erotic Dreams Zine

Some of the worst M/M I've read has really awkward use of pronouns and names. The story ideas can be wonderful, but the pronoun usage destroys the reading experience. There's no reason for such clumsiness. It marks the author as someone who hasn't sufficiently learned the tools of the craft. Just because a story has two male characters in any given scene does not justify the laziness with pronouns I've seen in some currently published books.

\* \* \* \*

Read a non-M/M book written by a best-selling, published author who has more than two male characters acting in a scene. Examine how the author uses pronouns referring to these two characters. How does that author make certain the reader does not become confused?

If you've created vivid, believable characters with distinct voices, there should rarely be confusion in the reader's mind



as to who is speaking or thinking within any given scene—even during a scene of intimacy when the characters are, as it were, as one.

And yet, even when the POV is unchanging, without the familiar romance tags of *she said* and *he said*, authors—let alone readers—can get tangled up in pronouns and descriptives. The best approach is a simple and clean one. Of course, that's easy for me to say. I usually write in first person POV.

The rule of thumb is that you reinsert the reminder proper noun or name after a couple of uses of the pronoun. When I do write in third person POV, I try to work it so that my pronoun will refer to the character who last spoke or acted. Obviously that isn't going to always work, but it's what I aim for.

*"Suit yourself," Will said. "You usually do." He picked up his canteen and wiped the mouth of it, ignoring Taylor's taut silence. He put the canteen to his lips and drank.*

Now, I guess Will *could* be putting the canteen to Taylor's lips, but probably not—and certainly not within the larger context of the scene.

The bottom line is, yes, it's a little more complicated when the two protagonists are male, but avoid straining or overcomplicating your scenes. Don't overthink this stuff. To some extent you can rely on the internal logic within the action being described. A sentence is read much faster than it is written, and there's less likelihood of confusion because of it. While you agonize over three *hes* within one line, the reader absorbs it without difficulty.

*It was a gentle kiss because Nick was thinking what a stupid thing this was to do, and that Perry, being inexperienced, probably expected songbirds and firecrackers.*

*He tasted like hot chocolate and something warm and young and male. It was unexpectedly erotic. He responded sweetly, opening right up, and Nick's heart turned over in his chest, his hands sliding down Perry's back, feeling delicate bones and tension, warm nakedness beneath too many clothes. And without thinking any more, his hands went to Perry's waistband. He was amused and aroused at the feel of Perry's hands mimicking the motions of his own. The kid's knuckles felt ice cold against Nick's belly as he tugged on Nick's belt.*

Nick yanked Perry's pajama bottoms down, and he had a fleeting, uncomfortable impression that he was robbing the cradle.

Perry was having a harder time with Nick's Levi's, so Nick just scooped him up over his shoulder. Perry burst out laughing, head dangling down at Nick's waist band. He tried to raise up and Nick smacked his ass, carrying him into the bedroom and flinging him down on the bed.

Perry was still laughing, a kid's untroubled laugh. There was trust in the hazel eyes gazing up at him. It pierced Nick right through a vulnerable piece of his anatomy there was really no name for.

*The Ghost Wore Yellow Socks* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2008)

Basically you only want to use names when it would be otherwise unclear who's doing what. Keep it simple and

specific. Avoid awkward and complicated work-arounds like "the slim green-eyed agent said" or "his taller, dark-haired partner laughed." Occasionally you can get away with a *the bigger man* or *the kid*, but these phrases stand out more than given names or pronouns do. Use them sparingly.

I asked some bestselling M/M writers to share a few tips on how they handle POV perspective and pronouns in their work.

\* \* \* \*

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.

I try to switch it up a bit, using terms of endearments or physical descriptions to clue the reader in to who's speaking.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell, Purgatory*, etc.

It's tricky, no doubt. The pronouns are enough to drive you crazy. At least with M/F, you've got "him" and "her" to work with. Outside of using proper names, I tend to fall on characteristics. "The redhead" or "the smaller man" and the like come into play a lot. I also tend to use incomplete sentences. Drives some of my editors crazy, but it mostly works. I talk about hands and lips doing things on their own, as in "Lips brushed over his cheek." Since I'm very particular about staying in one point-of-view throughout a scene, a reader should always be able to tell which character is doing the feeling.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

A lot of my stories are in the first person, so that eliminates the problem of identifiers in the scene. However, in my third person stories, I tend to use the characters' names to differentiate between them. If the story calls for it, I may also use other tags that work to identify them.

For instance, in my current story, *The Regent's Knight*, the main characters are Amery (a regent) and Tovin (a knight). I use their roles or titles interchangeably with their names when I feel it works in the prose.

A better trick is to group together dialogue with actions so the reader can keep the characters straight without the overuse of tags such as "he said." To do this, the author would write a sentence describing the character's action, followed immediately by the dialogue, without using a tag. For example:

Kevin pointed at the picture. "Who's this?"

It eliminates unnecessary verbiage and tightens the prose. A lot of beginning writers tend to not use actions or other descriptive sentences in their dialogue, which makes me feel as if the speech is taking place in a white room devoid of any scenery. Subtle use of action in such scenes will help show instead of tell, and the reader will pick up just as much through the actions the characters do while talking as they will through the words themselves.

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of the Vampire Magic series, etc.

First, I try to give credit to the readers to figure out which *he* or *his* is applicable. They know they're reading a story about two men, and unless Man A is REALLY flexible, he's probably not going to suck his own dick. \*g\* Secondly, I try to use one name reference and stick with his perspective for the entire paragraph so any *he* in that paragraph is likely to refer to the named individual in the opening sentence. For example: Chade sucked Kyler's cock. He loved hearing Kyler's lusty moans.

\* \* \* \*

Don't we all?

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## **CHAPTER 5: LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD MEN**

### Characterization in the M/M Novel

\* \* \* \*

Murphy Cutler, reader

To tell the truth, I don't know why I like your books so well. They touch me; I really like the Adrien character!

\* \* \* \*

There's a good reason I'm starting with character before plot or theme or pacing or any of the other necessary elements of fiction. In my opinion, all storytelling starts with character. If there's one single aspect more important than any other, one make-or-break thing to get right, it's character.

A strong character can carry a weak story. It's our characters readers fall in love with, not plots twists, not vivid language, not perfect grammar. Character. If the reader doesn't care about the characters, nothing else matters, because odds are good, she won't keep turning the pages. But if the reader loves the characters, she'll cut an author an awful lot of slack about improbable or derivative storylines, even a bit of clumsy writing. I'm not saying readers won't complain about the silliness and the clichés and the expiration dates of series that have outlived their prime, but they're very loyal to the characters they've come to love.

In fact, readers have a hard time saying goodbye to characters they love, so it's up to the writer to know—like the perfect house guest—when to depart. Part of being able to do that is planning your series out ahead of time. We'll talk more about that later. Right now we're focused on creating characters that readers love so much they *wish* they were series characters—if not their actual neighbors.

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

First of all, I love men. I truly do. I think men are, by far, the most fascinating creatures on earth! Of course, as a gay male I would think that way but it's not in the way that most people would think. I've spent most of my working career as a social worker and family counselor. From that perspective I've had the chance to work with thousands of males, most of them going through some very tough times. I have been utterly fascinated by the way that males find to cope. I have also worked with military families and that helped me write about my favorite males of all: members of the United States Marine Corps.

\* \* \* \*

Gay men come in all shapes and sizes: everything from big burly bears to campy little queens. And gay fiction—especially gay literary fiction—reflects that.

But M/M fiction differs from regular gay fiction in that most—though not all—main characters are very much a white

heterosexual female fantasy. Sure, M/M has its share—as does regular gay fiction—of perfectly ordinary boy-next-door gay characters, but on the whole, the gay characters no more reflect the typical gay man than the traditional heterosexual romance hero reflects the average straight guy.

A perfect specimen is award-winning romance writer Suzanne Brockmann's FBI agent and counter-terrorism expert Jules Cassidy. Jules is a wonderful character, don't get me wrong, but he's the basic heterosexual romance hero—gorgeous, smart, brave, funny, successful, sexy, well-balanced. He just happens to be gay. This is an important point for male writers trying to break into M/M fiction. M/M readers prefer homogenized milk. Transsexuals, transvestites, bears, queens ... your "typical" M/M reader—open-minded though she is—is going to have a little bit of a hard time swallowing. She will still read, she'll be interested and sympathetic, but you won't be tapping into her fantasies. And in order to write successful romance fiction, you have to tap into the reader's fantasies. Women writers almost invariably "get" this without being told.

There are plenty of excellent generic writing books to walk you through crafting secondary and supporting characters. I recommend *Fiction: The Art and Craft of Writing and Getting Published* by Michael Seidman, and *Writing the Breakout Novel* by Donald Maass. And a thorough, though outdated, one for a variety of romance topics, is *How to Write a Romance and Get It Published* by Kathryn Falk.

I'll say just three things on the topic of supporting cast members, including villains—and this holds true whether you



are writing about vampires, cowboys, pirates, space aliens, or the boys next door.

First, avoid clichés and stereotypes. To be interesting, a character must be more than the sum of a bunch of tics, quirks, and mannerisms. Give your supporting characters hearts and minds and dreams. Avoid black and white. Supporting characters look good in gray.

Second, we learn about our main characters through their interactions and relationships with supporting characters. Take full advantage of the opportunity these characters offer for insight and perspective on our two protagonists.

*and*, Third, supporting characters are often the source of subplots or main plots for future novels. If your supporting characters are interesting enough, you may decide to spin them off into their own stories. That said, remember not to let them overwhelm a story in which they are not starring.

So listen up, guys and dolls. You can include realistic unorthodox characters from the rainbow spectrum of gay life, but they must be relegated to supporting cast. The starring roles must, in key ways, fulfill certain genre expectations.

By the way, the classic romantic hero archetype isn't just a straight white heterosexual female fantasy. Victor J. Banis again on the topic of Mary Renault's popularity:

Well, there is the fact that she is just a terrific writer—and gay men are predisposed to like stories set in ancient Greece, aren't they? It's kind of our heritage, and nobody does it better than she does. She offers the reader every gay man's fantasy, the handsome, super macho guy who is also there to woo us and have his way with us. In her case, explicit sex

would spoil the books, it seems to me. Really, they aren't about the sex at all, or barely. They're about that other part of our nature, the longing to be loved, the search for Quentin Crisp's great dark man.

\* \* \* \*

Luckily the genre expectation in M/M fiction is much looser and broader—and a heck of a lot more fun—than in heterosexual romance. Adrien English is a case in point. A slim, quiet bookseller with a heart condition? You don't find a lot of those in Harlequin romances—unless it's the Harlequin heroine of many decades ago.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Pardon me while I climb on my soapbox for a moment. When you write M/M, make sure both of your men—or all three, or whatever the count—make sure they're all MEN. Actually this is a favorite pet peeve of mine with books with het couples as well. One thing that turns me off fast is a hero who was written to act like a woman. I don't know a single gay guy who isn't first and foremost a guy. (Unless he's a transsexual, and that's another theme—one I've written.) You can't just take a family classic, change the heroine to a gay man, and expect readers to "buy" it. Men think different from women—they speak differently, they talk about different things. They think and talk less and do more. A woman will spend 20 minutes picking out an outfit for the perfect date. Don't let your guy do that just because he's gay.

\* \* \* \*

I knew I liked that woman.

At the same time, don't go overboard in the other direction. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that there's some universal scratch-and-sniff male behavior that you can tap into. Keep your characters in historical and cultural context. Keep them real. Without meaning to be unkind, it's pretty clear to me that many of the women writing M/M fiction are coming up with their notions of gay male behavior based on reading each other's books. It's, at best, a limited perspective.

Case in point. What do Montgomery Clift, Ed Gallagher, Chad Allen, Elton John, Noel Coward, Rufus Wainwright, Dumbledore, Justin Fashanu, Plato, Liberace, Rudolf Nureyev, Siegfried and Roy, Neil Patrick Harris, Greg Louganis, Oscar Wilde, Truman Capote, Rock Hudson, Walt Whitman, Rudy Galindo and Richard Stevenson have in common? Here's a clue. It's not their keen fashion sense. But being gay is about all they *do* have in common. Don't make the tiresome mistake of believing that masculinity has something to do with using the F-word a lot, or having a military background, or craving sex all the time, or liking sports or beer or barbecue, or being afraid to ask for directions or say *I love you*. Because I know plenty of guys for whom none of that is true. Okay, maybe not the craving sex all the time. That's pretty much the one universal trait you can safely latch onto.

Write *people*, not stereotypes.

Granted, it helps if you like men—or at least know a few.

\* \* \* \*

Alanna, reader

It's not necessarily about M/F or M/M entirely, although you know, M/M is insanely hot. (shallow, shallow, shallow, haha) The appeal of books is in characterization. I have to like the main character to read the book. In most of the M/F books I had read, albeit this was when I was way younger and into romance, the female characters just weren't strong enough for me. They didn't have substance, and I couldn't understand why the male characters were falling for them. (Which meant, naturally, in my head, just take out the uninteresting character and replace it with a more interesting one—the beginning of fan fic interests if you will. For TV shows, anime series, and movies, the "best" friend or even villain is more appealing than the targeted love interest usually.)

\* \* \* \*

If you can't sell me on the characters, you can't sell me on their relationships; you can't get me to care about what's happening with them. The authors that I like (Patricia Briggs, Tanya Huff, Diana Gabaldon, Laurie Marks) really sell that point, especially in M/M, sci fi, and fantasy. The focus isn't on their 'relationships' or sexuality even, it's about them and whatever story they have to tell.

Now, *you* may get your protagonists served to you on the shell by Zephyrs, but I build mine from the ground up. I usually start with a vague idea and a name. I've no idea why,

but until the name feels right, I can't seem to get a handle on the character. If you don't own one of those name-your-kid books, get one. I use *20,001 Names for Baby* by Carol McD. Wallace.

Not to get all mystical on you, but I think there's power in names. At the very least names carry cultural and societal connotations, so I think it's important to get the name right. Male authors tend to go with manly basics: Tom, Jack, Robert, Will. Female authors tend to be more creative: Luc, Darien, Raphael, Brandon. Here's my advice: pick a name that suits the character as much as you understand the character at this point—and don't name him anything that would get him beat up at school.

Don't be afraid to change the character's name as the book progresses. Sometimes an Akihiko turns out to be a Kaemon. Who knows why?

Okay, now for a little on the spot improvisation. I'm one of three contributors to the *Hostage!* anthology due out in 2008 from MLR Press. The only thing I know for sure about my characters in "*Dangerous Ground*" is they're named Taylor and Will (Hey, I had to come up with something for the promo blurb), and they're some kind of special law enforcement officers. Taylor is my POV protagonist, but I haven't worked out yet whether I'll be writing him in first or third person. Probably—usually—first person.

Taylor MacAllister, I think. It sounds spiky and sharp. Will ... Brandt. Will's a couple of years older than Taylor, but they're both in their mid-thirties, both seasoned professionals.

Oh—while I'm thinking of it: certain guys refer to each other by their last names, so choose those as carefully as you do the first name. Also be careful with nicknames. Names like "Scooter" or "Chip" send the wrong message to a female reader. Of course you might be trying to make a point by using an inappropriate or offensive nickname, and boyish, cute nicknames are not unheard of in gay culture.

We've named our characters. Next I start narrowing in on how the character looks. There are only so many options, so this shouldn't take a lot of time. Some writers like to leave the physical details up to the reader, but I'm not a fan of that—as a reader or a writer. I want to know what the characters look like. I want to know the basics: dark hair or light? Tall or short? Willowy or built like The Rock? And then I try to figure out a couple of distinguishing features. A scar, really long eyelashes, a broken nose, a tattoo or any assorted piercings are all perennially popular in M/M fiction. Big ears, a bad perm, and a uni-brow would be more original, but this is romantic fiction, so there are limits to how free you should let your imagination run.

Remember, the steps for character development are the same whether you're writing about Regency bucks, contemporary firemen, 23rd-century astronauts, or shape-shifting prehistoric shark men.

For some reason I'm getting visual on Will before Taylor. Will is strong and square, square-jawed, broad shouldered, stubborn, a little set in his ways. Brown hair and blue eyes and tanned. An unexpectedly boyish grin, but Will's a pretty

serious guy. Quiet. Steady. He reminds me of the old-fashioned lawmen of the mythological west.

Taylor, in contrast, is a little sharper. Edgy, I mean. Same height or nearly as Will, but wiry, slim, angular. He's fast on his feet, a fast thinker. He's more emotional, a little more reckless. A smart ass. Does he have trouble making emotional commitment? Green eyes, dark hair—maybe a new streak of silver in his hair ... he's still recovering from a nearly fatal shooting a few months earlier.

You've probably noticed that Taylor and Will developed in my imagination as a pair—as romantic foils for each other. That's usually how it works for me. The protags come in tandem, and that's very useful because, again, these stories are all about the relationship.

If you're having problems visualizing your characters, try flipping through *GQ* or *Men's Health* or another men's magazine. Pick an attractive guy at random and try describing him in a paragraph or two. While the guy in the magazine might not be what you want, the guy you've described on paper probably will be.

This is a good time to start putting together a character sketch or bio. It'll make your life easier if you chart your character's age, eye color, height, etc. Because once you mention any of these details in the manuscript, sure as hell you'll never be able to find that paragraph again, and halfway through the book Taylor will have blue eyes and Will will have gray. Put down everything you can think of about the character. You might never use his appendix scar or the fact that he graduated from Kent State, but the more you know

about him, the easier he'll be to write. And if you go on to write a series, this will be the beginning of your character bible.

Regardless of what your character looks like, he'll eventually be irresistible to his male counterpart, and, ideally, the reader. But that won't be due to his looks; it'll be because of the personality you give him.

While I don't look for Odd Couple opposites, I do try to come up with personality types who will have natural and realistic conflicts—but who also have a lot in common. Complementary opposites are good. And, yes, I really do try to ground my characters with a bit of real life psychology. If I do this well, there will be plenty of believable obstacles to my two protags's happy ever after (HEA)—but there will be equal grounds for a satisfying and convincing resolution to their differences.

The fact that Will is quiet and steady, that he likes to deliberate before he acts, that he wants to hedge his bets, will naturally and realistically clash with Taylor who's a little more highly strung. Taylor is, in Will's opinion, too quick off the mark, even impulsive. Will thinks Taylor needs to think before he shoots his mouth off. Taylor gets impatient with Will—and he's sharp and snappish when he's annoyed. Oddly, he also takes Will's criticism more seriously than Will takes his. But they've been partners for a few years, and they've learned how to work well together. They like each other—a lot—and respect each other, and depend on each other. That's the job, of course: they're agents of some yet to be determined federal law enforcement department, and they



spend their days watching each other's back—and maybe backside. What happens between these two after hours? Hmm. I'm starting to like these guys. Starting to look forward to writing their story.

If your two main characters aren't convincingly drawn, if at least part of the tension between them doesn't evolve from their strong, contrasting personalities, then you'll find yourself relying on artificial bickering, miscommunication, or—the worst—strained contrivances to keep them apart: what I call, *But Darling, He's My Brother!* syndrome.

Believable characters are motivated, not manipulated.

So let's talk about developing characters that read like real people—only better.

In mainstream fiction, we don't need to like a protagonist. We merely need to find him believable and interesting enough to follow for three hundred and twenty pages. In heterosexual romance fiction, the female protagonist is often just a placeholder for the reader. But in M/M romantic fiction, we not only need to believe in and care about the main character, we need to fall in love with him. Chances are *you're* already in love with your protagonist. Unfortunately, you love everyone you create, so you're no judge.

You need to think objectively about why readers would want to spend time with your brainchild instead of someone else's. What is it about your main character that will engage a potential reader's heart and mind?

Traditional—cynical—wisdom is that men look for beauty and women look for earning potential. I don't think that's true. I think humans, being human, are equally attracted to

success, and equally susceptible to good looks—and both of those things are pretty much *de rigueur* in romance novels. Your characters must be attractive (at least to each other) and they must be successful in a way recognized by readers (even if not by themselves). But hopefully it goes without saying that your main characters need to be more than their physical descriptions and their carefully researched professions.

Speaking of which, I'm sure you realized that my protagonist's profession came to me at the same time his character began to take shape in my mind. The demands of the plot may well determine that your protagonist be a mage or a cop or a fur trapper or an artist or a prostitute or a CEO or a nurse or a geologist. But if you haven't figured out what he does for a living, think long and hard. In fiction, at least, people are what they do. Give your character something interesting to do, something that tells us about him, something that gives the potential for subplots. Taylor and Will are going to go camping in the High Sierras to try to rebuild the trust in their partnership damaged after Taylor's nearly fatal shooting. Their job and their partnership factors heavily into the story, even though the story is not about Will and Taylor on the job.

In fact, the real question is this: do Will and Taylor have anything in common outside of work? Think about how your protagonist's profession plays against the man in his life. Does his job bring them into conflict? Is his job the catalyst that brings them together? Is it just a job, or a career? Is it something he does to pay the bills, or is it his vocation?

Add his work experience to that character bio. Don't be afraid to get detailed. Even though you won't use a lot of those details, they'll add to your understanding of the character—they'll help you refine him. What does he like to wear? His clothes should say something about his personality. What does he like to eat? Does he have to think about his weight? What music does he listen to? Are his parents alive? Is he allergic to dogs? Does he have his tonsils? Does he sleep in the nude? (No, all guys do not sleep in the nude.) Does he believe in God? Does he have any hobbies? Any particular skills? Ah, that reminds me: Will has won sharp-shooting contests; that might come in handy later on.

One useful tool is the character interview. There are a lot of versions of this floating around. I think it's best to make up your own questions, focusing on the stuff that's of most interest to you, and then answer the questions in your character's voice. Start with the obvious stuff like where he was born and keep digging until you feel like you know this guy inside out.

A typical character interview question is: *what do you fear most in the world?*

It's good to know what your characters fear most, because they should be coming face to face with it in your story.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I've read a number of well-written M/M characters that were great creations set in terrific stories that despite

amazingly good writing, I didn't like at all. Why? Because the author didn't make me care for them or about them. Great guy, terrific love scenes, intriguing plot and I didn't give a damn. I couldn't care enough about the characters to give a hoot if they saved the day or ended up with each other. This is erotic romance. I have to fall in love with these characters, be rooting for them all the way, happy when they are happy and sad when they are. No connection to the characters and I might as well be reading a textbook. A great story isn't enough. I have to fall in love with the men.

\* \* \* \*

A well-written character—no matter how handsome—is not necessarily the same thing as a lovable character. Remember that.

Now, what do *you* find lovable? We're talking personality and character now, so put down that copy of *Men's Health* and focus for a minute. Think about the qualities you prize in a lover. Not *that!* We're talking about disposition, individuality. What would you look for in a mate? What are the traits you value most highly in friends? What do you think your own strengths are as a person? Are you loyal? Conscientious? Are you imaginative? Good at duck calls? We all know that traditional romance novel protagonists are supposed to be brave and über-competent, but M/M fiction allows us more versatility. Take advantage of that. Pick three qualities you really admire or look for in a lover and gift them, good fairy-like, on your still damp protagonist. Let these be his defining characteristics.

Taylor is clever, resourceful, and confident.

Will is cool under pressure, loyal, and relentless.

Beware the test tube baby—the perfect protagonist. You know him; he's cloned from the traditional heterosexual romance hero. Handsome, brave, generous, successful, charming, honest, self-controlled ... He's got it *all*. Even his faults are society-approved: he's too take-charge, too masterful, too brave, too driven to succeed, too ... whatever. Okay, *maybe* he has a secret tragedy in his distant past, but that just makes him more interesting and attractive. He laughs at danger, he scoffs at vicissitude, he's *really* annoying.

Sure, you want your protagonist to fulfill the role of hero, but these paragons aren't fantasy so much as chimera. Maybe they're attractive. They have many attractive qualities, but they're not real. They don't even vaguely resemble real men, and, as such, they aren't *lovable*. Readers don't love perfection. They don't identify with it. They know instinctively it would be unpleasant to live with.

Readers love characters they can identify with, and in order for readers to identify with a character, the character must be multi-dimensional, fully-realized, human—and, therefore, flawed.

Yes, flawed. To go along with all those virtues there's got to be a chink in the armor, an Achilles heel, a weak spot. You don't have to make him a miser or a kleptomaniac, but a few moments of insecurity, of jealousy, of failure will make your protag *more* appealing, not less.

The difficulty is our egos are often tied up in our fictional creations; it can be difficult to permit imperfection and ugliness in the embodiment of our romantic ideals. Even if you manage to come up with a few minor flaws—jealousy or possessiveness being the most popular—they don't add any depth to the characterization. Remember, growth of characters usually comes via their *flaws*.

As I study Taylor and Will, I see that Taylor is a little arrogant, occasionally reckless, short-tempered ... nothing too serious there. But there's this: Taylor was shot because he was over-confident. Or maybe he hesitated. Either way, Taylor made a nearly fatal mistake—and Will is still angry with him and not admitting it—not even to himself. Something else ... Taylor is in love with Will. He has been for years. He loves Will more than anyone or anything—and Will doesn't feel the same.

That's a pretty big flaw on Will's end. Because if we like and identify with Taylor, we're going to be increasingly mad at Will for hurting Taylor by not loving him back.

You see how this is shaping up? There's an easy and natural synchronicity to character development when you're on the right track.

Remember to let the reader discover truths about the main characters through the observations and comments of the secondary and supporting characters. Of course, the most important insight into the character will come through his exchanges with his romantic foil.

Here's an example.

*"You feel okay?" Showered and dressed, Jake stood at the stove turning bacon with a spatula when I walked into the kitchen the next morning.*

*I shrugged the rest of the way into my shirt. "Fine. Why?" He'd set a clean mug out for me on the counter. I poured coffee from the machine.*

I glanced his way. He turned down the gas on the stove. He looked more relaxed than he had the night before—maybe it was the absence of firearms.

"You were restless last night. Tossing and turning. Talking in your sleep."

I sat down with my coffee. "I hope I didn't spill my girlish secrets."

"Your girlish secrets are safe with me."

That kind of line works better with a smile, but Jake was not amused by references to my feminine side. He set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of me. "Eat. You'll feel better."

"I feel fine," I said, irritably this time.

Jake had this Nero Wolfeian attitude about food. He thought a growling stomach signaled serious illness. In less than a year I'd had more lectures from him on the importance of breakfast than I had from Lisa during my entire childhood.

He piled his own plate from the pan on the stove, sat across from me, leaning on his elbows the better to intimidate his food.

We ate to the homely sounds of the dishwasher running and coffee machine percolating.

I was deep in thought when Jake's voice yanked me back to awareness.

"So what's on your mind? You're usually chirping and chattering around here in the morning."

"Well, thank you," I said. "I appreciate the flattering comparison to Tweety Bird." I forked in a mouthful of fluffy scrambled eggs. He was a good cook, and I did appreciate the fact that he fixed me breakfast and did my dirty dishes—and saved my skin on occasion.

*The Hell You Say* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

In this exchange between Jake Riordan and Adrien English, we learn something about Jake, about Adrien, and about their relationship in just a few sentences—and it's all in Adrien's distinct voice. We see that Jake takes care of Adrien in subtle and not so subtle ways, that he's the more domestic of the two, that he is very aware of Adrien and how Adrien operates. In fact, we learn as much about Jake's feelings for Adrien in this simple scene as we do in any scene of lovemaking between them.

Remember that all this information and data that you're collecting on your two main characters are for your own reference. You're not going to do anything clumsy like dump it, exposition-style, into backstory or narrative descriptions. You're not going to have the character reflect at length on his own background.

\* \* \* \*

Anne Brooke, author of *A Dangerous Man*, *The Hit List*, etc.

I always start off a novel with not a clue as to character or plot (though I do have one, and usually only one, strong idea of what my main character is like). All I have is one scene in



my head and I take it from there. For me it's always a journey of discovery and I wing it mostly until I'm about 2/3rds through. It's almost as if writing becomes an act of faith, in a weird sort of way. I learn about my characters as I go on.

When I'm 2/3rds through, I pause, and do in-depth character studies for each of my people, and then I'll go on (and, later, back) from those. I've tried doing detailed synopses, character studies before I start, etc., etc., but the thing just dies in the water and I can't go on. It's got to be organic and off the top of my head (at least initially) or I just can't write it.

\* \* \* \*

Fair enough. There's no *wrong* way to write a book, but making it up as you go along will inevitably lead to lots of tentative initial dialogue and scenes that really have no purpose while the writer works through who the characters are and what their story really is. This isn't a problem so long as you're ruthless when it comes to your rewrite—something we'll talk more about later.

Meantime, here's an easy trick for fleshing-out psychologically-realized characters—regardless of when in the creative process you decide to do that.

Figure out your protagonist's birth date. Seriously. Pick the month and day you believe he was born. Believe me, even if it's subconscious, something will influence your choice. Once you've given him a birthday, go look up his horoscope. There

are all kinds of books and Internet sites. I recommend *Linda Goodman's Sun Signs* by Linda Goodman.

Taylor was born in May. May ... 25th. That makes him a Gemini. The consensus of the stars is that Geminis are quick-witted, communicative, energetic, contradictory, curious, adaptable, quick-silver—yep, this all sounds like Taylor. This will all work well. On the other hand, Geminis can be nervous, restless, unpredictable, insecure, cunning. That all sounds like Taylor as well. Worse, they can be inconsistent, self-centered and promiscuous—but we don't need to take it that far. Taylor doesn't need to be a monster, he just needs a few believable flaws. Of course, Will might have seen a few things that lead him to believe that Taylor is inconsistent, self-centered, and promiscuous, and that might explain why he's reluctant to let himself care for Taylor romantically. Something to think about.

The handy thing about using astrology and horoscopes is that you get the mirror image of any given personality type. It's a quick and easy way to study the day and night within your character's soul. And it's a useful prompt for ideas that wouldn't necessarily occur on their own. For example, Geminis physical vulnerabilities include hands, lungs, thymus gland—and now I know that Taylor took a bullet in the lung.

For the record, I don't believe the stars rule our lives, but I do believe there's a lot of good sound psychology behind astrology. Besides, it's fun playing with all the possibilities.

So we've got Taylor. What about Will?

I think Will is an autumn baby ... maybe October. How about Libra?

Libras are strong-willed with a strong sense of justice and fair play, and a strong sense of team. That's good for a cop. Libras don't like confrontation. Hmm. Maybe Will avoids confrontation in his personal life, although he doesn't duck from it on the job? Idealistic, able to stand back and judge impartially, unexpectedly sensitive. Is Will more sensitive than he seems? Not sure. On the other hand, Libras can be too conventional—yes, I think that's Will. They love creature comforts, they're easygoing to a fault, and they resist change—no dramatic revelations, but this is all workable stuff.

And by weighing and discarding possible personality traits, I end up giving a lot of consideration to Will and Taylor as individuals *and as a couple*. Remember, in romantic fiction, the story is about how the characters fall in love, not about their personal growth—although sometimes (in the best romances) both are achieved.

By the way, don't forget the intriguing possibilities of creating an antihero protagonist. An antihero is a central character who lacks the usual heroic qualities of a protagonist—perhaps he's a coward—or a killer. Perhaps he's a thief or just a little on the amoral side. Think the Flashman novels or the conflicted heroes of Laura Kinsale's romances.

Many of the greatest heroes of classical literature are, in fact, anti-heroes. Men of action and adventure who have to be larger than life to survive. Arrogance, cynicism, moral ... flexibility are all the characteristics of an antihero. From Odysseus to Heathcliff, the antihero offers wonderful

possibilities for romantic fiction. There's nothing like the love of a good man to redeem a bad man.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

My favorite character types are consistent throughout my writing. I like big brawny, confident, powerful men with gentle, understanding hearts coupled with physically smaller, slight men who like a man who doesn't treat them as breakable. Smaller men who enjoy being manhandled in the bedroom but are still treated as an equal in all other aspects of their relationship. I like the sensitivity and vulnerability it lets me write between them. A lot of readers have commented they see one of my characters as seeing himself as "unlovable" as a consistent characteristic, and I guess that is true. I like providing that perfect half to give them what they need to feel loved. I also like exploring why some relationships that look impossible on the surface work well for the characters once you know their private needs and desires.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed, Power Play*, etc.

In my opinion, M/M fiction is much more "feminine" than gay fiction. M/M fiction is written to appeal specifically to women readers. I don't write with that sort of reader in mind, to be perfectly honest. I think of my stories as gay first, appealing to gay men, and only classify them as M/M to attract potential readers online. It's true that the majority of

readers are women. However, I don't write my stories with them in mind, and maybe that shows a bit in my sales. I prefer to write for character first, story second, and sex a distant third (or fourth). Also, I try to keep my characters true to life, and from ALL walks of life, as well.

I like to think that realism is one of the strengths of my writing.

The stereotypical dynamics in gay relationships, as translated into M/M fiction, generally turn my stomach. Too often you have the frail bottom needing protecting from a domineering top. I like to turn that on its side, have a physically strong character who is dominant in all aspects of the relationship but prefers to bottom during sex. Or the emotionally weak character who tops his much larger partner. Or emphasize their differences through race instead of physique. The strong silent type who is noisy in bed, the self-confident jock who worries he isn't good enough to satisfy his partner, the burly biker with the heart of gold.

\* \* \* \*

Both Laura and J.M. are talking about the romantic or relationship dynamic between your protagonist and his other—or better—half. You need to take the dynamic into account as you're creating the characters.

Certain dynamics are more popular than others in M/M fiction. One of the most popular is the younger/smaller/weaker bottom paired off with an older/larger/stronger top. That's basically the traditional heterosexual romance dynamic. If that's your kink, that's

okay, but try to show a little imagination in how you handle this, *especially* if your plot is going to mirror a traditional heterosexual exemplification like the ones we discussed in Chapter Two.

As we said earlier, your POV character can't be a placeholder. He needs to be strong and vivid and lovable all in his own right.

There are two traditional romantic hero types: the alpha and the beta.

The alpha is the traditional romantic hero. He's powerful, successful, dominant—a leader in every way. The modern alpha is a lot more interesting than the stereotypical alpha of yesteryear. Now days he's allowed a softer side, a few vulnerabilities, a few flaws, a few losses. Jake Riordan is an alpha. Daniel Moran in *The Dark Horse* is an alpha. Both Will and Taylor are alphas—which should be interesting.

Traditionally the beta was the really nice, sensitive, boy next door type who inevitably lost the heroine to the alpha. A lot of times he was a perfectly good catch and the heroine often got herself engaged to him while she was getting over her disastrous feelings for the hero (who was always an alpha dog). Even heterosexual romance has loosened up enough to permit beta heroes a few wins these days. Betas are not weak; they just appeared weak in contrast to the omnipotent alpha of yesteryear. Hell, Superman appeared weak compared to some of those guys. Superman is an alpha, by the way. Clark Kent is a beta. Adrien English is a beta. Sean Fairchild in *The Dark Horse*, and Timothy North in *Cards on the Table* are also betas.

In M/M fiction there are plenty of alphas and betas. There is also something called an omega. The omega is the antithesis of the alpha. He's passive, submissive, emotional, and generally pretty helpless. I don't think you ever find a true omega playing hero in a heterosexual romance, but they turn up in M/M romance. I think the closest I've come to creating an omega character is Perry Foster in *The Ghost Wore Yellow Socks*. But they're out there. They're the feminized partners many of our reviewers and editors refer to in their quotes.

I want to make it clear that you should *not* be drawing characters based on the broad strokes of alpha, beta, and omega. These terms are useful shorthand for discussing characters types and conflict, but these are general classifications. If you construct characters based on these profile terms, you'll be creating clichés and stereotypes, not characters—not people.

True alpha/alpha pairings are rare. Even rarer are omega/omega pairings. There are a number of beta/beta pairings, but the most obvious pairing (and, don't get me wrong, it makes sense psychologically) is the alpha/beta. I don't have a problem with that. My problem is with romantic fiction that matches an alpha with an infantilized alpha or beta.

We'll discuss this further when we get to "Rescue Me," the chapter on hurt/comfort, but for starters, your characters should not be looking for parental replacements in a lover. Even the most sensitive and artistic omega should be an autonomous adult.

Now if you've got a seriously damaged POV character, that's okay. Bad things happen to good characters. But even a character recovering from rape or breakdown or incest or serious illness—even if it's all of these at the same time—shouldn't be a helpless, quivering blob 24/7. Not even if that really turns you on, because, believe me, it's not going to turn on the majority of editors, reviewers, or readers—male or female.

Give the guy a sense of humor, or incredible success in his professional life, or a reckless disregard for his own safety—*something* to balance the nightmares, and crying jags, the whimpering, and throwing up, and fainting, and ... ugh.

Weak is not attractive. Helpless is not attractive. Dumb is not attractive. It's not any more attractive in a man, no matter how blue his eyes or bubble his butt, than it was in those old heterosexual romance novels you hated as a girl. Okay? Have I made myself clear on this? The more powerful the alpha in your story, the more you have to work to keep the beta capable and interesting in his own right.

\* \* \* \*

Share your thoughts on characterization and the dynamics in M/M relationships. Or, as one reader put it to me: "I've been in some discussions about characterization in M/M fiction and there seems to be a 'sore spot' where some readers or writers don't want one of the male leads to be perceived as feminine."

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.



I think every couple is different, so it depends on the story I'm telling. If the alpha has a strong protective streak, I tend to write his partner more feminine. I think you should represent characters that are true and honest, and with that, comes an occasional feminine character.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell, Purgatory*, etc.

I find that if you come up with good, strong characters with reasons for being the way they are, then the issue is less. Not all of my guys are super macho. In fact, very few of my guys are super macho. I happen to like them slightly or overtly androgynous. But then, I try to give them a character to go with their looks and their situation. It makes perfect sense for a small, cute guy to act on that if he knows it'll get him what he wants. It also makes sense, in the right circumstances, for a big, burly guy to do something traditionally "feminine". It's all in the story and its context. I do, however, try not to lose sight of the fact that my guys ARE guys and there are physical and social differences. If my guys are feminine, there's a REASON. It either came from how they grew up or from a conscious decision. It's PART of the story and helps to form the characters, not just something that's there to make it a romance.

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of The Vampire Magic series, etc.

I try to focus on writing the character the story calls for. I don't try to fit them into female vs. male roles, and I think

that helps. Yes, sometimes one is softer than his partner, or one treats his partner in a traditionally male fashion. But that's because that's who they are as people, not as a gender stereotype. If I did a good job of explaining that throughout the book, the readers hopefully won't try to stick them in stereotypical boxes either. \*g\*

\* \* \* \*

Elisa Rolle, reviewer and bookstore owner

This is a rather common answer I believe. I like the alpha male/omega male pair. A strong man with a weaker one. But usually the omega male is also a smart man. The classical top from the bottom character. This is in absolutely my preferred couple. But I have also read books with an alpha/alpha pair. It can be interesting, but very unusual, so I have little chance to fully appreciate this type of relationship. Never read an omega/omega pair ... but I have the feeling I would not like it.

I like the presence of an alpha male pair in the story pairing because I like when my "men" have feelings and they are willing to share them. In a classical romance, the strong male is an action/no words man, and the heroine has always to understand him without any aid from him. And usually the heroine is a spoilt woman who has no interest in understanding her man. A non-communicating couple. Jealousy and trouble are around every corner.

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, Night Owl Reviews

The big dark alpha male with his small, blond, "feminine" mate, who he sweeps off his feet with the power of his unrestrained sexuality: I don't like it in M/F fic, where it makes me gag, and I still don't like it in M/M fic. It's such a popular one, though, that it must be doing something for a lot of people.

\* \* \* \*

For me, the challenge is to create equally strong but different partners. For example, because of a childhood bout of rheumatic fever, bookstore owner Adrien English is physically vulnerable. But Adrien is smart and capable and successful in every other aspect of his life. He's far more emotionally balanced and mentally healthy than his sometimes lover, closeted LAPD homicide detective, Jake Riordan. If classic alpha male Jake has a soft spot, it's Adrien. And Adrien's physical vulnerability allows us to occasionally glimpse a tender, protective side of Jake that we wouldn't see if Adrien was another alpha with whom Jake had to compete.

*When we reached the ranch, Jake called my grisly discovery in while I poured us each a drink. When he got off the phone I said, "How long before we have to start back for the cave?"*

*He took his glass. Knocked back a mouthful of whisky. "You don't need to go. I'll handle it."*

*"Stop treating me like—"*

He interrupted, "Look, you don't have to keep proving yourself to me, okay? I think you're plenty tough in the ways that count."

I didn't know what to say to that. It was hard to hold his gaze. Suddenly he seemed to see way too much.

"From here on out this has to be handled by professionals. Understand?"

"I guess so."

We drank in a silence that was unexpectedly companionable.

*A Dangerous Thing* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

Interesting and not over-used variations on the alpha/beta dynamic include the exploration of the age dynamic, the disability dynamic, the civilian versus military/law enforcement dynamic. Play around, have some fun with these dynamics.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, writer and publisher MLR Press

Society as a whole doesn't give men credit or the opportunity to be openly sensitive. (Gay men can get away with being open about it but they pay for it, but I think it applies to straight men too). I think that's why a lot of the women writing it are surprised that gay men want to read romance as well. Why they don't actively seek out the gay market which is nuts, as I'm proving with every new sale and every gay distributor that contacts me and every gay event that wants us to come to them. Why gay men write me fan letters even though I'm a woman. Hell, my husband is way more romantic than I am and no one would call him a wuss, big old biker, farm boy, bad ass. He reads erotic het romance.

\* \* \* \*

Create hard-boiled characters and give them a soft side.  
Create vulnerable characters and give them spines of steel.

Here's your homework. Put down *The Gay Kama Sutra* and read one of the following: *Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture* by Peter Lehman, *We Boys Together: Teenagers in Love Before Girl-Craziness* by Jeffery P. Dennis, or *The Male Couple's Guide: Finding a Man, Making a Home, Building a Life* by Eric Marcus.

*A Man's Man—exploring masculinity*

It's kind of funny to me how much some women writers worry about whether they're getting the man on man sex scenes right in every anatomical detail, while rarely worrying about whether they've nailed the masculine psyche. It's like a point of pride that they can describe anal penetration to the last twitch of sphincter muscle, but a matter of complete indifference that they're writing male clichés.

And there are *a lot* of clichés out there.

Unfortunately far too many women writers seem to believe that frequent use of the F-word, an inability to articulate feelings (or sometimes even thoughts), and a love of smoked meat, beer, and football is the same thing as creating a fully-realized, believable male character.

It's not.

\* \* \* \*

Raven McKnight, primary acquiring editor for M/M at Loose  
Id

Don't rely on stereotypes—not every gay/bi character must be either macho or the antithesis; not every gay/bi character or relationship separates into the oft-mentioned top/bottom designations. When you create a character, create someone who's blond, brown-eyed, Irish and Polish, acrophobic, gay, well educated, and a little annoyed with his sister; create someone who's bald, gray-eyed, half Nigerian and half mystery, a pretty decent mechanic, gay, saving for college, and happy to finally have his own house. We'd much rather read about them than about characters who are defined by one aspect of their overall selves. In other words, create real, whole people.

\* \* \* \*

Guys are as diverse and complicated as women. Honest. Some guys like to garden, some guys like to read, some guys work with inner city kids, or are connoisseurs of fine wine, old books, ballet, opera, and vintage film—and they're straight! So can you please try to mix and match your stereotypes in more interesting and fresh ways?

Granted you're writing romantic fantasy for women, which means you're trying to create male characterizations that play into feminine concepts (or maybe wish fulfillment) of who and what men are. Of course, if you can write gay male characters believably enough to convince gay men, then you could conceivably double your readership, and I can't imagine you'd object to that idea.

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## CHAPTER 6: CHEAT SHEETS FOR CHICKS

\* \* \* \*

Neil Plakcy, author of *Mahu*, *Mahu Surfer*, etc.

Interestingly, I just edited an M/M erotica collection, and most of the stuff I rejected was from men. Five of the 21 stories I accepted are from women, and I only rejected one woman—because she just couldn't write. I think part of what makes good erotica is a good story, often a romantic one, and women may have an edge there. I looked back at the five trying to see if I could tell that they were written by a woman—and I couldn't.

\* \* \* \*

Some general thoughts—also called generalizations—about writing 21st century western civilization male characters.

—Men like sex for its own sake.

—Men are more logical (except when they are thinking with their dick).

—Men don't talk about their feelings so much.

—Men don't analyze their feelings so much.

—Men have feelings too.

—Men feel responsible.

—Men and adrenaline rhyme. And there's a reason for that.

—All men are not created equal—but your protagonists must be.

- Men worry about their careers.
- Men channel their emotions—especially when they worry about their careers.
- Men love sex for its own sake.
- Men usually know basic guy stuff: how to change a tire, how to tie a tie, how to read a map (or compass), how to drive a manual transmission, how to grill a steak, how to use a torque wrench, how to say "I'm sorry."
- Men cry.
- Men don't like to cry—it's not society-approved and it makes them feel weird and weak.
- Men do not admit to feeling weak. Helpless is not in the male vocabulary. Neither is "taupe," "tiny," "terrified," or "tender".
- Men can be very tender—but please don't comment on it.
- The male ego is not a myth.
- Men like to compete.
- The desire to chase things is inbred.
- Men do not multi-task well.
- Men are goal oriented—they like to think of it as focused on The Target.
- Men are problem-solvers.
- Men like maps, strategies, business plans, game plans, star charts, and manuals to things they no longer—and possibly never did—own.
- Little boys start thinking like big men early on—like the minute the cord gets snipped.
- Men think about sex approximately every sixty seconds.



—Men have a lower pain threshold than women.

—Men don't spend a lot of thought about a room's décor or what people are wearing.

—Did I mention sex?

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

I have not read female writers thoroughly in the genre, but I have had female editors and readers respond to our novels. One comment that jumped out at me was when a female editor commented that a character entered into a sex scene too quickly since he was supposedly closeted and didn't want to allow himself to be seduced. There were several comments like this that seemed to completely miss the sexual-psychological interplay that men experience. Even when it was explained in text, some females didn't grasp the incredible shift that occurs when a man enters into a sexual situation (or how he feels when it's suddenly over). It is the classic "Which head are you thinking with?" joke. But it can be very true, and a man can switch from one logical head to another very illogical one in a moment. A man may have sex when he has promised himself he won't. He may have sex with someone he thought he hated. He may do things during sex he said he never would.

So it is not the mechanics of sex that female writers may get wrong. But it could be the unique emotional experience men have with sex. Perhaps they are writing M/M sex correctly physically but portraying it emotionally the way a female would feel. That said, many, many women readers

love the intensely male sexual experiences we portray without the slow, logical, flowery descriptions of straight romance.

\* \* \* \*

Liam Moran, author of *The Darkness of Castle Tiralur*, etc.

One of the surprises of my first book was its readership. It wasn't until after it was published that I discovered that most of the readers of m/m erotic romance (and most of the authors of same!) were heterosexual women. For better or worse, I started to fret about the rules and expectations of the genre and about my place in it. That angst has not resolved, and my belief is that my erotic writing holds little appeal for straight women. That's not necessarily bad, as I always intended to write erotica for gay men. This really is unresolved in me, as you can see!

I guess the simplest reason I believe my writing holds little appeal for women is that I've had almost no strong response from women, and by contrast lots from men. This is not to say that straight women can't write outstanding M/M erotic romance, because they do. Lots of them do. But no matter how good a novel might be, when the plot turns on one lover finally trusting the other's promise (in spite of all the conflict and uncertainty of the preceding adventures) of monogamous fidelity as the basis for their future lives together, I'm willing to bet a dollar that it was written by a woman.

Yes, gay men and straight women are attracted to men. But I'm convinced that the nature of the attraction, and the ways the attraction registers or manifests in the attractee are profoundly different. I'm in danger of making generalizations

so broad as to invite very legitimate accusations of sexism, so I beg for clemency in advance.

Starting with the two oldest sexual archetypes of Christian Europe—the sword and the chalice, Excalibur and the Grail—I believe the key to understanding the difference lies in pondering the difference in the fundamental energies of maleness and femaleness. (I believe that gay men synthesize something of the energies of both, and that heterosexual women understand this synthesis far better than heterosexual men do.)

Men and women fight or argue very differently. To be crude, they possess different weapons with which to inflict injury. Can you imagine Lysistrata based on the device that MEN withhold sexual intercourse until the WOMEN come to their senses? It would never, ever work. I think women and men deal with grief, rage and loss differently. They approach risk differently. What a "win" means is different to each.

Remember the jokes about the man driving in the car having to turn down the radio when he's lost? It's true! Forget about his resistance to asking for directions at a gas station (that's probably just pride, and anyone can be proud). That man can't process multiple and concurrent sources of input the way women can. We're not wired that way, as a rule. Under pressure, he's more likely to focus on one thing and eliminate distractions. These differences are not just social conditioning. I believe they are extrapolations of our most basic biology.

Perhaps most complex and important of all, I believe women and men experience the connection between sex and

relationship differently. I'm not wise enough understand all the differences, or even understand the differences I perceive. I just know we're really, really different in that. (CAVEAT: As a general rule.)

Going back to the original observation that both straight women and gay men are attracted to men, I think of the Sufi story about two women arguing over the last orange for sale in the marketplace. Neither was willing to let the other buy it, nor were either of them willing to share and buy only half. Each wanted the whole orange. Ultimately, because this is a Sufi story, the vendor discovered that one of the women wanted all the orange for its skin, the other wanted the whole orange for its juice. I believe that straight women and gay men are attracted to men very differently, and process that attraction differently. We want them for related but very different reasons.

I think I should stop there before I get into real trouble...

\* \* \* \*

Some tips for making your male characters seem more male.

Remember, this is all about creating the *illusion* of masculinity.

Limit male internal monologue and introspection to terse, simple sentences—but, honest to God, complete sentences, please!

Wrong: *Try as I might, I couldn't comprehend the strange circumstances which brought me to this place at this particular time*

Equally wrong: *But, I mean ... fuck!*

Right: *Nothing made sense anymore.*

Use simple, direct language for your guy dialogue—unless he's a writer or something equally arcane.

Wrong: *"I desire that mauve cardigan."*

Right: *"I want that red sweater."*

More right: *"I want that BLUE sweater."*

Use positive, active language for male POV. Male verbs, manly nouns.

Wrong: *I caressed his velvety rod*

Right: *I pumped his dick*

WAY more right: *He pumped MY dick....*

Yeah, baby! Oh. Where was I? Right. If you're already writing an ex-air force, bourbon-swilling, poker-playing, basketball-obsessed, 7,000 words-a-day-limit kind of guy, you need to think about rounding him out with a love of thriller novels or comic books or tropical fish—move him away from caricature and into the realm of character. Give him a cat and a mom.

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

A friend and I often play the "is it a guy or a chick?" game when talking to authors or reading their work. We're usually right, but not always. Female writers tend to put more into developing emotions and relationships. Male writers tend to be a little lighter in that area but heavier in showing things like characters' triumphs over outside foes. Thing is, this is in general. Two of the most richly emotional authors I know are

men. So while I might caution some female authors to remember that most men aren't as likely as most women to thoroughly discuss, or even think about, emotions and relationships, I'd also caution that nothing is hard and fast. Just be conscious that whatever you write is true to the characters you've created, be they chatty soul-searchers or taciturn emotional wastelands or anything in between.

\* \* \* \*

Some generally useless information about guys you might not know.

- Shoes, not clothes, maketh the man
- Briefs are better than boxers for long plane flights
- A man wears nothing under his kilt
- Not too many men carry handkerchiefs anymore
- Shaving is usually done in the shower or right afterwards  
(I'm talking faces)
- Leather. Accept no substitutes.
- You can't go by which ear is pierced
- Or by wedding rings
- Bathrobes are not obsolete
- All men look good in black
- Jockstraps—or, depending, cups—for athletics
- Straight guys use shoe trees too
- Got O.J.?
- Acceptable small talk with strangers: the weather, sports, current events
- Profanity is best used judiciously—and with flair
- Sunscreen is not for sissies

—The best tattoos are small, discreet, and for the right reasons

—It's hard to look manly sucking on a straw

Show your characters discovering what they have in common—show them laughing together.

\* \* \* \*

*Most of M/M Fiction is written by women and for women.  
Any thoughts on that?*

The Romantics, author of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

Logic winning over desire—wrong; Also wrong, cuddling or any afterglow after orgasm until the very end. If a man is enjoying an afterglow with another man, he is basically in love with him already; so unless there is some other obstacle to overcome to make their love a reality, that's the end of the story—or "all she wrote".

\* \* \* \*

Victor J. Banis, author of *Longhorns*, The Man from C.A.M.P. series, etc.

Men tend to be voyeurs, don't they, more so than women—which, of course, is why men in general are more turned on by porn, they're more visual. And I suppose that relates to the fact that women in general want to do it in the dark, and men are more likely to want the lights on. And that, I would imagine, goes back to the fact that men are more turned on by the physical (and, yes, more hung up on appearance) than women are. So, I would say, writing

romantic fiction for men, keep the lights on, so to speak. Lots of physical description, visual but otherwise.

\* \* \* \*

William Maltese, author of *Love Hurts*, *Diary of a Hustler*, etc.

If the majority of M/M fiction is being written, these days, by (and for) heterosexual women (and I've seen nothing to make me doubt that assumption), then why in the hell should any female author listen to me as regards tips on strengthening male characters? What men want and what women want, by way of characterizations of male protagonists, are not—believe me—one and the same!

As a male who has written M/M and heterosexual fiction from the female perspective for the female reader (the latter by way of several internationally best-selling Harlequin SuperRomances as Willa Lambert), I can tell you that females, in general, prefer their men to be far more cerebral, considerate, and caring, especially in sex, than do men (both gay and straight) who just want to get down and dirty, as quickly as possible, and forget all of the lengthy foreplay and post-coital cool-down.

\* \* \* \*

Liam Moran, author of *The Darkness of Castle Tiralur*, etc.

This is such perilous territory! Any broad generalizations I make can rightly be dismissed as sexism, even attacked as such. My comments are not meant in any way to be sexist, yet the core issue to me is inescapably that of sex and



gender, and the wonderful differences between men and women.

So here are some really, really broad generalizations about strengthening male characters...

My observation is that men are emotionally different from women—profoundly different—and my biggest beef in reading M/M stories is when I occasionally feel like the male characters process emotions like women, especially in relationship issues. Please remember I'm generalizing!!!

Men experience competition, negotiation, conflict and violence completely differently from women. Women understand patience, status, planning, and emotional vulnerability in completely different ways from men. It's interesting to me that women and men seem to respond to physical vulnerability more similarly than emotional—maybe it's just survival instinct.

The gods know that the differences between how men and women communicate—especially in conversation (empathetic listening and talking and open-hearted "sharing") have provided comedy material for ages! For very good reason—the differences are enormous, and in some cases, laughably predictable.

All that said, your original point is that most M/M fiction is written by—and FOR—heterosexual women. The very emphasis on romance and relationship over conflict and external challenge reflects this reality. Genre—by definition—draws on certain stereotypes, certain underlying rules and assumptions. Those are what define the genre.

So what I personally interpret as discrepancies in depiction of male characters may not be at all significant to the rules of the genre, or to the majority of its readers. I say if it's not broke, don't fix it. The M/M playing field boasts lots of outstanding writers creating truly satisfying stories.

\* \* \* \*

Mel Keegan, author of *Fortunes of War*, *Death's Head*, *Nocturne*, etc.

The other side to the question is, Why can't most male or female writers of gay romance make their work equally acceptable to both sides of the table? I can only guess that there's some aspect of the characterization or plotting which simply doesn't strike the chord.

A male writer might get inside the head of the gay male character better than the female writer ... but will he express the character in terms women readers will find appealing? A woman writer might easily get inside the head of a gay male character—zeroing in on the common ground I was talking about earlier—but will she describe the character, and his world, in terms which strike a chord with gay men? I'm not talking about a woman crafting M/M romance in "cute" or even "twee" terms. (There's plenty of that circulating; check the Internet.)

But the female writer's challenge would be to not only understand where the gay male character is coming from, but to imagine scenes and dialogue that ring true to guys. If it doesn't have that true ring nature, the book will still be

enjoyed by a lot of women, but many gay men will leave it alone.

The broadly-accepted book must have that sense of truth, and find the common ground we all share. That said, *good* writers can always craft a book for a specific readership. It's part of the job. The question is, are the romance writers of either gender interested enough in attracting readers from both sides of the table to evolve a different style? And that's a whole 'nother question. Ultimately, all writers do what we do for our own entertainment. If other people want to share the fantasy, we're flattered and gratified.

And if we get paid, we're even happier!

\* \* \* \*

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## CHAPTER 7: NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SON

### Plot, Conflict, Goals, and Motivation

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

I want to write stories about ideas, but I do it by getting the character first. I need to get that person firmly in my head and figure out his conflict and motivation, what he wants, and why he's so screwed up. I don't think you can do too much character work. I need to do more; I just get excited about the story and want to get going. I don't start until I hear the characters start to talk, so I can hear their voice, and until I have the good solid first line in my head.

\* \* \* \*

Okay, you've got your characters. It's time to think about how you're going to tell their story. Story = Plot.

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone comes up to me and tells me they've got a great idea for a book—or a fascinating life story—and we should become partners. They'll tell me their great idea, and I'll write the book. We'll make a fortune!

Uh huh.

As I said way back in Chapter Two, coming up with ideas isn't the hard part. Writing the damn book is the hard part. And one of the hardest parts is coming up with a good solid

plot that has enough action and conflict to carry the reader all the way to the end of the story. Too much plot will overwhelm a short story. Not enough plot will lead to saggy, limp novels. God forbid.

But when you start talking about conflict and goals and motivation—the building blocks of plot—a lot of writers get that glazed look on their faces. They want to go back to browsing *Men's Health* magazine. Or *The Gay Kama Sutra*. So listen up. Next to character, the single most important element of your book is the plot.

You have to give the plot of your story some thought. You can't just start writing. Well, you *can*, but you'll work a lot harder for noticeably weaker results. The time is coming—might already be here—when throwing two hunky guys together in sex scene after sex scene will not be enough to hold readers' attention; there will be far too many scorching and sexy M/M novels to choose from. And, let's face it, there are only so many ways to describe the act. Which is why some writers are getting kinkier and kinkier to try and keep it fresh. That's *not* the answer. The answer lies in building a better story.

And if you can't remember why your readers are choosing M/M fiction, go back and read Chapter One again. It ain't just about the sex. The further you climb out on that twisted little limb, the greater the distance between you and the majority of readers.

\* \* \* \*

Eve, reader

I love reading about gay love/relationship because there are still so many struggles and obstacles attached to it, unlike straight relationships, which I think, have reached a point that they only have themselves to blame if the relationship doesn't work out. That's what makes gay relationship so much more interesting (and sometimes heart-wrenching) to read.

\* \* \* \*

We'll keep this simple—if you really know your characters, it *will* be simple. Trust me. Plot is your story. In fact, plot is the carefully planned sequence of events that make up your story.

A story is not made up of random things happening. That's called real life; it doesn't always make for good fiction. Let alone happy endings. No, the events or scenes of a story evolve naturally—organically—from earlier events or scenes. They have to make sense, they have to be there for a reason—you're not just filling space between sex scenes. And in order for these events or scenes within your story to make sense, you have to *plan* them. (This is why an outline is such a good idea.)

The way it works is that each event or scene will complicate the situation between your protagonists a little more. The divide between them will seem to grow wider and wider with each scene or event. Conflict and problems and frustration will rise right along with sexual tension and attraction. Your characters are falling deeper in love—whether they like it or not—while the obstacles between them mount.

Now, you might be thinking that this is the opposite way it should work. There are plenty of obstacles to any two people building a life together, and you've got two great guys who, in theory, should be perfect for one another. Isn't your job to swiftly move them around the potential roadblocks and get them together? Of course it is, but getting them together is called the ending. Your story is over at that point. So unlike real life, your job isn't to smooth the course of true love starting on page one. Your job is to create enough problems and obstacles to make up a story about how these two met, fell in love, and finally worked out the differences between them so they could have a Happily Ever After. It's called *telling a story*.

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, Night Owl Reviews

First and foremost? Plot! Plot that makes the sex seem meaningful; plot that engages the reader's attention for its own sake and not just as an excuse to link the sex scenes together. There really isn't a lot of it out there.

\* \* \* \*

Remember when we were discussing coming up with strong ideas or hooks, we talked about the seven basic literary plots:

man vs. nature

man vs. man

man vs. society

man vs. machines/technology

man vs. the supernatural

man vs. self

man vs. god/religion

One or more of these seven basic plots will provide the context or framework in which your romance occurs. If you're writing a mystery novel, you're probably going to write a combination of man vs. the environment (society), man vs. man, and possibly man vs. self. If you're writing a western, you're probably going to write about man vs. nature, and man vs. man.

In fact, in numerous M/M novels the plot is actually a *subplot* of the romance—the romance or the relationship being the most important element of an M/M novel.

It's a question of degrees. In a gay mystery like *The Hell You Say*, the mystery is as important, or—depending on the reader—more important, than the relationship between Jake and Adrien. Jake and Adrien's romance or relationship is not resolved by the end of ... well, let's just say, it's not resolved. But in *The Dark Horse*, the mystery is elementary. The real story is about Dan and Sean learning to trust each other and themselves within their new relationship.

\* \* \* \*



Mel Keegan, author of *Fortunes of War*, *Death's Head*, *Nocturne*, etc.

I don't even like to draw a box around a certain type of book (such as my own) and say categorically, "This is a gay book," because the definition restricts the novels to being only one specific thing, when the fact is, each of my books is several things at once. For example, gay *and* romance *and* historical *and* thriller. Technically, a "gay book" should deal wholly with gay characters doing and saying gay things. The difficulty with this is, very few fully-fleshed plotlines can be so single-minded, and if a story did manage to conform, it would rob itself of a body of critically-important material. Most of the world wouldn't be classified "gay", but (at least for me!) to make a gay romantic thriller get up and go, people have to interact with the whole spectrum of humanity ... get involved with all kinds of people, situations, locations.

I guess I could devise some plots involving *only* gay guys, and *only* gay situations and locations. However, I'm fairly sure I'd run out of stories pretty soon—and this project also begs the question, would such a book be equally popular with guys and women? A good number of women would certainly read and enjoy it, but my intuition is (and I stress, this is only my own guess, there's no reader poll or whatever to support the speculation) that women readers would simply get less out of the reading experience.

\* \* \* \*

If you write a genre M/M novel, you'll have to meet the category requirements of both M/M romance and whatever framework you choose to set your story in. If you're writing a mystery—M/M or other—there are genre expectations: there will be a crime of some kind; the writer will play fair with the reader when it comes to clues, red herrings, and the cast of suspects; the sleuth will solve the crime by methods beyond intuition or happy coincidence; and there will be a believable solution. If you're writing a western, you will be required to deliver a western setting, lots of action, the "code of the west," etc. These elements must be executed as capably as they would be in a straight genre novel. No short cuts, no cheats. It's challenging, no doubt about it, but my take is that the more plot you have, the easier the story is to write.

That said, plot is where storytelling gets tricky for a lot of M/M writers, even those currently selling stories. Conflict, in particular, is a weak point for most M/M writers. Yep, the majority of M/M writers do not understand the difference between genuine conflict and contrived bickering between characters. If you can master this concept, you'll have an edge over your fellow writers.

*There is no story without conflict.*

That's why the seven basic literary plots are all man versus something. The keyword is *versus*.

Conflict is the clash of your characters opposing goals and motivations—their hopes, dreams, ambitions, and desires running headlong into someone else's fears, insecurities, plans, and prejudices. So, yeah, your characters may squabble about a variety of things, but the squabbling needs

to result from something more dramatic and fundamental than he's a neatnik falling hard for a slob—not that the Odd Couple dynamic can't work; it's the stuff of romantic comedy, but at the heart of those differences should be something profound.

In far too many stories, the only conflict or obstacle to the lovers' happy ending is the external conflict provided by the genre plot: amnesia, competing for the same job, marrying for money (or to hide sexuality), a tornado or a tidal wave. That's fine as far as it goes—but it doesn't go very far. Obstacles have to be complex enough to believably keep two smart, rational, well-suited men apart from each other—and this distance has to be *emotional* as well as physical.

A competently executed romance plot combines external (situational) *and* internal (personal) conflict.

\* \* \* \*

Victor J. Banis, author of *Longhorns*, The Man from C.A.M.P. series, etc.

Man on man relationships—it seems to me that there is invariably a certain degree of the competition for alpha male in virtually every male/male partnership, even where the roles seem to be clearly defined: top, bottom, master, slave, husband, wife. Didn't one of the famous porn bottoms (Joey Stefano?) assert that the bottom is always in control—which I think is true even though ostensibly it is the reverse. So, even with the closest relationship, there is a tension there, a conflict (if sometimes a subtle one) that a woman writer just is not going to know or understand. It's strictly a male thing.

I think the secret of most long term relationships is in how the two partners resolve that conflict—and, it ties in as well to my feeling that as homosexuals we may do ourselves a disservice by clinging so resolutely to the heterosexual idea of "marriage", which I feel forces men into roles that simply are never going to work for them. The relationship between two men is never going to be the same as between a man and a woman, can't be. The relationships that I have known that lasted for decades invariably involved the partners finding their own roles and rules rather than trying to imitate the Cleavers. And those who attempt the latter seem to me invariably to fail. And I think most marriages, even the heterosexual ones, flounder on the rock of monogamy—it's kind of contrary to the male beast. Put two men together, and you've doubled the problem. I don't know of any long term male/male relationship that hasn't found some way to deal with that issue, although their solutions are not always the same.

\* \* \* \*

An example of external conflict would be found in *Fatal Shadows* when Jake Riordan suspects Adrien English of murder. That's an external conflict supplied by the plot. Jake's suspicion is a barrier to his growing awareness of and attraction to Adrien. Another potentially final barrier is that Adrien is being stalked. An HEA is contingent on his survival. Both of these are external (situational) conflicts and complications.

External conflicts are relatively easy to resolve.

The *real* barrier to Adrien and Jake's happiness is Jake's conflicted feelings about his own sexuality. Jake is a closeted cop, and he has no intention of leaving the safety of that closet. That's an enormous obstacle to finding an HEA with Adrien. It is an internal (personal) conflict driven by Jake's personality and character, and it dogs their relationship throughout the course of the series.

Usually the most intense and dramatic conflicts will be the internal ones. But—please take note here—  
You need both internal and external conflict in order to write a satisfying romance.

Now, having said this a couple of times, I'll—unwillingly—qualify. There are, particularly in fan fiction, charming little exceptions to this rule. These are the slash varietals of *aga sagas*. The term *aga saga* is used to describe gentle-humored domestic dramas set in quaint villages—usually in England, although there are American small town cousins to the genus. Think Angela Thirkell or D.E. Stevenson meets *Queer as Folk*. These can be truly delightful little stories—often vignettes filled with dry wit and understated romance, but it takes a skilled and experienced writer to pull them off. There *are* writers who can make a story about two men choosing curtains or buying border collies fascinating, but they are not in huge supply.

Also, in a short story you can probably get away with just an external conflict or complication. Depending on how demanding the plot is, and how short the story is, there may not be room for much more.

Then again, there might be. On the surface, the *Arresting Developments* story "In a Dark Wood," is a First Date from Hell story—Tim and Luke end up tracking down a backwoods serial killer. With their survival at stake, romance is low on their list of priorities, but the *real* obstacle to a happy ending is Tim's guilt and alcoholism. This facet of Tim's character makes it difficult to wrap their story up with a bright bow, but at the same time the events of the story have given us enough insight into Luke's character that we can see he's going to be good for Tim, that he's going to see Tim through the difficult road ahead. He's there for the long haul. It's in his nature.

Like I said, I've read way too many M/M novels where there is absolutely no conflict between the two protagonists that isn't entirely based on external circumstances: He's-hot-but-he's-my-boss/employee/professor/student/patient/doctor/partner/step-brother/enemy. And once the characters work out that being the boss/employee/professor/student/patient/doctor/step-brother/enemy isn't that big a deal, our heroes generally spend the rest of the story having hot sex and tepid conversation.

Which is fine for the readers who are only interested in the sex scenes, but that's a limited market. The majority of readers are looking for original and passionate storytelling—the kind of storytelling that touches our emotions and makes us think.

I don't mean that in a high falutin' I-only-watch-PBS way. I mean it in the way that a great movie or a terrific novel

stays with us for days afterwards. Our hearts and minds have been engaged—and that's what expert storytelling does.

\* \* \* \*

Kellie W. reader

While there are some exceptions I find a lot of the M/M stuff out there a bit flat. The falling in love is too easy and any conflict is simple or in some cases silly and easily resolved. The only other backdrop that these stories seem to have is the prejudice faced, which of course is relevant but not enough to really get me excited. Then again I feel perhaps I am being too critical as most M/M stories are stand alone and not a series so things need to be wrapped up by the end of the book. Also these are love stories or romances and it goes without saying the two people will get together in the end and all fighting will cease.

\* \* \* \*

One detail: remember not to cook up conflict so destructive or insurmountable that you're unable to resolve it believably within your allotted timeframe. The reader will work with you, but you've got to do the heavy lifting. Some of this has to do with pacing. If you throw a gigantic and disastrous point of contention between your characters in the final third of the book, you're unlikely to be able to resolve this without rushing—something readers resent. The successful working out of problems and differences is part of what readers find so emotionally satisfying; if you cheat them

on this, they won't believe in your HEA—or even your HFN (Happy For Now).

Okay, so remember our special agent partners Will and Taylor from that as yet unwritten novella? Since we've worked with their characters, we're in position to examine their story for the potential conflicts between them.

Here's the "Dangerous Ground" blurb:

*Taylor and Will are relearning to trust each other—and their partnership—after Taylor's nearly fatal shooting a few months earlier. But their male bonding camping trip in the High Sierras turns into an exercise of survival when they run afoul of escaping bank robbers and Will is taken hostage.*

"Dangerous Ground" from *Hostage!* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2008)

The external conflicts are pretty clear. Bank robbers and the elements—man vs. nature and man vs. man—and the fact that Will and Taylor are partners—man vs. self and possibly man vs. society (the job's non-fraternization policy, etc.). These external conflicts offer us plenty of material for action and adventure, and that means we should have no trouble constructing a solid story framework. There's lots of material for a meaty plot right there. But it's not enough.

Why? Because we're writing a romance novel, and a romance is the tale of two people making a journey to an emotional destination. Readers want to follow that journey every step of the way.

We can see from that story blurb that there are already problems simmering beneath the surface: "relearning to trust each other—and their partnership—after Taylor's nearly fatal



shooting." Will and Taylor no longer trust each other. Now that's a big stumbling block for any relationship, let alone lovers. But then, they aren't lovers. Yet.

Now, I already know that Taylor was shot because of his own carelessness. So why is Will angry? Because Taylor didn't wait for backup. Taylor didn't wait for Will. Will no longer trusts Taylor not to get himself killed.

What about Taylor? Why doesn't he trust Will? Because ... Will doesn't trust him to be able to take care of himself anymore? Or because Will doesn't love him?

Really, why *is* Will so angry? Taylor didn't get Will shot, he got himself shot. He nearly died.

Taylor nearly died, and Will is furious about it. Because ... Will cares a lot more for Taylor than he will acknowledge even to himself? We already know that Taylor is in love with Will and has been since the first days of their partnership, and Will doesn't—or doesn't seem—to reciprocate. Why? They're friends, they've got a great working partnership, and we're going to quickly establish that they're both irresistibly attractive.

Maybe Will isn't gay? Or maybe he is, but he doesn't want to lose their friendship and strong working partnership—doesn't want to mess it up? Or maybe he's seen Taylor in action for too many years—he doesn't believe Taylor is good long-term relationship material?

You see how this works? The internal conflicts are tied to personality and psychology; they evolve as you develop the characters. The external conflicts are the twists and turns that come from plot that keeps your lovers from being together.

The best external twists affect emotions which then trigger internal conflicts.

Romance is character-driven. Romance is all about emotion. So the best conflicts are going to be emotional ones—character-driven ones. Typical issues driving internal conflict include trust, control, self-image, sexuality.

In itself, *Gosh, he's cute but he's a vampire!* is not enough conflict. Not for fiction, anyway. Real life, yeah, that could be complicated. Remember, fiction is not real life. Fiction is bigger—and better—than real life. The best fictional conflicts result in one protagonist fighting himself and his attraction to the other protagonist. So our plot becomes *Gosh, he's cute but he's a vampire—and I've sworn my life to destroying all vampires*. This time it's personal.

It's got to be personal, or else the conflict devolves into nothing more than heated intellectual debate, and your characters spend pages bickering. That gets old fast. We expect mature, intelligent, strong-willed people to disagree, and to work their differences out. Your challenge is to make it difficult for them to work those differences out. Take a subject like the outing of public figures. A lot of gay men disagree on whether it's right to forcibly out public figures; that's an intellectual disagreement. But suppose one of your protags is a reclusive, closeted actor, and the other is a crusading reporter for a gay magazine. *Now* they both have something to lose. *Now* it's personal—and painful.

And the main reason it's painful is because of a little something called sexual tension. Sexual tension is the physical desire characters feel for each other but are

prevented from acting on because of all that external and internal conflict. The main ingredients are physical awareness—sexual attraction—and conflict.

You write sexual tension by showing your characters reacting to each other in visceral and sensorial ways.

*Nick passed the bottle opener. "How old are you? You're over twenty-one, right?"*

*"I'm twenty-three."*

The dark eyebrows rose skeptically. Nick looked about thirty. He had smooth olive skin and short, dark hair. And those navy-blue eyes. He was very good-looking in a stern, No Trespassing way. Medium height and built for action. Keyword: muscles.

Perry swallowed a mouthful of skunky-tasting beer. He couldn't decide if he liked Nick Reno, but he felt safe with him. He couldn't imagine anything happening that Nick Reno couldn't handle.

*The Ghost Wore Yellow Socks* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2008)

I want to note here that sexual tension is not just about sex. Or rather, it's not just about the act of intercourse. Sure, a large part of it is sexual frustration, but it's also about the longing, the yearning for emotional intimacy your characters feel for each other. So if your characters have sex—and they frequently do in M/M romance—you can keep the sexual tension alive between them by denying them the emotional satisfaction they (and the reader) crave.

Once you resolve the problems between them, once you let them reach emotional union, once they say "I love you,"

the story is over. And if you don't want it to be over, you're going to have to work like hell to split them up again—which usually irritates readers because it generally means falling back on external conflict like ... pirate attacks or white slavers or the good old *But, darling, he's my brother!* trope.

The course of true love cannot run smooth. Granted, it can't be a non-stop ticket to raging waters, either, or the reader will never believe these two guys could find true happiness together. You have to allow them some tender moments, shared laughter, great sex. But the tiny wins must be followed by seemingly greater losses—and yet, progress has to be made or the happy ending will not be believable. It sounds contradictory, I know. Each resolution brings your characters closer together, and each new complication drives another wedge between them. They're falling harder and deeper, and it's looking more hopeless by the minute. *That's* romance.

An abbreviated outline would look something like this:

The meeting

1st obstacle—External

Partial resolution

2nd obstacle—Internal

Partial resolution

3rd obstacle—External

## The climax

## The resolution

If you're writing a genre novel like an M/M mystery, you're going to alternate the plot and romance beats. As the mystery or adventure peaks, the romance lulls—meaning, in the middle of a shoot-out, your protagonist doesn't start thinking about what a great ass his love interest has, and in the middle of making love, you don't have the bad guys break down the door—unless one of your guys was about to use the "L" word.

The rise and fall of contrasting story lines will keep your reader riveted. It's all about structure and pacing. Very simply, something interesting has to be happening all the time. We'll explore that amazing concept when we get to the next chapter, which is on pacing.

Some things to remember: While you want to keep emotional distance between your characters, you want to write a story that throws them together as much as possible. You want readers turning pages as fast as possible, but not because they can't wait to get to the good parts.

If you're writing a genre M/M novel: wind up the genre plot before the romance.

Again, don't mistake conflict for arguing. I've heard aspiring writers try to justify ceaselessly quarreling protagonists with statements like "There should be conflict in every scene." While characters in conflict may well argue,

contrived differences and bickering isn't satisfying storytelling. Mostly it's just annoying. Conflict has to be genuine and believable. It has to be motivated.

So let's talk about motivation. Characters are motivated to achieve goals. Every action, every choice your characters make must be motivated. Motivations, like conflict, must be genuine and believable.

Motivation is the trigger that pushes your protagonists into action. Motivation is based on backstory, the character's recent past or their history—which is why you have to know your characters thoroughly.

When you create a character you must decide what he wants. Everybody wants something.

It goes without saying that in a romance novel, your characters want to be loved. You have to dig deeper than that.

What is this character's quest? What stands in his way? Different characters have different experiences and perspectives—and that creates a natural conflict. Realistic motives make for real characters. Realistic characters are easy to motivate into action.

The major decisions your characters make should be motivated by emotion, even though men are, for the most part, rational beings.

Will and Taylor are going camping to try to repair their working relationship. They're both motivated by concern and the desire to preserve a previously successful partnership—and friendship. It seems like a logical decision, and on the surface it is. On the surface, they share a mutual goal, but

individually they also have goals. Taylor is working past his fear of being shot again, and he's trying to wriggle his way back into Will's good graces. Will is trying to come to terms with his feelings for Taylor—his fear that Taylor means too much to him, that his feelings for Taylor will cripple him on the job, and his fear that Taylor might be killed the next time things go south.

But as the plot progresses, Taylor's and Will's goals will change, and so will their motivations. Falling in love and fighting to stay alive will do that to you.

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## CHAPTER 8: DO THE MATH

### Pacing

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

What we look for in an M/M novel is hot meaningful sex between two smart, sexy, realistic characters. And most importantly, an interesting story that is logically intertwined with the romantic relationship. Both plot and relationship should further each other. If it's too focused on the story, the romance gets lost. And if it's just a moony romance with no coherent plot, it's boring and indistinct.

\* \* \* \*

I mentioned in the previous chapter that you have to alternate the beats of your romance plot line with the beats of your genre story line. But even if you're writing a straightforward contemporary M/M romance, you have to pay attention to the rhythm of your story—this is called pacing.

Pacing means moving the story forward at a speed appropriate to genre and story requirement. A historical romance won't necessarily be served well by the breakneck speed of a contemporary thriller. That said, most contemporary readers aren't going to enjoy something structured along the lines of *Vanity Fair*.



Here's the rule: *something interesting has to be happening all the time.*

If you find yourself writing quickly to get past the "boring bits," you need to get rid of the boring bits. Keep the exposition and info dumps to a minimum. Believe me; you need a lot less of that stuff than you think you do.

I'm assuming you know what exposition is, but maybe I shouldn't. Exposition happens when the writer strong-arms his way into the story to explain something necessary to the reader. A certain amount of exposition is required, sure—even useful. The main thing you want to keep in mind about exposition is that it amounts to telling the story instead of letting the reader live it with the characters. I know you've all heard the advice, "Show, don't tell." The best writers don't tell you, and quite frankly they don't just show you—they make you feel it, live it, taste it, touch it. Storytelling is about being in the moment with the characters.

That said, you don't need to live every moment of your protagonist's shower or breakfast or drive to the office. There are times when exposition is the best way to cover a lot of dull ground fast.

Exposition is generally the enabler of the info-dumping author.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor Loose Id and MLR Press

At a guess, I'd say that the top three problems that editors see in submissions are indistinct characters, info dumps/exposition, and poor mechanics. It seems to me that

the first two are often related. If the characters are denied the opportunity to participate in the story, if the author takes over the telling, takes over driving the action, then the characters never have the voice that can speak to their individuality and motivations. The characters can never actually be a presence in their own story. It's always obvious when the author has written the story and just dropped the characters in. The characters move through the story doing everything that's expected of them to advance the plot, without believable motivation, without really influencing the story, without really having anything at stake. The action just washes over them without any real effect. Exposition is the opposite of dialogue. You can't have character without dialogue.

\* \* \* \*

The term "info dump" should be self-explanatory. It's the literary equivalent of *Oi, too much information!* Basically the author empties a dossier-worth of intelligence on the hapless reader's head. Often this is in the form of the extensive and painstaking research the writer did. We all hate to waste those hours we spent in the library or on the Net boning up on forensics or dog shows or automatic weapons. But info dumping can also be the filling in of backstory through a character's thoughts or dialogue—or even straightforward author narration. You often find it in the speech the villain (or master detective) gives at the end of a mystery or crime novel: the part where all is explained in one fell and long-winded swoop. Instead of working all this information

piecemeal into the story to be digested unconsciously by the reader, the author plops it all in a lump right there on the page like a bad waitress in a cheap diner.

There is a rise and fall—a rhythm—to storytelling. Timing is everything. One action scene following on the heels of another, whether it's a car chase, a murder, or a sexual encounter, is just as boring as pages of bickering, or description, or backstory.

This is yet another place where outlining can be a big help to an inexperienced writer. As you map out the flow of your story, you can see if you're piling too much into a chapter, or not enough. You want a smooth flow, big action scenes followed by brief scenes of reflection.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

I usually write scene by scene, and I try to think the scene through before I start writing. Things always pop up in the writing, but if I haven't thought it through, I just sit there and stare at the paper and then I go check my email and look at the Land's End overstocks for cashmere sweaters etc.

\* \* \* \*

A story is made up of scenes or events. There has to be a point or a purpose to every scene. Otherwise we're back to random happenings that mirror real life but not good fiction. Each scene must move your story forward.

In M/M fiction, no matter how beautifully written or clever a scene is, if it doesn't advance the plot, you need to cut it.

Character development is not, in itself, enough of a justification for a scene—although we should be learning more about the characters and their motivations, goals, and conflicts in each scene.

Scenes are built upon action. Action is everything your characters do. There are large actions, like a chase scene or having sex, and there are small actions like opening a can of tuna or meeting someone's eyes. Small actions build toward larger actions or reactions.

It's called cause and effect, and it's a one-two punch: action triggers reaction that then triggers another reaction. Think of it as the dialogue of motion.

*He finished unbuttoning my shirt and I half-raised to shrug out of it; he pulled his T-shirt up over his head and tossed it away. His hands went to the button fly of my jeans and I thrust up at him, already so hard the stiff denim was torture. My hands fastened on his belt and I worked it like I had seconds to disarm a bomb—which is what it was starting to feel like. Sweat broke out on my forehead, my breath came fast. I felt wild, out of control with wanting him. Wanting him now.*

*He had me free of the constriction of briefs and jeans, yanking them down where they hung up on my tennis shoes, and I didn't give a damn because by then I had got him free as well, and his dick, hard and thick, was giving the high five to my own.*

*"Oh, God," I groaned.*

"Ghost of a Chance" by Josh Lanyon, *Scared Stiff* anthology (MLR Press, 2007)

You'll notice that I don't just follow one character's action with the other character's reaction, followed by the first character's reaction, followed by the second character's reaction. It's not ping-pong. You want to alter the rhythm for dramatic effect, and you've got to allow for some emotional response as well.

Use reactions, quantity and quality, to emphasize the importance of the initial action. Sometimes a low-key response underscores more effectively than a big reaction. Sometimes a whisper grabs attention more effectively than a shout, right? In real life we look for the tiny clues that tell us what someone else is thinking or feeling. Make your reader pay close attention.

*"He sounds a lot like you. No wonder you identify."*

*I laughed nervously. "Oh, right!"*

Dan's brows drew together, and to keep him from drawing any more ridiculous comparisons, I said quickly, "I guess it's his ordinariness that appeals to me—appeals to most guys who read the book. I don't know if he's afraid to face the reality of who he is—what he is. Maybe he's just afraid to lose himself by loving someone completely."

Dan's expression was odd.

*The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

Use the rhythm of action and reaction to build tension and suspense, and increase conflict.

*"You're not that stupid," he said. "Then again, maybe you are. I go to the trouble of lying—of falsifying police reports—to keep you out of this shit, and you turn right around and walk back into it."*

*My heart slipped into heavy, slow punches against my rib cage. "Give me a break," I said. "You didn't lie to protect me, you lied to protect yourself. You never asked me what I wanted. And I sure as hell never made you any promises about what I would or wouldn't do."*

His finger jabbed the air, punctuating his words. "Stay. Out. Of. It. Or this time, bad heart or not, I will throw your ass in jail."

"No you won't," I said. "You wouldn't want to risk anyone discovering the connection between us."

His face changed, grew ugly, dangerous. "Are you threatening me?"

I hadn't been, but like an ember in dry grass, a self-destructive impulse flicked to life in my mind.

"My existence threatens you."

He shoved me back hard. I crashed into the hall table, knocking it over, smashing the jar of old marbles I had collected. Glass balls skipped and bounced along the corridor. I landed on my back, my head banging down on the hardwood floor.

I lay there for a second, blinking up at the lighting fixture, taking in the years of dust and dead moths gathered in the etched glass globe. The silence that followed was more startling than the collision of me and the table and the floor. I heard Jake's harsh breathing and a marble rolling away down the hall—which seemed pretty damned appropriate since I'd apparently lost all of mine.

*The Hell You Say* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

Action and reaction sequences make for scenes that are strong, active and fully realized, but avoid empty stage business, actions that are there simply to fill a page. Pointless busyness is the trademark of the inexperienced writer. If your characters meet each other's gaze, it should be to underline an important moment. If your protagonist slides open a drawer, let it be in contrast to the fact that he's closing himself off in a conversation.

Real life is full of rambling discussions and pointless gestures. We don't have that luxury in fiction. There must be point and purpose to all dialogue and action—and to every scene.

It might help to picture your scenes as if you were filming them. Keep them visually interesting, and aim for a dramatic arc. Just as your story has a beginning, middle and end, so should each scene.

Start at an interesting point in the scene and write through to the natural ending—ideally breaking at a point which leaves the reader wanting to find out what will happen next.

For more information on plotting and pacing romance in general, try *Writing a Romance Novel For Dummies* by Leslie Wainger, and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing Erotic Romance* by Alison Kent.

Also, don't overlook some structural sleight of hand. Brief paragraphs broken up with dialogue, and short punchy chapters will give an illusion of a faster-paced story. The current theory in publishing is that modern readers don't have time or the necessary attention span for reading; lots of white space, that's the ideal.

\* \* \* \*

*Do you have tips or tricks for keeping your developing plot on track?*

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.

I do things a little different. I've found that writing the blurb and a synopsis before starting the actual book keeps me on track.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell, Purgatory*, etc.

I wish I did! If I did, I might follow it. I'm a terribly haphazard writer. It's a flaw that I've tried to overcome without much success. Each time I try to give some regimen to my writing, the creativity almost always suffers. Actually, if I did have one tip, it'd be this: keep writing. Even if you think a scene is horrible or incomplete, take it through to its completion. I find that I can almost always find the answer to my dilemma once I see the whole thing. Now, that also means that sometimes I'm writing twice as much as I need to, but I invariably find out something interesting about my characters or make a clear decision about the plot where I only had a vague idea before.

Okay, I have another one. READ what you write. Read it from a reader's perspective. As best you can, put yourself outside of your head and look at it as though you didn't know what's happening. If you can do that, you can often spot



holes that would drive you crazy if they were pointed out later.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

My trick is not to write too many stories at once. I never work on more than one novel-length story at a time. I just can't juggle more than that. I have enough unfinished prose to last a lifetime, and I don't plan to add any more to that stack.

Short stories are different. I can write any number of short stories while I'm also hammering away on a novel, but I always aim to finish one short before moving onto the next.

Personally, I can't think a story through from start to finish before I sit down to write it. If I know the ending, I find that the story fizzles for me. Why bother writing it out, when I already know where it goes?

I try to have a few scenes in mind, maybe an overlying theme, but nothing more than that. Once I see the opening scene vividly, I can begin writing the story out.

Working this way is not without some risk, as you can imagine. Sometimes I get in a tight spot and have to waste several days mulling over the plot and working through issues that might have arisen. When this happens, I take a break from writing and focus on something entirely different (video games usually help). While my mind's not focused on the story, it's nonetheless working out the tangles in the plot, until I find that I've worked around the problem without even trying and can move forward with the story.

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of the Vampire Magic series, etc.

I used to be a pantsner, and had a hard time finishing any book because I never knew where my story was going, how the conflict would get resolved or when it would end. I learned two tricks that really helped me move beyond the guesswork. One is to write a loose synopsis based on the answers to my "what ifs" that the characters give me. Yeah, stuff is going to change as the writing happens, but at least I have a general idea of the road I'm taking. Thinking about the resolution ahead of time really helps to keep the story on track because you KNOW what'll be important later and can better focus on it. The other thing is to save each chapter to a separate file. By separating the work, you won't go back and tweak and twist and wring it all out of shape. There'll be time for fixing later, once the story is done. And by then I rarely think it needs much work to put it right. \*g\*

\* \* \* \*

If plot and pacing remain a struggle for you, take a look at one of your favorite romance novels and analyze it chapter by chapter.

Or, turn once again to the Old Masters—er—Mistresses. Find a Harlequin romance with a plotline that sounds like something you could work with, break it down scene by scene, and outline it. Use that outline to construct your own original tightly-paced M/M novel.

But please don't name anyone Raoul Germon.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

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## CHAPTER 9: G.I. JOE, US ARMY, REPORTING FOR DUTY!

### Writing Action Scenes

Because most of M/M fiction is crossover genre fiction, action—both large and small scale—is an integral element. For the purpose of this chapter, we're concentrating on large action. The typical M/M novel could conceivably contain everything from a battle scene to a scene of seduction. Gunfights, rapes, beatings, car chases, forest fires, sword fights, football games, physical therapy, shape-shifting—if you can picture it, you can probably find it in an M/M novel.

This means that a lot of writers are going to be writing about things of which they know *nada*.

That's not a bad thing. One of the most misunderstood pieces of advice new writers absorb is the bit about Writing What You Know. If we all stuck to writing strictly what we knew, not many people would be writing mysteries—let alone science fiction and fantasy. I guess a few elderly scribes might still be turning out westerns or noir thrillers, but I guaran-damn-tee you no one would be writing paranormals.

Of course, if you want to write a story about a twenty-something West Hollywood film editor falling in love with his doctor—and you just happen to be a twenty-something West Hollywood film editor in love with your doctor, you have a natural advantage. In fact, you have what's known in the biz as a *platform*. Same holds true if you're a gay ex-cop and you'd like to write a police procedural about a gay cop.

But suppose you want to write a novel about a twenty-something film editor in West Hollywood who solves his doctor's murder. Do you have to go work as a PI for six months or join the police academy? Do you have to murder your doctor? Of course not. That's what research and imagination and (this one is key) empathy are for. Editors and agents and marketing departments love platform, but good writing trumps platform almost every day of the week. And twice on Sunday. And good writing is largely about research, imagination, and empathy.

If you don't have natural empathy for people, it's a drawback in writing—especially when it comes to characterization—but you can make up for it by being extra diligent with the research. If you don't have much imagination, *I* can't imagine why you would want to be a writer, so you're excused from class.

Writing what you know is especially useful when it comes to the little telling details that add veracity to any story. And of course the more observant you are, the more you know, and the more you have to draw from.

You know how it feels to be cold, right? Maybe you've never been on the point of freezing to death, but you take the details of what you know (being cold) and add them to your research on freezing to death, and with the help of your imagination, you should be able to write a pretty good scene showing your hero struggling to avoid falling asleep in the snow after a car crash. Even if you've never been in a car crash.

You're still essentially writing what you know, but you're also using your imagination and research. The scene will be better if you can recapture the sting of snow melting against your face, breath freezing in your lungs, the sodden heavy feeling of just wanting to lie down for one little minute...

It's very interesting to me how often new and weak writers fail to capture ... reality. Too many characters in books and films are merely stick figures drawn to people the storyline. They fail to behave like real live people. Keep characters real by having them react in believable ways. Keep the little details accurate, and you'll find readers are far more likely to suspend disbelief. When you ask them to swallow the greater lie, like a sexy pirate ghost or an amorous space alien, they'll willingly—even happily—go along.

We all have a lifetime of experience to draw on for our writing. Use that experience to make your action scenes more real. Maybe you've never driven a race car or a tank, but you've probably been behind the wheel of some vehicle. Use what you know and fill in the rest with your research and imagination.

Also, don't tell or summarize the action scene. Remember our discussion of exposition? Put your characters right into it; make your reader live each moment with your characters. This is where skillful use of point of view comes in. POV is the filter that allows your reader to experience the action with your protagonist, instead of simply visualizing the hero within the scene. Key to that is relating your POV character's reactions.

There are a few basic techniques for keeping the action fast-paced and intense.

*Stay focused*

Stay with your POV character. Now is not the time to "headhop." Concentrate on what your POV character is doing and feeling—his actions and reactions. But keep the focus narrow. Your protagon should not be noticing how handsome his lover looks in those khaki shorts, or what beautiful weather they're having when he's running for his life or being shot at. Unless your character is in shock, he—and you—should stay focused on the action.

Don't interrupt the action to explain it. If explaining is necessary, get it over with before the shooting starts.

*Details matter*

Use all five senses to put the reader right into the scene with the characters. Let the reader smell the sharp coppery scent of blood; feel the itch of tears or the prickle of sweat; taste the salty pre-cum; feel the brush of a hand on sensitized skin. Sensory details bring a scene alive. They create immediacy and a sense of urgency. And, while we're on the subject, all the adjectives and the adverbs in the world can't replace a little genuine biofeedback, know what I mean?

In a large action scene the conflict is external. There isn't time to brood over internal conflicts when someone's coming at you with a saber.

*Style is not for sissies*

Write crisp, clean sentences. Be terse. Aim for a rat-a-tat-tat effect.

*Or* use connectors to give the feeling of a breathless, headlong rush. Keep going, don't stop, don't look back.

Either way, don't spend valuable time on descriptive passages or internal reflection.

*Stay in character*

Most importantly, keep your characters *in* character.

Yes, real live people do occasionally behave out-of-character, but good fiction, unlike real life, has to make sense, and characters must abide by the rules of good fiction. So, if your character is suddenly going to demonstrate abilities making it possible for him to outwit killers, outmaneuver pirates, or outrun werewolves, you'll need to establish early the foundation for that skill set.

And if your protag *does* do something completely out of character, you'll need to have every other character comment on it —*and* have already foreshadowed this peculiar behavior. There are no shortcuts in good writing.

Sometimes it's easier to demonstrate rather than explain. The following is an example of a very bad action sequence—title and author name withheld as the intention here is not to embarrass anyone—with my own explanation of what works and what doesn't. Mostly what doesn't.

Joe's seventh sense, the one that along with his Logan-sense kept him alive, clicked in. He was off-balance, right hand gripping a tree above him, legs splayed with little or no purchase on the slippery ground as he heard it. The faint, but distinctive sound of a gun being cocked—the same sound as he had heard just under twenty-four hours ago when he had been bathing and Huntley had pulled a gun on him.



As far as I know, there is no "seventh sense." In fact, there are plenty of folks who will argue over whether there's even a sixth sense. Joe apparently has eight senses because in addition to his seventh sense, he has something called a "Logan-sense" which works with his seventh sense (which actually sounds like his sixth sense) to keep him alive.

Confused yet? And that's just the first sentence.

Equally confusing is the phrase "legs splayed with little or no purchase on the slippery ground as he heard it." As he heard what? The ground?

Part of the problem—though only a small part—is punctuation. A colon at the end of the second sentence would lead us naturally into "the faint, but distinctive sound of a gun being cocked."

By the way, instead of describing "the sound of a gun being cocked," why not tell us what that sound is? Is it a click? Is it a tick or a tock or a metallic slide? Is it a ka-chunk? Soft or loud?

Now, like then, he reacted. Without letting go of the branch, he whisked Logan's Magnum from his belt, removing the safety and aiming in one smooth, panther-like move and fired three rounds, just as a bullet zipped past his head hitting the tree against which he had been resting.

I'm thinking maybe the gun control advocates are right if it's reached the point that panthers are armed and shooting at citizens.

"Now, like then, he reacted" is Joe reflecting on an earlier incident. It's slowing the action, isn't it? You could simply

write, "He reacted," but that's self-evident. Better to cut that first line.

Detailing each of the actions in the second sentence slows the pacing—and it's awkward as hell. Much faster would be: "Without letting go of the branch, he whipped Logan's Magnum from his belt and fired off three rounds." You can also cut the "just as a..." and start the next sentence with "A bullet zipped past his head hitting the tree against which he had been resting."

But strengthen those verbs. "A bullet burned past his cheek and plowed into the tree..." sounds a lot more deadly than "zipping" and "hitting."

The quadruple shot shattered the air and cozy peace, sent birds screeching into the sky and squirrels quivering across the ground. The tang of cordite hung almost visible in the air, settling around him in the familiar pattern.

The "quadruple shot" causes the reader to pause. "Shots shattered the air" is plenty. "Cozy peace" is just plain silly—especially since Joe was searching for his missing partner and should not have been experiencing "cozy peace" in these woods.

Cordite and gun smoke are frequently confused with each other. They aren't the same. What Joe smells is going to depend on the weapon and the era of your story—and if smoke is hanging in the air, it's not cordite, which is a smokeless propellant.

A tang can be a taste or a scent, but it isn't going to be visible in the air and it wouldn't have a familiar pattern.

Does it seem like I'm nitpicking? Get used to it. Editors nitpick, and copy editors are worse—and you only get the privilege of being nitpicked if you're good enough to get past the nitpicky gatekeeper.

In another swift seamless move, he let go of the tree towards which he had been aiming to move, regained his balance and whipped out his own Luger and settled it in his right hand. Then moving carefully and steadily, eyes, ears, nose and seventh sense all in play, he began to half walk and half scramble in the direction of the single shot. Glancing around as he went, his gaze skimming over the ground and through branches and leaves, every pore, sinew, bone and organ on red alert. From the boom of the shot, he gauged the distance to where the shooter must have stood and came to a halt, caution now over-riding all other thoughts.

Swift and seamless. That's something to aim for, certainly. So in the previous paragraph Joe was still hanging onto the tree branch and holding Logan's Magnum. I'm not sure why he hasn't jumped behind the tree since someone just opened fire on him. Instead, he lets go of the tree and pulls out his own Luger—why? He already had a gun in his hand. What did he do with it?

"...moving carefully and steadily." Carefully and steadily are just about interchangeable, and in this case they add nothing to our understanding of Joe's movements.

"Eyes, ears, nose, and seventh sense all in play." Uh huh. Well, I hope they're having a good time. I'm picturing Mr. Potato Head pieces being moved around a gameboard.

"He began to half-walk and half-scramble." Really? I want to see someone try that. My seventh sense tells me the writer didn't take time to picture this scene.

"Glancing around as he went, his gaze skimming over the ground and through branches and leaves, every pore—" STOP! Let me catch my breath. And while we're taking a breather, let me recommend *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss.

Okay, Joe's apparently having some kind of fit. "Every pore, sinew, bone and organ" is on red alert. Now, unlike Joe, I don't have a state of the art internal security system, so I guess I shouldn't comment on his alarmed status.

"...came to a halt, caution now over-riding all other thoughts." And we can tell that how?

What happened to the shooter? He shot once and disappeared?

He came out into a clearing and gasped as he came face to face with the perfect cylinder that rose above him disappearing into the sun as he squinted up at it. It was constructed of brown-gray bricks and stood tall and firm, guarding the hillock and staring down on all that it surveyed.

Is that like a phallic symbol or what?

So did Joe get the shooter or not? What happened to the guy? He was close enough that Joe could hear his gun cock, but he apparently vanished without a trace. And whatever happened to Logan's gun?

And how come Joe didn't notice that towering cylinder reaching to the clouds until he's standing with his nose pressed up against it?

Something kicked his ankle and he whirled gun in hand, catch back and pointed the Lugar straight at his partner, who sprawled on the ground with his hands tied behind him, his ankles bound and mouth taped.

Not very observant, is Joe? For all that red-alert glancing and skimming, someone is close enough to kick him, and he doesn't notice? Oh, and where's that famous Logan-sense?

The commas in this scene are running amok. I have no idea what a catch back is—I guess it's a catch, and it's back, but is it Joe's or the gun's?

Above the taping two brilliant sapphires sparkled and gazed at Joe with utter and complete love.

NOT THE BRILLIANT SAPPHIRE EYES!!!!

Never before, not even in the few minutes at HQ the day before, had Logan been so open.

Since the writer just told us "never before," the additional "not even in the few minutes at Central the day before" is redundant. And it weakens the impact of the revelation of Logan's powerful feelings for Joe.

*(Which, by the way, seem inappropriate and just plain goofy given their current plight.)*

Joe gulped, ignored the prickling that filled his eyes, and the tickling at the back of his nose and sank to the ground, unsteady hands reaching out towards the ropes. "Logan," he whispered and sniffed hard, before burrowing in Logan's pocket for the knife his partner always carried.

Joe seems awfully shaken for a tough guy. Really, for any guy. He's gulping, prickling, tickling and sniffing—and this is

all relief that his partner is okay. I hate to think what would have happened if Logan was not in one piece.

Secondly, a lot of guys carry pocket-knives. Joe, who appears to be some kind of a spy or law enforcement agent, certainly would carry a pocket-knife—particularly in this kind of situation. Especially since Logan carries a knife "always." It's almost as though the writer were deliberately complicating the scene.

Speaking of complications, this paragraph too, is a mess.

A smoother read would be, "Ignoring the prickling behind his eyes, the tickling in his nose, Joe gulped and sank to the ground, unsteady hands reaching for the bindings."

Much better would be, "Joe knelt, hands not quite steady as he cut the ropes that bound his partner."

That way we see that Joe is moved to find his partner okay, but we don't make heavy weather of it, and we get a sense of the speed at which Joe is acting by condensing all that sinking, reaching, and burrowing to "cut the ropes."

He freed his partner, hands first, then feet and finally mouth—having no idea as to why he chose to do it that way.

Much like the writer?

Personally, I think you would probably rip the gag off first so that your partner could fill you in on where the bad guy you failed to shoot got to—or whether someone was sneaking up behind you. Not necessarily, though. People aren't always logical under pressure, so you might simply tackle what presented itself first. One thing for sure, you'd be moving fast. Asides like "having no idea as to why he chose to do it that way," slow the sense of speed and dilute the tension of

the scene. Short, punchy sentences and clean simple directions are what you want.

"Hello, babe. Wondered when you'd get here. Don't suppose you brought anything to eat, did you?" Logan's voice, so normal, after one or two minor false starts, raced into his ears and settled in his body, making him feel whole. He reached out a still shaking hand and touched the distinguished face.

This is beyond confusing. We get Logan's dialogue *before* we find out that he had "one or two minor false starts" at speaking. Huh? We learn that his voice is "so normal," but the fact is it wouldn't be so normal after his having been gagged for a couple of hours; it would probably be raspy or hoarse. Again, we're getting stage business that doesn't make sense, doesn't read true, and adds nothing to the scene.

Also, let's take a look at what Logan says. I understand that the writer is trying for that sort of insouciant, wise-cracking, guy thing that we all expect from our action heroes under pressure, but this just rings false. "Hello, babe" is too breezy. It dispels any and all sense of danger or suspense. "Wondered when you'd get here" equals "What took you so long," and it is *absolutely forbidden in all its variations*. I can't think of a single worse cliché in action scene dialogue. "Don't suppose you brought anything to eat, did you?" is worst of all. I mean, maybe if Logan has an eating disorder or has been tied up for days he might ask about food in the middle of a major action scene, but it shouldn't be among the first words out of his mouth. Even if there's a running joke about Logan's

eating habits, the timing is off. No, what's happening here is the writer—God help her—is trying to be funny.

It's not working.

Then we have "raced into his ears and settled in his body, making him feel whole."

Can someone explain to me what just happened?

Logan's voice apparently raced into whose ears? How does a voice race into someone's ears?

"...and settled in his body;"

The voice did? Ouch!

"...making him feel whole." Who? Joe? Hearing Logan's voice made Joe feel whole? Wow. Usually we require sex for that.

This is an example of a writer not taking time to find the exact and correct phrase she wants. Part of the problem is she hasn't defined what she really wants to say, which I'm guessing is that Joe feels weak with relief at hearing Logan's voice.

"He reached out a still shaking hand and touched the distinguished face."

WHO did? If it's Joe, we've already heard enough about his shaking, sniffing, prickling, tickling, and gulping. The more it's mentioned, the less impact it has. At this point he just sounds like a wuss.

And, by the way, "distinguished face" feels wrong there. Logan's face might be "beloved" or "drawn" or "grimy" or "weary" but "distinguished" conveys the wrong image for this scene, in my opinion. As does the stagy touching-face bit.



My advice with this kind of scene is to stick to crisp dialogue and understated action to cue the reader into the subtext of the scene rather than spelling it all out:

"Wondered when you'd turn up," Logan rasped. He worked his jaw, winced.

Joe was grinning like a fool. "Yeah, well the birds must have eaten your bread crumbs." He offered Logan a hand, pulling the other man to his feet.

And if it's an action scene, pick up the pace. Don't detail every move, every expression, every moment. Speed it up.

The bonus is you'll have less chance of making obvious mistakes if you don't spell out every single action, especially when you're not sure of what you're doing.

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## CHAPTER 10: RESCUE ME

### Hurt/Comfort and Angst

\* \* \* \*

Jill P., reader

I think that H/C is so popular because, if it's well written, it's how we ALL would like our partners to treat us if something bad happened.... or maybe because so many of us have HAD something bad happen, and had to deal with it alone/with an unsupportive partner."

\* \* \* \*

I'd never heard the term "Hurt/Comfort" or "H/C" until I discovered fan fiction. Basically it's where one character is ill, injured, or traumatized thus requiring the loving care and attention of another character. The scenario isn't unique to fan fiction, of course. It's similar to the classic heterosexual romance dynamic where the powerful hero becomes weak and injured, requiring the nurturing attention of the spunky heroine, thereby resulting in a temporary shift of the power dynamic, and allowing the heroine insight into some aspect of the hero's character previously unknown to her.

When that set-up is moved to original M/M fiction, there are key differences from heterosexual romance. The main difference is one of intensity. Characters (in fan fiction especially) are generally *very* ill, *very* injured, and/or *very*

traumatized. Addiction is not unheard of. Rape is not unusual—nor is being forced to confront long-buried memories of childhood abuse. Lives and, not infrequently, sanity are at stake.

The other interesting thing is that, often as not, it isn't the alpha male brought to his knees by illness, injury or trauma; it's the beta male. So no particular shift in power dynamics takes place unless it's seeing the tough alpha male having to assume the caretaker role. And perhaps that *is* part of the attraction. An alpha having to comfort and cuddle his vulnerable male companion is, in theory, an alpha showing a side not often seen.

\* \* \* \*

Liz, reader

I'm not sure, but for me it shows me the men taking care of each other's needs.... In my family the men don't comfort one another. They fight and hurt a lot. So, I like reading the dynamics and the range of emotions between two men in a H/C story. I think when I cry or laugh while reading, then the author did a damn fine job.

\* \* \* \*

The male psyche being what it is, the situation must be pretty damn unusual and the level of damage inflicted has to be extreme for one male to passively accept being coddled by another—or for the other male to feel comfortable taking on the role of nurturer. In short, we're seeing characters behaving out-of-character but in believable circumstances.

For this to be effective, the writer has to make sure that both characters have been portrayed as strong, independent, and healthy (emotionally, mentally, and physically) previous to the illness, injury or trauma. It's the contrast between their usual tough and resilient selves and their new—temporary—roles as hurting and comforting that appeal to most readers.

Keep in mind, though, that strength isn't about muscles or even a hard man attitude. There's also a certain appeal in a sensitive, smart character suddenly shoved into treacherous water, and struggling to stay on his feet.

*I cried, trembling, "Nothing else makes sense!"*

*"You've got to calm down."*

"How can I be calm when you can't—or won't—see what's happening? What does it take to convince you? He's out there. He's coming for me."

His hands clamped on my shoulders, anchoring me fast. "He's not getting you. No one is getting to you. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I stopped Hammond, I'll stop this freak too. He's not getting near you."

"He's already near me!" I couldn't help it. My control was slipping. I heard my voice shaking and wild. "He's out there now. How could he know about what a pest that damn dog was? Tell me that? He had to have heard us. He could be listening to us now. This place could be bugged."

"Jesus, Sean." He pulled me close, holding me against him like he wanted to smother the words spilling out. "Stop it. Sweetheart. Stop. You're making yourself sick."

He kept murmuring words I couldn't comprehend, but I understood that he was petting me, quieting me, and after a

while I stopped ranting, stopped trembling, finally managing to slow those panicked shallow breaths that were making me lightheaded.

We moved over to the sofa. He left me for a moment or two. I scrubbed my face, wiping away tears I didn't remember crying. I rested my head in my hands and tried to think. Nothing made sense. The postcards had stopped but Hammond had escalated to violence. It had been all threats up until this point. What had changed?

Dan sat down beside me. Set a glass of water on the table. He held a small brown vial that I recognized from my bathroom cabinet. I had news for him; those pills were well past their expiration date—like me apparently. I watched him shake two tablets into his palm.

"I don't want those."

"I know. But you need them."

I gave him a hostile look. Anything I said now would be put down to my irrational state of mind. I held out my hand. He dropped the pills in my palm, I popped them into my mouth, took the glass of water he handed over. I washed the pills down, handed him back the glass, stretched out on the sofa and closed my eyes.

Dan brushed my hair from my forehead. I kept my eyes closed, rejecting that light, tender touch.

"Just relax."

Yeah. Right.

"Everything will be okay, I promise you."

I swallowed. Didn't answer. Kept my eyes closed. He said that a lot: "I promise you." But what did that mean? He

couldn't promise me anything. Not when he didn't even believe me—when his main concern was to shut me up.

He kept stroking my hair. I didn't want him to. I didn't want to be comforted by him. I didn't like the fact that his touch seemed to find a way through my defenses, that he seemed to be able to converse with me through his fingertips and my nerve endings. I tried to shut out my response, but my scalp seemed to tingle beneath the deft fingers threading my hair. The tears stopped leaking beneath my lashes. The torpidity lurking at the edge of my consciousness eddied around and sucked me down.

*The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

In my opinion, the dependency of the hurt character needs to be restricted to a specific time-frame—even if the character is left permanently disabled. Helplessness just isn't very attractive.

By the way, being hostile, bad-tempered, and throwing tantrums isn't the same thing as showing strength. That's all an expression of fear, and fear is just a different face of weakness.

In fact, hurt/comfort offers the opportunity to show the character rising above adversity. Injured, he still manages to escape from the burning building or crawl out of the car wreck. Recovering from his deadly tropical fever, he confronts his fears of mortality and realizes what's important to him. Facing life in a wheelchair, he has the courage to offer his lover his freedom rather than ... you get the idea. Character growth. It's a good thing.

And on the opposite side of the padded cell, we have the brusque, authoritative, sexy-as-hell partner ready to do whatever it takes to get his lover back on his feet: putting his own needs a distant second, showing a tenderness and attentiveness *he* didn't even know he was capable of. He doesn't give up searching for his missing partner, he sits at his bedside reading aloud no matter how long the coma lasts, he jumps in front of the bullet. Whatever it takes. Nothing is too good for the man he just discovered he loves.

And, yes, that's another of the most useful aspects of hurt/comfort: it often serves as catalyst to one character's recognition of his true feelings for the other. There's nothing like a near-brush with death—yours or a loved one's—to put everything into focus.

Even if the characters were previously attracted or in love, they will bond still more deeply through hurt/comfort.

\* \* \* \*

Jill P., reader

When it comes to H/C, I like mainly physical. And YES—I hate when the comforter turns into a 12-year old girl.... I love my H/C to be a strong man who shows his emotions (even if he is normally uncomfortable with doing so ... ), who is realistic about the whole situation—as in, "THIS SUCKS. We know it sucks, let's deal with it and get on with things."

\* \* \* \*

It's difficult to say who really has the starring role in the hurt/comfort scenario. Is it the one hurting or the one

comforting? It probably depends on the individual reader's kink, as does preference about which partner is damaged. One thing's for sure; switching roles midway through is guaranteed to annoy most readers, although I've seen writers do this in the interests of preserving some kind of power balance.

Caretakers who are overwhelmed by caretaking, or by how ill, injured, traumatized their beloved is, are pretty much a turn-off. A few tears, a moment of panic, a little stress is only to be expected—readers like strong men to be vulnerable—but you can't have both characters competing for Wimp of the Year Award, okey dokey?

*His shadow passed through the bars of moonlight. The mattress dipped on his side of the bed. I could hear the fatigue in his voice. "Do you need anything? You didn't eat dinner. Do you want some scrambled eggs?"*

*"No."*

*"A hot drink?"*

I had a sudden and totally inexplicable longing for the hot cocoa and plain animal cookies my mom used to fix me when I a little kid and feeling sick or sad. I hadn't seen or spoken to my mother in five years. Not since the memorable lunch where she'd spent the first half reassuring me that there were doctors and clinics and therapies to help me get over being gay, and the second half crying about what she and my father could have done to deserve a son like me.

Two days later I'd checked myself into the hospital for a few weeks of R&R. But, it only took a day for me to realize that being depressed or nervous didn't mean I wasn't safe



with the cutlery. The first step had been learning to trust myself. The second step had been putting a healthy distance between me and my family.

"Nothing," I told Dan. And then belatedly, "Thanks."

He lay back with a sigh. "Jesus, what a fucked up day," he muttered. I don't think he meant to say it aloud. I'd never heard him sound so drained.

I lifted my head. "Are you okay? Can I get you something?"

He said huskily, "I could really use a hug right about now."

For a sec I didn't think I'd heard him right. I was so used to him being the caretaker that it didn't occur to me that he might occasionally need solace—or that I'd be the person best qualified to offer it.

"Hey," I whispered, and reached for him. His arms locked around me. I wasn't exactly sure who was hugging whom. I rested my cheek against the soft crispness of his hair, kissed him lightly. His breath was warm against my ear. Toothpaste and a hint of the coffee he'd had earlier. He inhaled sharply. Held me even tighter.

"I love the way you smell," he whispered.

I smiled a little. Gave him another of those tiny stray kisses. After a few minutes, I felt his body relaxing against mine, growing heavy and drowsy. It was unexpectedly comforting. I held him until I too gave into sleep.

*The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

My personal take is that you get more mileage if you keep the hurt/comfort stuff understated and minimal—without cheating the reader. Don't hospitalize your protag and then

send his boyfriend out of town—unless his love interest is going to be one of his doctors. There's no point in injuring a character and leaving him to suffer on his own or in the hands of strangers. *It's the caretaking element readers are interested in.*

Try to devise a sequence that leaves the characters no option but to care and take it: getting lost or snowed in together, waiting for the ambulance/helicopter/boat to arrive, long convalescences. Give the characters quality time alone together to show one in pain, and one concerned and caring. That's basically what it's all about.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

I think one of the primary joys of hurt/comfort fiction is the idea that someone can come in and perhaps not save the day but at the very least be supportive and caring and helpful. People often feel alone in their real lives and as reading a story can, in some cases, be a type of escape, it adds to the fantasy to give the primary romantic pairing a full and loving emotional support system or have them earn such a relationship.

\* \* \* \*

Through it all, the characters must stay in character. The reader is seeing a side to your characters that wouldn't ordinarily show, but this facet of personality still has to be psychologically possible for both characters. There are

degrees of trauma, and pain can be nuanced. Everybody doesn't react the same to every trauma—some guys are tougher and more resilient than others, which is how they got to be who they are in the first place. So don't change them into something else merely for the sake of the story.

A large part of hurt/comfort has nothing to do with character arcs, but if the character *should* learn something from his illness or adversity, if he *should* demonstrate growth and maturity through his suffering—or his caretaking—then that needs to be demonstrated. Your injured protag can't stay curled up in a fetal position forever. Likewise, once his lover realizes how much he cares, he can't plausibly return to complete and chilly indifference. I don't care how many incriminating snapshots he finds searching through his lover's sock drawer.

Furthermore, if a normally strong, sensible man is reduced to a quivering wreck, the circumstances need to be suitably dramatic. Like ... rape.

Which leads us to sex.

While hurt/comfort doesn't necessarily wind up with the characters realizing their love and having sex ... *a lot* of the time it does.

Yes, cue the Marvin Gaye. Part of the recovery process often involves long and lovely sexual healing. You'll have to follow your own instincts here, but I personally think that characters need to be pretty much convalescent before they're fucking like minks. And I suspect that hot sex is probably not a cure-all for rape or childhood abuse.

Beyond that, there's no doubt that physical and emotional intimacy are generally beneficial. Who doesn't want to be held after something horrific happens? Who doesn't long to be reassured that they're still lovable, desirable following an emasculating experience (which major illness and trauma generally are)?

Just keep it real. I've read way too many stories about half-dead characters having sex in hospital beds under the very noses of medical staff. Granted, if your protagonist's love interest is a physician, nurse or therapist, this scenario probably ties into a few variations on the theme—which is nice for the fetishists in the room.

I hate to tell you, but risky sex, uniforms, and the potential for bondage aside, critically ill guys are often—temporarily—unable to get it up. Trauma, whether physical, mental or emotional, generally does *not* act as an aphrodisiac.

Close calls, on the other hand, often *do*. There's nothing like not getting one head blown off to make you want to use the other.

When it comes to hurt/comfort, male writers tend to be sketchy on details. They set up great scenarios, but they tend to shy away from really ... getting into it. Don't be shy. Use all the senses when describing these scenes.

Just keep it plausible, and keep your characters *in* character.

*I tried to lift my head. Really bad idea. I bit back a curse and managed, "How long have I been here? Where am I exactly?"*

*"Almost forty-eight hours. You're in Calavares County Hospital running up a sizable bill even as we speak. I hope you've got health insurance."*

I hoped I had enough. I've known solvent, gainfully employed people bankrupted by a hospital stay.

"Next question. When can I leave?"

Jake looked vague. "A day or two. They want to keep an eye on you."

I knew what that meant.

"Going by my missing clothes, they've had a plenty good look already." I hate hospitals. When I die, I don't want it to be in some hospital. I started feeling around the IV needle, raised my head and checked out the technology on my bare chest. Instant Panic: just add water. "I want to talk to the doctor," I jerked out. "I want to go home."

Jake planted his hand on my shoulder. It was like having a brick dropped on my chest. My head dropped back on the spongy pillow, pain thudding in dizzy time with my pulse beat.

"Simmer down, baby." He traced my collarbone with his thumb. I couldn't have moved if I had wanted to; I was too surprised to try. "Just relax."

The feel of his callused thumb on my sensitized skin was weirdly hypnotic. I blinked up at him like I had been shot by a tranquilizer dart.

"When they brought you in your heartbeat was a little funky. It's been fine for twenty-four hours so they're going to release you pretty soon. Okay?"

I assented weakly.

Jake made a fist and hooked a playful right to the angle of my jaw.

*A Dangerous Thing* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

Closely aligned to—and often resulting in or from hurt/comfort—is angst.

If your protag is critically injured and languishing in hospital, and his boyfriend is out of town on a secret mission, the hurt/comfort quotient drops, but the angst quotient skyrockets. See how that works?

Like hurt/comfort, angst is a staple of fan fiction. As you can imagine all those serious illnesses, critical injuries, nervous breakdowns, rapes, betrayals, addictions, kidnappings, stalkings, deaths in the family, broken dreams, shattered hopes and really *really* REALLY bad days lead to a certain amount of tension. Even anxiety.

Angst is actually a Germanic word meaning "anxiety." The Danish philosopher and theologian Kierkegaard, used the term angst to express his belief that the human condition was riddled with despair. He wrote a philosophical novel called *Fear and Trembling*. What does that tell you?

Typically we associate angst with adolescence. Few people are better at suffering loudly and noticeably than teenagers. It's an art form with them, and you have to respect that.

Acne and existential quandaries aside, angst is also a very important ingredient in M/M fiction. Well, not all M/M fiction. Romantic comedy and action/adventure are mercifully angst-free for the most part, but any time your characters are suffering over their conflicted feelings—generally for each other—they are usually angsting.

Please note: if they're just depressed and insecure, that's not angst. Angst requires *serious* suffering. Breaking up with your boyfriend is sad. Your boyfriend dying is tragic. Finding out after your boyfriend dies that he was seeing someone else—now *that's* angst.

Death, disease, disaster—this is all angstilicious stuff. High drama is what separates true angst from the anxiety normal to the human condition.

Historical M/M lends itself particularly well to angst. It's the whole, love-that-dare-not-speak-its-name thing. *Yaoi* is also angstful: all those giant cartoon eyes veritably *brim* with grief at the human condition—mostly their own.

Wondering if the object of your affections feels the same is not technically angst—unless you're under 18. Having a closeted lover, however, *is* generally grounds for angst.

Because I have a weird sense of humor, the more angstful the story, the more likely I am to find it funny. I guess someone left a banana peel on my pain threshold. Anyway, my advice is that you use angst sparingly. Less is more. Heaping coals on your hapless character's head in chapter after chapter just reminds me of those sappy Victorian novels where the noble and long-suffering hero (or heroine) endures tragedy after tragedy only to die with a brave smile and an angelic sentiment upon his rosebud lips after saving a child from the wheels of a train.

In my opinion the more angsty the journey, the more life-affirming and reassuring the happy ending should be—but that's just me. I'm in favor of happy endings from a purely philosophical standpoint.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

Sometimes angst is its own reward—some protagonists do suffer beautifully—but generally it requires comforting. Ideally from the other protagonist. You can see what a vicious cycle this could turn into. It's enough to make a grown man cry.

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## CHAPTER 11: WHAT'S IS ALL ABOUT, ALFIE?

Theme

\* \* \* \*

K.M. Frontain, editor

I'm a woman. I prefer reading about romantic relationships. I would like to see male writers giving us M/M stories in the romance genre or stories with a positive message.

\* \* \* \*

One of the least understood elements of writing is theme. The very word makes some writers break out in hives as they flashback to high school compositions on *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

Very simply, theme is the moral of our story. It's your message, it's the point you're trying to get across—the point of your story, in fact.

Did you realize that even sexy little man-on-man romances were supposed to have a point?

The themes you choose to write about reveal your personal philosophy about life and love. It sounds intimidating, doesn't it? But when you write about two people in love, whether those people are male, female, vampires, space aliens, or all of the above, you reveal your own feelings and beliefs about relationships and society and sex and all

kinds of things you may not have consciously been thinking about.

Our plan here is to get you to consciously think about those things. To strengthen thematic elements within your writing so that your philosophy becomes an integral part of the story you're trying to tell.

Why? Because these are the stories that stick with readers. These are the stories that resonate. These are the stories that touch our hearts and our minds. Every classic work of literature has a clear and easily recognized point to it.

Calm down. I'm not going to force you to dissect *To Kill a Mockingbird* or even *Sam I Am*. Just think about a book that meant a lot to you when you were young. Younger. What was that story about?

I don't mean, what happened during the story. Plot is what happens in a story; Theme is what the story is *about*.

For example, Mary Renault's oft-cited *The Charioteer* is about a young man coming to terms with his sexuality—and his identity. That's what the story is about. What happens in the story is Laurie Odell is wounded after Dunkirk and falls hopelessly in love with a young conscientious objector—only to run into the boyhood idol of his prep school days—the man who, coincidentally, rescued him at Dunkirk.

\* \* \* \*

Bella, TwoLips Reviewer

I think some authors have really found their niche with M/M fiction. I have read some truly wonderful stories that are M/M. I think the quality of the writing is top notch depending

on how the author feels about his subject. Every great now and then you will find an author who has simply jumped on the bandwagon but doesn't have a feel for the genre. But there are books that stun me with the depth of emotion the authors are able to weave into a story. It really comes down to the author.

\* \* \* \*

Now if you're just in this for the money and you're cranking out blazing-hot novellas by the six-pack to cash in on a lucrative corner of the erotic market, you're excused from class today. Go write a M/F/M story about a voluptuous psychic cop, her studly wererat partner, and the dashing—but angst-filled—ghost-pirate they both adore.

The rest of you, listen up. The genre that we're working in is rich in thematic material. In our culture, sad to say, to write about men loving each other openly is, in itself, a thematic statement. In fact, some people would view your literary efforts as subversive.

*(And here you thought you were just writing about what turns you on!)*

However, since the boom of the M/M market, man love stories are no longer rare, so simply writing about two guys in love isn't quite enough for our purposes.

*Common gay themes in stories*

—Coming out

—Self-hate/self-acceptance

—Isolation/alienation

—Illness/disability

- Family
- Superficial values/material world
- Facing prejudice
- Addiction
- Monogamy
- Obsession
- Death
- The power dynamic
- The closet

Obviously there are others. Almost any generic theme is appropriate for gay fiction as well. In fact, one of the conscious themes in my own work is the illustration of normal, ordinary gay men fully integrated into contemporary society. This is assuming that you can accept that a normal, ordinary guy would keep getting involved in murder.

\* \* \* \*

Elisa Rolle, reviewer and bookstore owner

I'm a very traditionalist reader. I like to know what happens next and know that the author will not deny me my happily ever after. It is not the plot which is important for me, but how the author deals with the plot. The same story could be a wonderful one or a bad one. All lays in the author's skill. I like variety and tradition: I like to test new authors and genre but when I find an author I like, I always follow his career reading all he writes.

\* \* \* \*

Your theme doesn't have to be some big lofty PRINCIPLE. In fact, it's generally better if you don't put your message in flashing neon lights. Even readers who agree with you philosophically and morally don't like having an agenda rammed down their throats. You don't want to be heavy-handed or blatant.

Maybe you just want to say something about the healing power of love. Or maybe you just want to comment on the importance of equality in relationships between men. Maybe you're digging a little deeper: trying to say something about how different people find different closets to hide in—and how ultimately destructive hiding in the dark can be. *Whatever is important to you is a theme worth writing about.*

Ideally theme is not something that can be lifted out of one story and plugged into another. It should be integral to this particular story and these particular characters. Theme is, in fact, closely linked to character. Theme often develops through the conflict of your two main characters. Each man brings his own experiences, expectations, attitudes, beliefs and dreams to a relationship. When those different personalities collide it creates conflict, and through conflict we explore our themes about love and belonging and compromise and whatever else we think important in human relationships.

\* \* \* \*

Murphy C., reader

Now days het romance doesn't really have a lot of barriers to loving somebody. Religion, financial circumstances, etc.

aren't big issues like they were in the past. But men choosing to love men, that takes a lot of courage and soul searching because it is still a taboo in most religions, most families. You have to have a real passion for that person to risk so much family and societal rejection. It hit me that is why the M/M books appeal to women. We all want to be desired, but to be so desired that a person is willing to risk everything for you!

\* \* \* \*

Let your characters argue out two sides of an issue that's important to you. Allow your characters to be wrong once in a while. Allow them to learn from each other. Allow them to genuinely disagree. When they disagree on important issues—issues important to you *and* them—you have the genuine and believable conflict we discussed earlier.

Through the course of the story your characters will discover what is important to them, and *that* is the exploration and development of theme. That's what you want. You want the characters *and the reader* to explore your themes together.

But keep this in mind: when you're writing these themes, your own lack of experience and knowledge can turn something well-intentioned into something pretentious or just plain silly. Be sensitive to that.

\* \* \* \*

Neil Plakcy, author of *Mahu*, *Mahu Surfer*, etc.

Here is an example of something I read recently, by a woman, writing about a young man's first gay experience. I

think that it's easier for a woman to make the change from straight to gay than a man, so I think this woman underestimated the emotional impact of the change:

*"He knew, as he lay sprawled under the quilt next to X's warm, hard body, that his life had changed irrevocably. X had done something to him that went beyond a simple broadening of his sexual horizon. Now all Y had to do was figure out what to do with that change."*

It was that easy for him—just an OK, I'm gay now. I just don't think that's realistic in a twenty-something guy. You can't be that self-unaware not to realize that male bodies turn you on, for example. It's been said that women fall in love with a person, while men fall in love with a person of the gender that attracts them. I think that idea is one that women stumble over sometime.

\* \* \* \*

The balance of power in relationships has always been of interest to me. When is strength a weakness, and when is weakness strength?

When I set out to write the Adrien English series, I saddled my protagonist with a heart condition. Partly I did it because heart problems run rampant in my family, so that was always in the back of my mind. But partly I did it because I knew that readers would instinctively realize there was little risk of Adrien, a series character, not surviving any given adventure, but his physical vulnerability upped the ante a little. And it created an interesting dynamic with his extremely aggressive alpha male romantic interest. Exploring that particular

dynamic between Jake and Adrien worked so well that it's become a common motif in my stories. Nearly always one of my characters has some weakness or disability that allows me to explore our concepts of strength, masculinity, and power within the context of a romantic relationship.

As you outline your next story—or read over the current one—ask yourself: *What am I trying to say?*

If you're not sure, or if that message doesn't come through clearly in the story, then you need to rework a few scenes so that the premise of your story, the point driving it, becomes clear.

Every scene should underline and illustrate your theme.

I can feel your resistance to this idea right through my laptop screen. But this concept ties back to my assertion that every scene must be there for a reason, and the reason should be two-fold: to move the plot along and to illustrate your theme. These two things work in tandem because the story you tell should illustrate the themes that matter to you. Granted, sometimes you don't really know what you're trying to say until you've said it—and reworked it a few times. (This frequently happens to me when I'm arguing with my better half.)

It's okay if you haven't decided on a theme before you start writing. Theme often develops organically through the creative process. Sometimes the most powerful themes gradually reveal themselves through the course of the story, through the journey the characters take.



Almost always you'll have to go back and refine or define theme in a few scenes. You grow comfortable with your characters through the course of the story. Sometimes your characters will surprise you; sometimes the theme turns out to be something different than you imagined it would be. That's okay. Like I said, often the very best way is to let theme develop naturally out of the characters' journey and the events of the story.

Now. Very important. *You must not preach.* Despite the richness and wealth of thematic material in our chosen genre, you must restrain yourself from jumping on the nearest soapbox.

There's a fine line between subtly and skillfully getting your point across, and preaching from the pulpit. Readers of M/M fiction look to us for entertainment and escape. You must avoid the temptation of whanging them over the head with your 24kt message. Readers are not a captive audience. Irritate them and they will not buy your next book.

Your opinions are always better coming from the mouths of your characters. Use your characters' beliefs, actions, dialogue to say what you want to say.

*Steve said, "Yeah. But there's a problem. Lenny Norman is directing and he doesn't want you."*

*I sat up, dislodging Dan's hand. "You're kidding!"*

*"Nope."*

*"I've never even worked with him. Why doesn't he want me?"*

*"For one thing he thinks you're too good looking for the part of Laurie."*

I glanced across at the reflection of myself in the mirror hanging over the bureau dresser: tall, lanky, brown eyes, brown hair. "I'm not that good looking," I protested.

"I agree. I don't think you're so good looking. In fact, I think you're butt ugly. This is his opinion."

I gnawed my lip, ignoring these witticisms. "That's it? He doesn't want me because of my looks?"

Steve said, a little more serious now, "That, and he thinks you're not gay enough."

"What? What the hell does that mean?"

"Hey, I'm just telling you what was said."

"But what does that even mean? I'm gay. I'm out. What more does he want?" Dan's hand closed around the nape of my neck, his fingers knowledgeably prodding the muscles knotting up. I felt a spark of annoyance; I could practically hear him telling me to take a deep breath, relax. I didn't feel like relaxing. This was business. This was my career.

"It's not like we had an in-depth discussion. I think it's a political thing with him. He feels like you're walking a line with straight audiences, that you're not openly gay. 'You play it too straight,' that's what he said."

"Well, so does Laurie! So does Ralph. I mean, it's historical drama. It's World War Two. Nobody was out. What's this idiot planning to do, portray them as a couple of flaming queens?"

"Chill, dude. Don't kill the messenger. I'm just letting you know what you're up against. He went ahead and FedExed me a copy of the script, so you're not totally out of the running."

*The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

Please avoid clichés. Realistically, *everyone* is not going to be okay with your protag's sexuality. Even your protag may not be totally comfortable all of the time. Likewise, avoid populating your world with crazed fundamentalists and hate-filled bigots. People are complex. The world is full of contradictions. Black and white photography requires the ability to work with light and shadows—if you're not good with the sharps and angles, stick to color, and keep the camera moving.

Don't take yourself too seriously. But don't underestimate your audience, either.

And remember: *having to make a difficult moral choice is one of the best dramatic means of showing conflict and demonstrating theme.*

Probably the most powerful theme in the Adrien English series is Jake Riordan's struggle to come to terms with his sexuality. At the end of *The Hell You Say* he makes a difficult choice that will have lasting ramifications for himself and Adrien.

As you try to find ways of strengthening theme in your work, look to using thematic recurrent symbols, physical objects, weather, colors, songs, etc. For example, Adrien English's heart condition is a thematic symbol of his quest for love. Setting will often tie into theme. Look to the supporting characters and the subplots—although my feeling is theme is more potent when it personally affects your protagonists.

Not to make heavy weather of it, because we're writing romance here, but there are social and moral implications in writing M/M or GLBT fiction.

You do have something of a responsibility.

Italian bookseller Elisa Rolle reviews on her blog and for Torquere Press and Linden Bay Romance. Elisa is a major fan and supporter of M/M and gay fiction—not an easy thing in her native country. I asked her what it's like for gay writers in Italy: *How difficult was it for them. Is there stigma attached to writing gay literature?*

*Absolutely yes. In Italy gay writers can be only intellectual writers. If a gay writes fiction, it can't be mainstream; he has to use underground channel or very small publishers. It seems like gay writer have to justify themselves being cultured people: Look I'm gay but I'm also an "intellectual" so being gay is not so important, is it? But really Italian gay writers are very few. Rather, Italian "openly" gay writers are very few: in Italy coming out is still a taboo, something that brings you to face the public judgment, and that can destroy your career. In a country of over 60 million inhabitants, we have maybe two gay politicians, one writer, two or three entertainers.... We have had a great artist, writer, journalist, poet, director: Pier Paolo Pasolini. But he was beaten to death thirty years ago—"officially" by a hustler. After thirty years, most people know him as the "murdered gay writer" and not as the "murdered writer."*

\* \* \* \*

Yes, we're writing sexy little stories of love, adventure, fantasy, and mystery, but these stories should not be meaningless. Commercial fiction can still inform and teach us

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

about life. Have some respect for yourself as a writer. Use the stories you tell as a vehicle to share your beliefs and values.

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## CHAPTER 12: A MAN OF FEW WORDS

### Dialogue

"So sexy. God, aching for you, lover."

"You? Always. And I'm gonna eat you up."

"Oh ... Ohhhhhh, that feels ... Yeah."

"Yeah, my sugar. So sensual."

"Tell me again. Tell me I'm yours."

"You know. M-mine. All mine."

"Oh shit. Gabe. You ... You tease. Fuuuuuuuuuck..."

"Need. Fuck! Love you!"

"Uhn. Oh. Oh. God. Oh. Love you. Gonna suck you off before you leave. And tonight? Tonight need you to fuck me sooooo hard."

"Sugar. Surgarbaby please..."

"Fuck!"

"Yeah!"

"Oh sugar. How'm I going to punch those l'il doggies now? I'm like ... like limp spaghetti."

Now that's romance, eh?

What've you just read, assuming you could get through it, was my painstaking recreation of some typical M/M pillow-talk minus the physical action. *No*, I'm not exaggerating.

Now you might be thinking to yourself, that's cheating. What's the point of this dialogue without the physical action? It doesn't even make sense.

You got it. My point exactly.

This is not dialogue any more than the moans and salacious comments on a prefix 900 call are conversation. This vocal-orgasm paddle ball is simply there to help the reader get off. You could take it out or exchange it with another Ooooooh-Ooooooh-Baby sequence and virtually nothing in the scene or the story would change.

And that is not a good thing. Really.

Dialogue serves several purposes, but each purpose is designed to one end: to advance the story.

*(Actually, I guess there is an additional purpose if you want to count "getting the reader off," although that one isn't listed in most of those other writing books.)*

Personally, the sample dialogue above didn't do it for me. But then, as my significant other tells me, I'm a tough audience. I prefer my pillow talk to offer insight into the characters and their complicated relationship—to be meaningful *and* sexy. Of course that would take a few minutes to figure out, and might slow the assembly-line production of books from certain writers and their co-conspirators—er—publishers.

When human beings have sex with someone they love, they're vulnerable. Which means it's a great time to insert romantic and heart-felt dialogue. Every sex scene should have a point—beyond the obvious one. It should signal some change, some development in the romantic relationship between our two protags.

If the sex scenes are coming (behave!) so fast and furiously they don't signal anything beyond cranking up the

word count, then we've got a problem. Or rather, you have, because I don't do that.

Every sex scene I write is there for a purpose. I want these episodes to resonate with the reader. I want them to impact the characters and the story. I want them to be memorable. And dialogue is one of the key ways to keep sex scenes distinct and significant.

Yeah, yeah, I know there are readers who are totally happy with the moans and groans school of pillow talk, but keep in mind that we're operating in a pre-glut market. Readers are already getting pickier about the books and authors they choose. Within a year or so it's not going to be so easy to get published merely because you're writing M/M, and as the competition grows stiffer (yes, I know, *focus*) you're going to have to get better at what you do. You're going to need an edge, and, believe or not, getting raunchier and rougher between the sheets isn't going to do it for most of the M/M readers out there—not once the novelty wears off.

A few chapters back we were talking about the sexy historical market going bust. My dear old mum read a lot of those things, and being a tyke with an inquiring mind, I read a few too. There was a certain tiresome sameness to them, and eventually my mother and a million other readers grew bored and moved on to something else. The sexy historical market still exists, but a lot fewer writers earn a living in it, and those who do are the cream of the crop.

Hear me now and believe me later: *skill* is the best insurance policy for a writing career.



Anyway, your characters will—should—say things when they're in bed together that they wouldn't say anywhere else. They'll reveal things about themselves through dialogue and action in those particular scenes that could only happen in those particular scenes.

Bedroom dialogue isn't interchangeable with other dialogue. It *is* sexier—sensual and emotional and naked—but it still needs to be coherent. And your story shouldn't make sense if you remove that dialogue because very often that dialogue is going to be a turning point. At the very least it should be an emotional turning point.

And my personal preference is that even if you took all the physical action out, the dialogue would still make sense. Mostly.

Weirdly enough a lot of M/M authors either resort to a version of the example above or they have almost no dialogue at all—mostly the latter. I'm not sure if it's because so many women writers are focused on getting the mechanics right to the exclusion of all else. In fairness a number of male writers make the same mistake, although that's a little more understandable, the big lugs. Anyway you look at it, it's a lost opportunity.

Okay. Read the scene below while paying close attention to the dialogue. True, there isn't a lot of it, but you don't need a lot. Like anything else in your writing, it's about the quality, not the quantity. Pay special mind to the internal versus external dialogue.

"This is enough for you? Just ... this?"

"Enough...?" I gasped, humping against his hand. He had wonderful hands, long strong fingers and a delicate touch despite the calluses. "I'm not saying I wouldn't like ... oh, God that's nice..."

I closed my eyes, savoring the sustained caress, then opened them as his words sank in. "Is it not enough for you?" I wasn't sure what we were talking about. The sex itself or the fact that for him sex was all it was? Did he want to put a cock ring on me or did he fear I wanted to put a wedding ring on him?

"I didn't say that." Then, strangely, he said, "I heard you with Green that night."

It took effort to concentrate on his words rather than his touch. I didn't understand what he meant at first, and then I did. I blinked up at him, not quite knowing what to say. The night he referred to, the night I had discovered who had killed two of my closest friends—and why—was something I still couldn't bring myself to think about. At first I'd been too shocked and sickened. And now ... it felt safer not to look back.

"He hurt you."

"I don't remember. Maybe."

"You let it happen."

Again I didn't have an answer. It weirded me out to think of Jake listening to Bruce fuck me, but that was hardly the weirdest part of that particular evening.

And that evening was hardly the weirdest part of my relationship with Bruce.

"You let it happen, but you didn't enjoy it."

"Well, no." I asked carefully, "Did you enjoy it? Hearing us, I mean."

"No." All at once his face looked older: tight, bleak. "You were afraid. And I was afraid. I thought you were going to die."

I had thought I was going to die that night too. It was strange looking back from the safety of Jake's arms. Bruce, who said he loved me, had fucked me over in every possible sense. And Jake, who only spoke of fucking, never caring, had already proved to be an unselfish lover.

I said—and I thought I was kidding, but somehow it didn't come out like that, "I knew you'd save me."

The pain in his face closed down my throat. He seemed about to add something, but changed his mind. Instead his mouth found mine with sudden hunger.

My turn to stroke and soothe.

*A Dangerous Thing* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

Does the dialogue still make sense (for the most part) without the physical action: meaning, are these two characters actually *communicating* with each other? Even without knowing the backstory or the characters, is this dialogue interchangeable? Can you see that we're watching a turning point in this relationship—learning something about the characters and their feelings for each other? It couldn't happen at another time in the story; this dialogue has to happen at this point.

Dialogue in your sex scenes: yes, you do need it, and yes, you need to take as much time and trouble with it as you do with the rest of your dialogue.

\* \* \* \*

*How important is dialogue to you?*

Elisa Rolle, reviewer and bookstore owner

Very important. A mix of dialogue and description. Both of them of right length. My attention is easily lost if I have no dialogue for too long, but at the same time, without description I can imagine the story in my mind. Not knowing all the words I read, I try to build the story in my mind and replace the unknown words with my intuition. I don't use a dictionary. I skip the word and try to understand it in the context of the phrase. No hiding here. I read romance, and now M/M romance, because I like a love story, and I read erotica because I like to read sex scenes. But if a book is only an unending sex scene, it loses my attention.

\* \* \* \*

LadyMoluk, Squashduck Reviews

Dialogue makes a story for me. As a writer it's where I begin to form the plot—I let the characters speak for themselves and the rest follows. False dialogue, stilted or unrealistic, grates so much on me I usually stop reading. But clever dialogue can say so much without saying anything at all.

\* \* \* \*

Poicale, reader

I think to me, dialogue is so important because it makes me feel like the characters are real, like they could be people

out in the world. As much as I would love to have access to the internal monologue of other people ... well, only if I could turn it off and on at will ... I don't. And the challenge of being human is trying to figure out people's motives and feelings based on just what they say.

\* \* \* \*

Dialogue in a story does that. That feeling of ... ooh, Character A just said Y but did he really mean it that way? Or was he just saying that so that Character B would think Z?

There is internal dialogue and external dialogue. Internal dialogue is your character's private thoughts and reflections. External dialogue is what your characters say aloud. They are equally important. Both rely rather heavily on the author's voice. We'll go into that a little later.

There is also non-verbal and verbal dialogue or communication. Nonverbal communication is the gestures, expressions, body language and other unspoken cues we give our readers to tell them what's *really* going on in a scene.

I mentioned earlier that dialogue—all dialogue—serves several purposes. Let's review those purposes.

*Dialogue establishes character.*

*You've put time and thought into making sure each of your characters is unique and fully-rounded. Obviously you don't want to spoil that by having your characters all sound alike.*

"Hey, y'all, it's Frank!"

"Bloody hell! Frank, you here, mate?"

"Whoa, dude. They'll let anybody in this place."

Use the rhythms and cadence of speech to differentiate between characters.

\* \* \* \*

Kellie W., reader

Apparently X has a huge following but I cannot get into her stuff at all. I read ISP, and I cannot tell you what it is about except that one character speaks very bad slang English that grates since it is obviously coming from an American writer.

\* \* \* \*

Be sparing with dialect, accents, obscenity, foreign words, speech impediments, slang—a little bit of that goes a long way. Mostly you're just trying to give a feel or a flavor. You don't want to sound like Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi. Or worse, Huck and Jim floating down the Thames.

*Details matter.*

The challenge is a little different if you're writing historical romance. The dialogue of Regency or other period characters is going to require a fair bit of research on your part. Be careful to get it right. Words and their usage change as time goes by. Avoid anachronisms. Read fiction from the period you plan to write about.

Just so you know, nonverbal dialogue is especially good for establishing character.

*Dialogue reveals background, values, and beliefs*

You can cover a lot of ground with dialogue, and it makes for more interesting reading than long sections of narrative, or pages of a character thinking about his life story.

Still, you want to avoid those painful exchanges of exposition that plainly exist only to fill the reader in on information she needs to know.

"Ever since your younger brother Frank, who hates homosexuals, married Jo Beth, the mayor's daughter, and moved to Silverbrook, a neighboring town still within driving distance, things have been a lot more peaceful around here!"

\* \* \* \*

K.M. Frontain, editor

If I have a complaint about women writing M/M fiction, it's that they make their male characters think way too much in some stories. Pages of thinking is horrible to read. Most aspiring M/M writers need to find the balance between thinking and action. They really overbalance on thinking. Some stories seem to be entirely thinking, some sex, more thinking, and a very minimal plot to back up the thinking. The world is often very vague because, well, the entire story is told through the filter of some fictional man's head, and the thinking sometimes doesn't come off very male. So I'd tell female M/M writers to pay more attention to how men think, not how they work their plumbing.

\* \* \* \*

Pages of thinking, especially of what passes for masculine thinking in the imagination of some women, *is* pretty horrible

to read. The success of a character's internal reflections is going to largely depend on the "voice" the writer gives him—which largely depends on the writer's own "voice."

*Dialogue foreshadows coming events*

Your characters can unconsciously reveal clues to the unknown future through spoken and unspoken dialogue.

"Ever since your younger brother Frank, who hates homosexuals, married Jo Beth, the mayor's daughter, and moved to Silverbrook, a neighboring town still within driving distance, things have been a lot more peaceful around here!"

Is anyone in any doubt that young Frank will soon be making an unscheduled visit?

You see foreshadowing through dialogue and gesture used a lot in films and television. A character rubs his forehead. The second character asks if he has a headache. The first character says, nah, it's just the heat—and in the next scene he's having a stroke.

Foreshadowing is a great tool, but you have to be subtle with it.

*Dialogue breaks up all that print so there's plenty of white space.*

You just *think* I'm kidding about that one.

*Dialogue describes setting and characters.*

Ideally, dialogue serves more than one purpose at a time.

"Have I ever told you, you look like Monty Clift?" he inquired in a deep, seductive voice.

"Before or after the accident?"

Claude tittered. Pushed my glass forward. "Red wine. Good for the heart."



"Thanks." I inhaled. "This smells heavenly."

"You need someone to look after you, ma belle." Claude wasn't smiling. With his sad, brown-velvet eyes he watched me spear a soft-shell crab bathed in tomato and herb sauce.

I took a bite. "I'm a born bachelor."

"Bah! You just need to meet Mr. Right."

*Fatal Shadows* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press 2007)

Through just a few lines of out-of-context dialogue we learn that Adrien looks vaguely like Montgomery Clift, that Claude has a deep voice, brown-velvet eyes, and affects French phrases. We see that they're eating and drinking—and what. And we have foreshadowing that Adrien may have health issues and that his lovelife is of some concern to his friends.

*Dialogue is useful for propelling the plot forward and for making quick, seamless transitions.*

In fact, I like to start chapters and even occasionally the novel or story itself with dialogue. It's a way of getting the reader straight into thick of the action. But you have to be careful with opening dialogue. It's got to be interesting and it can't be too confusing.

\* \* \* \*

Victor J. Banis, author of *Longhorns*, The Man from C.A.M.P. series, etc.

I had a lesbian friend once who said, "Women don't have sex, they have meaningful conversations." I thought it was funny enough on the surface, but I felt sure there was something more that I was missing. And when I related it to

another lesbian friend, she roared and told me there was, and gave me an explanation that left me as puzzled as before.

\* \* \* \*

*A few general comments about male dialogue in the M/M novel.*

What you have to remember is that while all guys are not the same, and there are plenty of articulate, well-spoken men out there—as well as arch and campy queens, and Neanderthals who rely on grunts to communicate—what you're trying to create with your M/M characters is, in many ways, a *composite*. And this is because most of the time in M/M fiction, the main characters are presented as normal or average (though reeeeeeally, reeeeeeally goooooood-looking, as Zoolander would say) Joes.

With the exception of sex scenes, most M/M protagonists talk way too much—and about the wrong stuff. I don't mean that there's too much dialogue, per se, but these guys talk way too much about their feelings. And not just their feelings, *everybody's* feelings! I've never known men so interested in who's dating who, and who's having a baby, and who's getting divorced. And they remember all the details, and everybody's names, and who said what to whom....

And they don't just talk to each other about how they feel, they talk to their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends, employees, bosses—oh, and not just their own, but their *lover's* mother, father, sisters, brothers, friends, employees, boss, therapist, neighbor, cook, dog—you name it.

I'm not saying you can't have a chatty protagonist, but go easy. All your male protags cannot be Chatty Cathys. Okay?

Now, I know part of the charm of these books is getting to see a side of men not often glimpsed in real life, but again, it's the *quality* and not the quantity of emotional openness you're going for. If your protags are constantly prattling about how much they care about each other, you dilute the impact and importance of these revelations.

Also, admitting that you love someone is a big moment in a romance novel—any romance novel. When both characters finally admit that they love each other, it's generally the end of the book. Big screen kiss and fade to black.

Actually, your protagonist admitting even to *himself* that he's in love should be a big moment in your story. Don't just brush past it like it's a common everyday occurrence, because it's not.

And admitting to his significant other that this is it, this is the real thing, should be dramatic, important, emotional. Don't spoil the moment with ... premature ejaculation ... if you know what I mean.

#### *Words to the wise*

Book dialogue is not supposed to mirror real conversation. Real conversation is frequently pointless, repetitive, and dull. It may be realistic to have your characters ramble for pages with "uh, er, oh, hmm," but your readers will tire quickly. Fictional dialogue is supposed to be better than the real thing. In addition to serving one of the several purposes we covered previously, it should be pleasurable to read. But be honest with yourself. If you're not funny, steer clear of banter and

witty repartee. Nothing falls flatter when it's done badly. Develop a clean, crisp, straightforward "voice."

Don't hamper dialogue with verbiage. Just say what you're trying to say. Get to the point. Stick to the point.

Don't slow dialogue down with a bunch of attributions, tags, and meaningless gestures and expressions. If you've properly developed your characters, they should have distinct voices, and those voices should make it reasonably easy to follow who's saying what in a given scene.

Don't pull a muscle trying to avoid repeating taglines. "He said" is pretty much invisible. At the same time, you don't have to be afraid to vary the lineup—sometimes people do sneer or murmur or whisper or chuckle the things they say. Don't let the MFA grads intimidate you; there are fashions in writing like everything else. The English language is full of marvelous, precise, and nuanced words, and "he said" doesn't begin to cover it. Choose your words carefully.

Break dialogue up with action when possible. However, avoid cluttering a scene with empty gestures and pointless motions. Busyness won't add anything; in fact, it will simply distract from what your characters are saying.

Use masculine—or gender neutral—analogies and metaphors. Think sports, math, war, nature, science—yes, I'm being sexist, but I really can't take one more guy thinking in terms of some feminine point of reference like baking or paper dolls.

Unless your protagonist has newly emigrated use contractions where you can. Otherwise your protagonist's formal speech is going to make him sound like English is his second language.

Of course, if English *is* his second language, then a more stilted style of speaking will serve him and you well.

Ease up on the profanity, little lady. Although the F-word is dearly beloved by M/M writers everywhere as definitive proof of masculinity, not every guy uses it in place of all other adverbs and adjectives. There are other swear words. As a matter of fact all guys don't express deep emotion by swearing. Since when did *male* become synonymous with *simple*?

Here's a good test as to whether you're overusing the all purpose F-word. Use search and replace to substitute "fuck" for an innocuous word like ... "blue." If the use of blue becomes ridiculous and conspicuous, you know it's time to pull out the thesaurus and find a new crutch to prop your prose on.

In short, make *less is more* your motto, and the added payoff will be that your dialogue will sound and read more masculine.

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## CHAPTER 13: VENI, VIDI, VICI

### I Came, I Saw, I Conquered—Writing Sex Scenes

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

For us, sex is integral to the telling of a romance. It is not just erotica. It shows how the heroes relate to each other and how their relationship develops throughout the novel. It is a unique and very effective method of showing their emotional journey. I am sure it is possible to write a love story without sex. But it would have to be for a good reason that is essential to the plot. We don't see the need to tackle that challenge right now.

\* \* \* \*

You might be wondering why I've waited so late in this writing guide to get to what some readers refer to as "the good part."

Well, it's for a couple of reasons. The first reason is I personally think the sex scenes will have more emotional impact if the reader has gotten to know the characters a bit before they're tangled in the sheets with them. All things being equal, sex with the people we love is better than sex with strangers.

Granted, not everyone—writers or readers or even publishers—agree with this theory, but I think slowly building

the sexual tension, teasing and tantalizing the reader—and exploring the other possibilities for sexual and emotional gratification—make for a richer story *and* more satisfying erotic scenes.

\* \* \* \*

Kellie W., reader

I like a good sex scene. I like to know how characters relate to one another, how they make each other feel, how they long for each other but I do sometimes find that when the sex scenes happen too quickly after each other and go on for page after page that I do lose interest. Also I am not interested in the exact description of what a penis looks like, even the one belonging to the main character. I can work that out for myself. Less mechanical description and more feelings for me is the key.

This leads me to my second peeve. Sex scenes that carry most of the book or are too interested in the mechanics rather than what the men are feeling or experiencing. Obviously some description is necessary so you know what they are in fact doing but often it feels like "and this went here and it felt good..." it could be sex between any two people. I want to know about sex between *these* two people (and before you start wondering—I think you did it very well!

\* \* \* \*

Whew! I did wonder.

The second reason I've waited to talk dirty to you is that, believe it or not, M/M fiction is not synonymous with erotica,

although a fair number of reviewers and readers might argue that. M/M is about a romantic relationship between two men, and yes, in all likelihood, sex will be a big part of that relationship, but technically an M/M novel need not contain graphic and explicit sex scenes.

While consummation of the relationship will certainly take place, there are a number of well-known M/M novels that brush over the act with literary flourish: *The Charioteer* by Mary Renault (as well as her historical novels), *The God in Flight* by Laura Argiri, *Kirith Kirin* by Jim Grimsley, and *Gaywyck* by Vincent Virga to name just a few.

So far Suzanne Brockmann's Troubleshooter novels have not contained explicit sex scenes between FBI agent Jules Cassidy and actor Robin Chadwick, but this is clearly Brockmann hoping to gently acclimatize her readers to the idea of M/M romance—and still not offend anyone too much.

\* \* \* \*

*Is sex a requirement in M/M fiction?*

\* \* \* \*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing

Sex isn't a requirement. I don't have a list of dos and don'ts. If sex is going to be in a story, it needs to work with the story the author is telling.

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id



Sex in some form seems to be a part of slash. And it definitely is for Loose Id, though interestingly, of all our releases lately, it's our M/M stories that often are more "romantic" than sexual. Many of our M/M stories are traditional romances.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

No. We have stories that had little to no sex in them become bestsellers and become award nominees. Some of our readers have expressed gratitude for less erotic stories, saying that they can only read so much erotic content without becoming jaded.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Not at all. As a general publisher, we have titles all across the board, from sweet to über-erotic. As our motto states, *it's all about the story*. And not all stories require sex. Readers are looking for M/M stories to fit every mood, and books don't have to have sex to garner reader interest.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

A requirement? No, but the better sellers have M/M sex scenes in them. They don't have to be erotic in nature, or exceptionally explicit; they can run the gamut just like a heterosexual romance novel can.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

From our experience, hotter stories are always better sellers (when it comes to customer satisfaction), however, we will be releasing our first "non-erotic" M/M story in the next few weeks, so it's anyone's guess how the customers will receive it. Obviously, we hope the interest in M/M fiction extends beyond the bounds of "erotic romance" and we would love to explore the possibilities.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Absolutely. We publish ONLY Erotica. Specifically over-the-top-hot Erotica.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

For us yes, we are publishing erotic romance so that does require sex. There is a possibility in the future of opening up our Parent publisher, Atlantic Bridge, for mainstream fiction.

\* \* \* \*

Is M/M fiction synonymous with erotica? No. Is sex a requirement for your story? It all depends on who you're trying to sell to. The majority of M/M readers seem to prefer erotic scenes. Sexy M/M novels, in general, sell better than non-sexy M/M novels (with the exception of those published through mainstream publishers, which have larger print runs to begin with).

Sex sells. No argument there.

Porn is big business for a reason. Which reminds me. I guess we should discuss the difference between erotica and porn.

I've read a lot of different arguments—debates?—on the topic:

*Erotica is healthy, legal, and has artistic merit, while porn doesn't*

*Porn is for men, erotica is for women*

Erotica is for the mind, porn is for the body

There is no difference

I guess there's a measure of truth in all of that. What you need to keep in mind is that *you* are writing romantic fiction, primarily for women, and your approach to everything—including the sex scenes—needs to stay focused on that fact.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen, etc.

The difference between erotica and porn is very subjective in my opinion. For me, personally, erotica engages my mind and draws me into the characters and plot; porn can be very, very hot and I think it has its place, but it doesn't engage me in the same way. Sometimes I want one, sometimes the other—and sometimes I write one and not the other.

\* \* \* \*

Traditionally, porn doesn't spend a lot of time on plot or characterization or style. It's all about the act of intercourse.

Everything is aimed at bringing the reader/viewer off as quickly—and frequently—as possible. Erotica is most definitely about style. It's about the choice of words, the use of language, the appeal to all the senses—and to the emotions. It might also be about plot and characterization; I can't say for sure. But what I *can* say for sure, is that you're writing M/M romance, and *you* most definitely need to be concerned with plot and characterization in order to get the most bang for your erotic buck.

\* \* \* \*

Lise Y., reader

That Lambda nominee in the erotic category, *Hot On His Trail* by Zavo was definitely for guys. All that sweat, etc. Women prefer men to be clean—hence the popularity of shower or bathing scenes. Also the multiple partner thing—maybe that's a guy fantasy, but definitely not appealing to women, who prefer to read about love, not just sex.

\* \* \* \*

Judging by the number of multiple partner stories at the leading M/M publishers, the multiple and mixed pairings do tap into a few fantasies for a number of readers, as do BDSM, fetishes, etc. It's not my own kink, granted. Like Lise, I'm more interested in developing a story about a loving relationship between two men. Frankly, the other stuff seems too calculated, too much about marketing to women's fantasies rather than telling a meaningful story about the human condition.

And how pretentious was that last statement? Write what you enjoy reading—like I do. The odds are good that if you write well, you'll find a market for whatever you like to write. My personal favorite motivational quote: *If you write it, they will come.*

\* \* \* \*

LadyMoluk, Squashduck Reviews

Yes, I do think sex is pretty critical for M/M fiction. Including it reminds everyone that these are MEN we're writing about—or should be. It helps overcome the temptation to make the characters women by any other name. However, I do like stories where the sex is rare but powerful, where simmering passions are more important than the sex. I'd quote *As Meat Loves Salt* by Maria McCann as a great example of this style of writing. It's the not being able to have sex that makes her story so incredibly powerful.

\* \* \* \*

When I began writing the Adrien English series, my work was classified as gay fiction or gay mystery. My then-publisher was Gay Men's Press, and they published a lot of gay porn as well as gay literary novels. I tried to hit a happy medium with my work by including brief—quite brief—erotic scenes. By the time I wrote the third book, *The Hell You Say*, I was targeting a mainstream mystery audience, and I cut the erotic scenes down to nothing.

I suppose part of that was the fear that I wouldn't be taken seriously as a writer if I included sex scenes. But the

truth is the true literary snob doesn't take *anyone* writing genre fiction seriously, so an erotic scene here and there isn't going to make a hell of a lot of difference—even if I really, truly cared what some unknown parvenu thinks.

Ironically this was just at the point that M/M fiction was beginning to break out, and I began to hear from a number of female readers, one message in particular coming through loud and clear: they didn't like the fact that I "closed the bedroom door" on Jake and Adrien.

And because they argued so convincingly for what those scenes meant to the developing intimacy of the characters, the insight it offered into a side of the characters we would not otherwise see, I began to reconsider my ... uh ... position.

\* \* \* \*

Bella, TwoLips Reviews

Sex is incredibly important. 100% important.

\* \* \* \*

So not only did I begin writing erotic M/M novellas, I re-edited my original work to include scenes of explicit lovemaking—taking my own pleasure in making each one unique and significant to the characters and their developing relationship.

Even so, I'm pretty tame by most M/M standards, and I thought I'd get some help from some of the acknowledged sexperts in the field. Besides being one of my favorite people, Laura Baumbach has an eye for detail and a gift for the language of lovemaking.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

When I write a sex scene, I start by keeping the mood of the moment in mind. It's not always a quiet romantic setting in the privacy of a closed-door bedroom in an empty house. There might be people in the next room or it might be a semi-public place like sex in a dark alley. The setting can dictate what kind of sex I write. Rushed and public sex means intense, down and dirty for me. Private sex means I can take my time and let the partners explore each other a bit, try new things, linger and tease, talk and listen. I like both kinds of settings, and both reveal things about the characters.

Quick, down and dirty shows who's the dominant character right off the bat. It lets one man be bowled over by the other both emotionally and physically, which I like. It also forces the stronger of the two to be intensely caring by making sure they aren't so rough and eager things get painful, and to be protective, shielding them from discovery while they roll with the moment. It's hot, fast and thrilling to write and to experience.

\* \* \* \*

*"You're shaking, baby. Excitement.... "A callused fingertip ran down the length of his neck and back up to stroke over his open, panting mouth. "Or fear? Doesn't really matter to me." Another shudder rippled through James. Cowboy*

*grinned. "I like you trembling against me, because of me, whatever the reason."*

*The thigh pressing his legs apart rubbed side to side, massaging the growing bulge in his jeans. James groaned and bit down on one corner of his lower lip to hold back a startled yelp when the pressure increased to the point of near pain.*

Cowboy narrowed his eyes, his voice taking on a harsher edge. Warm breath ghosted over James' face, and moist lips grazed against his mouth while the man talked, teasing at the lip tucked between his teeth.

"Does that feel good to you, baby? Like that? Like it slow and gentle?" He lessened the pressure and slipped a hand between them, thumbing open the buttons of James' jeans as he talked. Finding nothing under them except heated flesh, he shoved his hand inside and grabbed James' cock, dragging calluses and fingernails lightly over the sensitive organ.

James squirmed and made a strangled, animal sound in the back of his throat.

"No, you wouldn't be on this side of town, in this bar, if gentle was what you were looking for. Maybe you want it a little rougher." He shoved his fingers down farther and captured the tight sac beneath. "A little harder." He massaged James, grinning at the increased squirming and guttural whimpers his heavy caress produced. "A little deeper." Kicking James' legs farther apart, he slid two fingers behind the sac, tracing the thin ridge of sensitive flesh that led up to his opening. Without hesitation, he shoved both fingers into James' body, twisting and stroking the hot, slippery walls of muscle within. A guttural gasp rewarded his efforts.



He chuckled low and throaty, nudging James' cheek with his nose, silently commanding him to look up until their eyes met. "You got yourself all ready for me, baby. All nice", the long agile fingers twisted roughly, "and slick", plunged deeper, "and tight." The questing digits pressed up, grazing over a spongy firmness.

As he fought to remain standing, James spasmed and bucked against the intimate contact. He whimpered and began to pant, arching into the touch while at the same time trying to squeeze shut his thighs. He was torn between the desire to have more from this seductive, intense man and the urge to push the dangerous, aggressive suitor off and stumble back into the bar for a fortifying drink. One more swirling stroke deep inside and desire won.

Jerking his head up, James captured the man's mouth with his own. Both hands tangled in the cowboy's hair, forcing their mouths firmly together. His urgency was met and matched. The kiss was hot and dirty and thrilling, each demanding stroke of tongue met with an equally aggressive suck or bite, until oxygen-deprived, racing heartbeats pounded painfully in their heads.

The cowboy broke away, sliding his fingers out of their tight cocoon of muscle and heat. Pulling his hand from James' jeans, he bestowed a rough caress on James' straining cock on the way out.

"Jesus, fuck!" James protested the loss, thrusting his groin into the retreating hand, his body trying to regain the needed touch.

*A Bit of Rough* by Laura Baumbach (MLR Press, 2007)

It's important to note a couple of things here. Most of the reputable M/M publishers are strict about things like pedophilia, necrophilia (vampires and other supernatural beings excepted), bestiality (not including werewolves, shape-shifters and aliens), rape for titillation's sake, incest (although twincest and sex between consenting adult brothers is apparently mostly okay), scat, golden showers, fetishes in general, and snuff.

Infidelity can be a problem, depending on the individual house—and I cannot stress enough the importance of reading publisher guidelines before you submit your work.

Even unsafe sex generally takes place with condoms and between consenting adults.

All of the above possibly helping to define some of the differences between porn and erotica.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

The quieter, more leisurely setting allows me the chance to write long, sweaty bouts of extended lovemaking. Satisfying and tender, these scenes give me time to have my characters engage in foreplay, pillow talk, cuddling, and sometimes, regrets. I can try out new sexual positions and reveal more about the characters through their preferences and reactions to each other in bed and the activities they try. One likes a little bondage, the other one is uncomfortable with being held down, one likes to have his arm pits licked, the other has a thing for rimming, one doesn't like to kiss during lovemaking,

one likes to be bitten on his ass—exploration time, revelation time.

Although I have more time and opportunity to expose more about my characters during the secluded sex scenes, both settings give me the chance to show the characters' emotional make-up.

\* \* \* \*

*Hands spreading his lover wide open to his hungry gaze, Bram stared at James from between his trapped, bent legs, memorizing every detail of the man's appearance. He was entranced by the bunched, rumpled crispness of James' white dress shirt, unbuttoned and gaping, the moonlight fading it to a luminous blue. The light heightened the deep sapphire shade of James' eyes and accentuated his clean-shaven, pale skin. Locks of tangled curls lay plastered to James' forehead, their disheveled strands dark with sweat. Eyes half-lidded with a wanton stare, James' mouth parted, his lips moving in a wordless plea.*

*The musky smell of James' pre-come teased at Bram's senses, mixing with the earthy scent of puckered flesh under his hands, spurring on his desire. Bram dove forward, dragging the flat of his broad, wet tongue over the exposed, spread opening to James' body, licking over the tight hole and up the thin strip of sensitive flesh behind James' sac. James bucked and twisted in his grip, guttural, inarticulate noises escaping his throat.*

"Come on, baby." Bram licked James' ass again, his movements slow and firm. "Tell me what you want. Let me

give you what you need." He stabbed the tip of his tongue at the ring of muscle, flicking a few moist laps over its edges, then retreated. "Just tell me, baby, and I'll give you anything you want, everything you need."

"Christ!" James groaned and shuddered under Bram's hands. "Bram!" He arched his back and pushed his spread cheeks at his lover's face, wordlessly begging for more.

Bram grinned and ran his tongue lightly over James' hole, leaving a slick, cool patch behind. He blew a stream of warm air over the wet spot, delighting in the goose flesh that turned the smooth skin under his palms to pebbled, squirming mounds of seductive, delicious ass. He loved the taste of James, whether it was the sweat from the curve of his slender neck or the pungent flavor of his lower regions; Bram savored every inch of the man he had fallen in love with. Wanting more, he sealed his mouth to the fluttering hole and sucked on the edges of its rim, teasing the tight muscle with little darting jabs of his pointed tongue and a rhythmic suction designed to drive his lover crazy with need.

"Bram ... ugh ... fuck!" James ground his ass against Bram's face, shudders wracking his bent and exposed body.

Bram pulled back and murmured against James' skin, so close the warmth of his own breath was deflected back at him as spoke. "Tell, me, baby. Just ... tell me. I'll do anything for you, all you have to do is ask."

He licked around the puckered opening, bathing the wrinkled circle of darker skin with long laps of his tongue, tempting and teasing his shy lover.

As much as he loved hearing James tell him what he needed, Bram enjoyed these moments, too. He found James' shy reluctance to verbalize his more wanton desires endearing and sweet. James at his most vulnerable, all rumpled, restrained, and tongue-tied, turned Bram on more than he thought possible. He was still having difficulty believing James was his, truly his.

*A Bit of Rough* by Laura Baumbach (MLR Press, 2007)

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Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night*, *A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I usually write a scene from the POV of the most emotionally conflicted character because I'm writing romance and it's his thoughts and actions that fuel a lot of the conflict in the story. He is also most often the one controlling the events within the romance, not the more confident, stronger (emotionally or physically) partner. I like to explore his misgivings, his doubts about the relationship and watch how he overcomes those or grows out of them as the story progresses. I also like to show how the more self-assured partner recognizes (or not) his partner's hesitancy or doubts and what he does (or doesn't do) to help his lover overcome the stumbling block to their mutual happiness. I'm not talking about just sexual differences. The intimacy shown in the bedroom translates into all aspects of a relationship. Trust, control, give and take, understanding, ability to listen, tenderness, unselfishness. If you don't have them in the bedroom, chances are you can't have them outside it.

I write the emotional aspects as graphically as I can. I want the reader to be there right inside the character whose POV I'm writing. I want them to feel their lover's hands on their skin, the heat, the satiny touch of flesh, the hard muscle and heavy shaft, the tight grip and deep kisses. And I want them to understand how each and every touch makes my character feel whether it's a flash of burning stretch and fullness, or a flush of body warmth, to the sizzling beginnings of a white-hot orgasm.

I describe the physical elements in detail, but I try to balance them with what the character is thinking at the same time. I want to share the connection of the moment between the two lovers whether it's done by a lusty gaze, an intense stare, a desperate kiss, a tender touch, a possessive grab of the hair, or a full body slam and grope.

I want the reader to be as overwhelmed with the moment as the lovers are, share it and find the same connection my lovers are experiencing. I want them to fall in love, too. I want them to close my book and say, "Damn, I want a man who makes me feel like that!"

\* \* \* \*

Here's something to be aware of. There are only so many ways to describe the act of intercourse. Pretty much everyone in M/M is using the same terminology and phrases, and generally the same sequence of erotic milestones in any given work. The way you make your scenes different is through dialogue—internal and external—sensory details and emotional subtext. Fresh language, original metaphors are

wonderful if you can think of them, but step cautiously. It's alarmingly easy to skid from the sublime into the ridiculous when you're writing about sex.

I'm not a big fan of euphemisms. "Twin orbs" and "velvet rods" sound like something an interior decorator should be concerned with. I like simple, effective writing. Use evocative, sensual language, *focus on the emotions*, and remember to have your characters talk to each other.

Playful is good, but "dueling purple-helmed love gods" ... not so much.

Explicit language is not only okay, it's encouraged—just keep it in historical and cultural context. Straightforward and sensuous—never clinical and never cold. You can be tasteful—I encourage tasteful—but don't be coy.

Go easy on the adjectives and adverbs—some of these scenes read like the rape of a thesaurus. Your erotic tableaux should be written in the same style, the same voice you've used throughout the novel.

In addition to reading gay men's porn, analyze how sex scenes are handled in literary fiction and heterosexual romance novels for a slightly fresh perspective. With all of us reading each other's work there's a danger of M/M fiction developing into a literary circle jerk.

A couple of books for your writing library are: *The Romance Writer's Phrase Book* by Jean Kent and Candace Shelton, *The Joy of Writing Sex: A Guide for Fiction Writers* by Elizabeth Benedict, and *Elements of Arousal: How to Write and Sell Gay Men's Erotica* by Lars Eighner.

Take as much care with these scenes as you would with any other.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

The sex scenes should not be generic. Hand job, blow job, then somebody gets fucked. No, no, and no again! Let the real characters tell you what they would do, and use every sense—would your character be more likely to taste his lover's neck or slide his hands down and squeeze his ass? What is your character thinking when he watches his lover's face twist with orgasm? Which one of the two lovers is more likely to go into the bathroom and get a warm washcloth? If one of your characters is dead to the world down below, what would they do? Go to sleep? Make out like a couple of teenagers? Would somebody's feelings get hurt?

Think about this area and make it special and unique so this sex scene could only happen between these two characters.

I like to use interesting language and original metaphors, but an old critique partner mentioned to me several times that "observable physical details are never out of place". Semen, for example. (By the way, cum is porn, come is English). Semen: How much? How does it taste? Does it taste differently if he has been eating curry? How slick is it smeared between the fingertips? What color is it under gray skies vs. at the beach in the sunshine? Who is the character who is going to swallow vs. spit out, vs. smear it all over his mouth? Use some creative thinking in this area and make the sex tell



you something about your character that you don't know. Is someone going to turn mean? Selfish? Burst into tears? What is going to happen in their bedroom that you don't know about? We all know that conflict cannot be resolved in the bedroom, but their conflict comes into the bedroom with them.

\* \* \* \*

*Luke went to his knees, one hand on Clay's shoulder, and Clayton pushed him gently backward until he was lying on the floor. Clayton rolled the jeans into a ball and put them under Luke's head, then he tugged his boxers down and off.*

*Luke was already erect, his cock dark against the ivory skin of his belly. Clayton buried his face between his legs, buried his nose and mouth in the golden hair, ran his cheek up and down Luke's cock, felt something tight let loose and relax in his chest. Luke's hip bones stood out like wings, and Clayton could see a pulse beating in his groin. The femoral pulse. He put his fingers over it, and then his mouth. Every beat of Luke's heart, and he could feel it here, under his lips. He was alive. Clayton's face was wet with tears.*

He took Luke into his mouth, wrapped his fingers around the base of his cock, his thumb caressing that muscle underneath where Luke was so sensitive. When he caught that scent, Luke's scent, the one from his memory, he went a little crazy, his mouth frenzied, Luke's cock so deep in his throat he thought he would swallow him whole. He wanted to swallow him, he wanted to reach into his chest and eat his beating heart, crawl inside his body and curl up, asleep. Then

Clayton could taste him on the back of his tongue. Luke filled his mouth, hips pumping, breath harsh in his throat, his hands reaching for Clayton's head.

Luke's eyes were hungry and sweet with longing. He reached for Clayton, his hands moving over his face, over his chest and stomach until he reached for the button at the waistband of Clayton's jeans and twisted it open.

Clayton stared into Luke's beautiful eyes. They trapped his heart, and he spun there like an insect caught in a spider's web, waiting to be devoured. Luke pushed Clayton's jeans and boxers down over his hips to his knees, then tugged him down, clutched his ass and pressed them together.

His skin touching Luke's skin, his cock touching Luke's cock, finally, finally, staring down into Luke's sleepy, sexy eyes, just like the first time. Clayton felt his heart squeeze tight with longing and love and gratitude. Luke's skin underneath his; Luke's smell surrounding him, love touching him.

*Border Roads* by Sarah Black (Loose Id, 2007)

Part of how you keep the sex scenes vivid and intense is that you make them true to the characters. We've all got our little quirks and preferences when it comes to the bedroom, and characterization in your sex scenes has to hold true with the rest of the story.

Don't be afraid to give your protagonists preferences. I know it's very popular in M/M fiction to show the male lovers meticulously taking turns with topping each other. I find that generic and boring. Tell us something about the characters by showing what they like and don't like in the bedroom. Give

them opinions, predilections, desires—give them fantasies—give them insecurities and hang ups. Make their sex as unique and individual as they are.

For example, Adrien English is totally at ease with his sexuality; he's intuitive, slightly conservative, and emotionally generous. He has no problem taking the role of bottom to Jake Riordan. In fact, he finds it relaxing to let go and be submissive in this particular arena with this particular partner. Jake is into the S/M scene. He's a Master, and there's no way in hell he's going to be penetrated by Adrien or anyone else—at least, not at this point in the series. With another partner, Adrien may have other preferences, take another role. It would hinge on the personality of that other character. Jake? Well, Jake's a whole 'nother story.

In the historical novella *Snowball in Hell*, Nathan Doyle is the experienced sexual partner. He craves physical and emotional intimacy through physical union, and his need to submit, to be dominated sexually, drives the sexual dynamic with Mathew Spain. So while Nathan is very much the bottom in that relationship—in all his relationships—he's still the one controlling the shots.

Now, in *The Dark Horse*, Sean Fairchild panics at the idea of anal intercourse, period. Still struggling on an unrecognized level with his sexual orientation, Sean can't quite deal with the invasiveness, the emotional nakedness—and when his lover, Daniel Moran, who is about as sexually healthy and integrated as they come, offers Sean the option of doing *him*, Sean recoils. Sean's got a few hang-ups; Dan recognizes this, and he's patient and gentle with Sean. Who these men are

doesn't change based on which room of their house they're standing in.

And then there's Will and Taylor of the as yet unpublished *Dangerous Ground*. Now those two, yeah, they will meticulously—consciously—take turns topping each other because their testosterone-drenched partnership pivots delicately on their total equality, the complementary balance of strengths and skills.

Use depictions of intimacy to show us something about the characters we wouldn't—couldn't—otherwise see. Give us insight into their characters and their relationship.

Strip your protagonists naked during sex—emotionally, spiritually, mentally naked. All right, they can keep their shoes and socks on.

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, *Loose Id*

In terms of M/M, I have problems with stories that have the same kind of sex over and over in the story without a lot of emotion—the emotion needn't be expressed girly-style, but it should be there. Oh, and stories that are about males but written too much from a female POV. I know much of our audience is female and have fantasies of what men really are like when they're away from females (apparently they're romantic and loving and tender when we aren't looking) but men express that differently than women do.

\* \* \* \*

*"You're shaking." His voice was soft.*

*I laughed unsteadily, shook my head, although it was true.  
I was shaking.*

Warm hands on bare skin. I'd forgotten how good that felt. Adam's long strong fingers caressed, smoothed, teased. I wrapped my arms around him, his body hard, thin, hot against my own, his cock pressing urgently into my inner thigh.

Mine thrust blindly back. He gathered me closer still, his arms folding me tight. I rubbed my feverish face against his chest, inhaling that sexy sharp smell of male arousal. Mine, his, ours.

"All right?" He was still tender, still ready to turn it into comfort if that's what I was really after—and how funny was that?

"God, yes."

How long had it been since someone had simply touched me like this, held me? Years. Years. Oh, God, it felt good. Skin on skin felt so incredibly good.

Adam nudged my face with his, found my mouth, kissed me. A hot sweet kiss that deepened. I moaned, opened for him, needing more. Craving more. His tongue thrust against mine. I responded with a hunger that probably startled the hell out of him. Our tongues met, dueled, parted.

His hand had slipped between our bodies; he stroked the vulnerable skin between hip and thigh, slid down to capture the tight sac, tracing with his fingernails. I broke the kiss, panting. My lips felt swollen.

"Adam.... "I caught his hand with mine, shifting it to my cock, desperate for him to relieve that throbbing distended need.

"Right here," he whispered, and mercifully he was. His hand wrapped around me, sliding our cocks together—slick, hot—working us together. His mouth covered my own again, wet and hungry. Frantic tension built inside me.

I need to do something here, I thought dizzily. I'm being selfish. But all I seemed able to do was writhe and shiver. Nor was there time to sort it out because, to my astonishment, I was already coming. Hard. Liquid heat splashed over Adam's hand, moistened the nestle of our bellies and thighs. Waves of relief so intense it was painful. Wet heat slipped out beneath my lashes too.

Adam's hips rocked against mine. Faster. Fiercer. The mattress springs groaned. His hands slid under, bunched into my ass, snugging me up hard against him. I ignored that painful stiffness jabbing into my belly; kissed his throat, the underside of his jaw, the hollow of his shoulder, his nipple; tasted salt and sweat.

It's real. I'm not dreaming. It felt better than any dream.

Adam bit off an exclamation and arched his body against mine. Blood-hot release spread between us, easing the friction of skin on skin.

The world steadied once more. Downstairs the clock was chiming a silvery hour.

"Three o'clock and all's well," I whispered.

Adam turned his face to me, kissed my cheek. His head jerked up.

"Are those tears?"

I dragged my arm across my wet face. "The good kind."

"Hey..." He slid an arm beneath my shoulders, cradled me against him. "Tell me."

There was no way I could put it into words.

Shakily, I said, "You had to be there." I started laughing and then, crazily, I was crying again. Adam just held me, petting me, whispering endearments, and after a few minutes I quieted.

*Murder in Pastel* by Colin Dunne (Torquere Press, 2007)

\* \* \* \*

Alex Beecroft, Night Owl Reviews

Well, at the risk of missing the point entirely, I'm fed up of gratuitous sex; sex that is introduced entirely for the sake of sex and seemingly with little relevance to the plot and no concern for who the characters are or why they would want to get together. Total strangers thrown together into a life threatening situation? About to drown/starve/fall off a cliff? Let's think about having sex! Kidnapped by strange cat-like aliens? Who cares? Let's have sex! I've just found this amazing talisman which may unlock the secret of my predestined fate and enable me to save the world from my evil father? Let's have a threesome!

It isn't that I don't like a well written sex scene which is in there because the characters want it and the plot calls for it, and it's saying something about the heroes interaction with each other etc. etc. (even if that's just "oh God, I'm so lonely and horny"). I do! But I sometimes get the impression that

there's some kind of quota, and if you don't get to at least the oral sex by three quarters of the way through chapter one you're not paying your dues.

\* \* \* \*

Yeah, let's talk about the rhythm method. Pacing is just as critical for writing sex scenes as it is for the rest of the work—both in the number of scenes and the length of the scenes.

When it comes to the number of scenes within a given work, think quality over quantity. I've read way too many novels and novellas where the plot merely existed to string together a numbing sequence of non-distinct humping, grinding, and thrusting.

That was fine in the early days of the M/M renaissance, but the competition is too ... well, too stiff now. Not only do you have gay writers dropped from their indie publishers scrambling for a new home, you've got mainstream writers caught in the crunch. A lot of writers are turning to e-publishing, and one of the most lucrative areas of e-publishing right now is M/M fiction.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor Loose Id and MLR Press

The market is moving fast. Writers need to be aware that publishers are trying to keep up with it, whether it's to cut back the pornography or ramp up the eroticism. Guidelines are hybrids, an amalgam of the publishers' tolerances and the customers' preferences as revealed by their buying habits. Both those elements change over time. It's inevitable that the



guidelines will follow suit. In practice, yes, the stakes are getting higher. Regardless, whatever the guidelines might seek in the way of erotic content, every erotic moment must advance the emotional stakes in some way. The consistent element in romance is, ta-da, the romance. Emotion is the key.

The biggest taboos are pretty consistent publisher to publisher: rape as titillation, underage sex, bestiality. Hardly the stuff of romance.

\* \* \* \*

Too many sex scenes dilute the impact and importance of what should be a big moment within the story. Don't spoil the romantic tension by satisfying your lovers—let alone your reader—too quickly. Tease, tantalize. Make everybody work for it.

\* \* \* \*

Eve, reader

As to what work and what doesn't work for me. I've tried a couple of very raunchy M/M novels, where the sex/plot ratio is about 70:30, I was bored by the 3rd sex scene :P

It's always good to have an engaging storyline, well-drawn characters (such as Adrien & Jake, whom I am totally obsessed with) and good sex scenes that are plot-related or tell you something about the characters. Because sex is never just sex, right?

\* \* \* \*

When it comes to the individual scenes of erotic intimacy, don't be afraid to slow the pace. In these sections it's okay to let the characters reflect and remember as they respond to each other. Within reason. You don't want anyone falling asleep before ... well, before.

During *these* action scenes your readers do want details and attention to the little things.

*Details, details*

When the action is between the sheets (or up against a brick wall) it's okay to talk about the moonlight, the flicker of candles and the shadow of leaves, the feel of wool blankets—or silk pajamas—on bare skin. Let the reader feel the warmth of firelight, the taste of whisky—or semen—in a lover's mouth. Let her hear the pants or groans or whimpers; let her smell the soap, so to speak.

And describing the setting is not only okay, it's preferable. The reader wants to be in the moment with the characters. Don't belabor, but be specific. Where are the characters? Who is doing what to whom?

And please make sure that whatever anyone is doing, it's within the realm of physical possibility.

Fingers digging into Rick's skin, Peter began to rotate in a seesawing figure-eight which he knew from experience brought a barreling, pulsating orgasm every time.

Like, what just happened there? The last thing you want is to yank the reader out of the story while she tries to picture the logistics of your characters' sexual acrobatics. You want her engaged, you want her—yes—*aroused*. If you're having trouble figuring spatial relations you might try a trick Laura

Baumbach mentioned using once: she takes two male action figure dolls and tries out different positions with them. Uh, I mean, Laura positions the dolls with each *other*. But you could go a different route; anything that helps you visualize the scene is good.

Here's the thing, though: you don't need to give a blow by blow description of every move, every position. It's more important to let the reader know how everything feels, tastes, smells than to give the exact coordinates of hands and feet.

#### *Pan and scan*

Even if you're writing from first person POV, make sure you include the reactions of your POV character's lover. This isn't masturbation (unless it is, of course).

It's more satisfying for the reader if you go big picture with scenes of intimacy. I'm not saying start head-hopping, but allow your reader to observe what both characters are feeling through the senses of the POV character.

*Graham reached up and touched Tommy's face, slid hands through his hair to hold them close. He could feel their legs tangling together, their cocks sliding against each other. Tommy was hard already, too, and he was shaking.*

*The Lincoln County Wars* by Sarah Black (Loose Id, 2007)

The observations your POV character makes about his partner and lover give your reader necessary insight into a brain and emotions she doesn't otherwise have access to. So pay attention to the revealing details: a change in breathing, a bitten off comment, a smothered laugh.

#### *Show and Tell*

Aim for simple, elegant language. Yes, adjectives and adverbs are okay—even expected here, but use some restraint.

You can structure your sentences for flow and movement rather than speed and urgency—although speed and urgency will be good at some point. Fever pitch will be good at some point.

The main thing is take your time with these scenes. Don't rush through them, and don't cheat the reader. Even if you're tired of writing about the horizontal bounce, you can't let your ennui show. Not in mixed company. And it will. If it's routine for you, it will read as mechanical and rote. That's not sexy, and it's not good writing.

\* \* \* \*

William Maltese, author of *Love Hurts*, *Diary of a Hustler*, etc.

For guys, sex usually comes first, relationships, if at all, after; for women, it's just the opposite. Which may sound stereotypical, but it has been my personal observation that that's just the way life goes. So if a woman writes about two men having a nice sweet and lengthy courtship, then sex, then a loving relationship—when, more realistically, they should be quickly down and dirty, doing it on the bathroom floor of some gay bar, before they likely even know each other's names, then going their separate ways—I suspect it's the former that's more likely to appeal the most to heterosexual women readers. So, why should any female author change anything in her M/M writing, just to make it

more realistic? Hell, most of literature is make-believe, which is why a good part of it is called fiction. You don't have to write "real" to sell books, so why should you, especially if your readers are more enthralled and caught up in the fantasy?

\* \* \* \*

Don't miss the opportunity to build sexual tension and satisfaction by including erotic scenes that don't end with fucking. Showers, baths, hot tubs, moonlight swims, feeding each other, undressing each other, dancing, cuddling, massage—full body and otherwise—not to mention good old-fashioned kissing can all feel—er—*read* wonderfully well.

Use these to build up the sexual tension between the characters.

*Naked, half-hard and panting, James climbed onto the bed and knelt beside Bram's waist. He rested one hand in the middle of Bram's back to ground his lover with his touch then ran his hand up the valley of Bram's spine from the crease of his firm buttocks to the base of his spine. Bram responded with a low moan and arched into the light touch.*

*"Hang in there, caveman. I'm just getting started. Keep your hands down, okay?" He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one. Bram merely flexed his hands against the sheets.*

James rose up and straddled Bram's hips, settling his hot, open crotch over the center of Bram's ass, and letting his sac rest in the warm, hairy divide.

Bram's moan dropped an octave and he spread his legs wider.

Filling his palms with the thick massage oil, James rubbed them together to warm it. Placing both hands at the base of Bram's spine in front of him, James worked his way up the hard flesh, kneading hard against the variety of knots he encountered and massaging the oil deep into the tense muscles and satin smooth skin. While working his hands over and over the hard plains and rippling tissues just to feel the power and strength in the muscle, he was amazed at the silky texture of the man's flawless expanse of flesh.

Bram groaned when James worked the tight knots and moaned again when he caressed the smooth strips of sensitive muscle. His tone alternated between a low growl and soft rumble whenever James stroked over his more sensitive spots. James memorized these as future places to investigate when the massage was over and their playtime had moved onto more serious pursuits.

James worked his way up each of Bram's arms, massaging each palm and finger in turn then worked his way back down Bram's spine. He kneaded and prodded the hard flesh of the man's neck and shoulders until the flesh was hot and pliant under his hands. Bram let a nearly constant hum of approval. James lifted off Bram's ass and slide down between the man's spread legs to his feet. He massaged and stroked, loosening Bram's muscles from his toes up. He paid homage to sensitive arches, around rough heels and strong ankles to knead thickly corded calf muscles and stout, iron hard thighs.

Finally, James moved up between Bram's knees to cup and caress the twin globes of his rounded, taut butt, massaging and stroking the muscular area with firm hands. His thumbs snaked along the deep crease with each pass, invading deeper and deeper until they brushed across the dark, furry opening to Bram's body.

Both men gleamed in the soft fading light of the afternoon. James wore a fine sheen of sweat. The candle began to throw gray shadows around the bed, intensifying the visual effects of the oil on Bram's golden skin.

*A Bit of Rough* by Laura Baumbach (MLR Press, 2007)

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night*, *A Bit of Rough*, etc.

Women shouldn't feel bad about liking to read M/M erotic romance. We have a right to our sexual fantasies. Men have been free to enjoy and brag about the fantasy of two women together and women shouldn't be ashamed to admit they love the two men fantasy and to ask for it to read. It shouldn't have to be a dirty little secret. I actually think that is one of the major reasons I'm popular: I'm a straight married woman who writes under my own name and isn't afraid to say I like M/M and I want to read it. Our sexual desires/fantasies should be as respected and accepted as men's are.

\* \* \* \*

Speaking of fantasy, a great deal of M/M sex is exactly that. Research will only take you so far when you're writing

about sex between humans and vampires, shape-shifters, ghosts, and space aliens.

*Through parted lips, Maymon tentatively tasted Talos, his own tongue darting out to lap at the long, slick muscle invading his mouth. Their tongues dueled, then stroked each other, the Hunter's longer more agile tongue wrapping around Maymon's tongue, caressing and drawing it into his, only to release it and capture it again.*

*Talos' lips felt like smooth satin, but wet and warm. They latched onto Maymon's and refused to allow air or sound to escape as they ravaged him, sucking and working their sultry way over his mouth, alternating their attention between his lips and his face, leaving a burning trail of passion behind in their aggressive wake.*

Maymon gasped and heaved against his captor, reveling in the sensations he was free to indulge in, overwhelmed by the sheer novelty of being able to let his urges and emotions have free-rein in this taboo relationship he desperately desired. Buggery was nothing new to him, but making love to a man was. Being made love to was even more startling and disturbing yet, but he was willing to have the Hunter convince him of the pleasure of it.

Wanting to taking in all the sensations demanding his attention, Maymon consciously registered each one assaulting his body. One large, meaty hand still held his head arched back, the thick fingers of Talos' hand kneading his scalp and entwining the fine strands of his thick hair tightly around them. Talos' chest rubbed over his own, the soft cartilage



nubs running across his broad frame becoming more supple and warmer as their passion grew more intense.

Legs wrapped around Talos' hips, Maymon squirmed against the massive, strong hand supporting his left hip and butt cheek, amazed by the sheer power of the Hunter he could feel through the firm grip. Maymon's scrotum lay on the bed of soft, tubular appendages surrounding Talos' cock and he couldn't resist the urge to shift back and forth on their spiny surfaces, gasping at the tingling buzz of pleasure the action generated in his balls. The buzz traveled to the base of his stiff, straining cock and he began to leak, barely able hold back a climax that sizzled at the root of his shaft as he pictured himself linked to his new, voracious lover.

He reached down to fist his cock, but before his hands were free of Talos' neck, his cock was gripped in a warm massaging caress. As the caress stroked him up and down the length of his rod, a slightly coarse pad rubbed over the leaking tip of his cock as his scrotum was gently kneaded and tugged.

Maymon groaned into Talos' mouth and feverishly prayed for his teetering climax to come crashing down on him when he realized that neither of Talos' hands had moved from their hold on his head and his arse. His eyes flashed open and panicked, he pulled his mouth away from his lover's to glance down between their plastered bodies. Talos eased back and let Maymon watch as the Hunter's snake-like cock continued to curl and uncurl around the pirate's shaft, milking it and stroking it, its full fifteen inches coiled snugly up against Maymon's own seven inches of proud flesh.

"Bloody hell, luv. You are sea serpent."

Maymon's eyes turned wide and his panting mouth hung open as the soft tubular fingers moved over his balls, the tiny suction cup-like tips gripping his sensitive flesh then pulling off to move to a new patch of skin, leaving a burst of pleasure and a fiery tingle behind each time.

Passion and delicious excitement overrode any of Maymon's few remaining inhibitions. He embraced his new lover's special attributes with an open mind and a starving libido. Arching into the firm grip, he squirmed and bucked, driven to near madness by the oh-so-near-but-unobtainable-climax dancing at the edge of his consciousness.

*Details of the Hunt* by Laura Baumbach (MLR Press, 2007)

Don't be afraid to experiment

Don't be afraid to have fun with these scenes. If your characters have a sense of humor or a playful streak, let that side of them show in the bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Kiren, TwoLips Reviews

I love angst and I enjoy BDSM—I can't think of anything hotter than two strong men in a relationship involving trust, control and bondage. Since I'm not a gay male, I don't claim to understand the dynamics of bottoms and tops but love the switch because as a reader, the sex scenes become more creative and unpredictable.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

The most important thing about writing BDSM is respect—respect for the lifestyle and respect for the very real men and women who live it, may the involvement be day by day or as a game played once in a while. In order to show that respect research is vital. We are selling fantasy, of course, but if that fantasy isn't grounded in correct details the readers will know. To that end, writers really need to understand two key points.

The first is the Safe, Sane and Consensual rule of BDSM. Of course, a writer can choose to ignore the rule and make the story all about that; I'm sure it could be a great story, actually.

The other thing to consider is what the exchange of power does within the story and how it affects the way the characters relate to each other. BDSM is all about power and who gives it and who takes it; how the characters deal with that is where the story could possibly be formed. The mechanics of sadomasochistic sex play are important and easily researched; all the tools can be seen online, and it's fairly easy to find first hand accounts of various scenarios. The real understanding, however, is in the power exchange and really knowing the motives of the characters.

In BDSM and D/s relationships the hurt/comfort dynamic can be very important to the story; the power exchange can be imperfect, or the author can create a Dominant in need of support from his or her submissive; there can be many stories, each one wonderful and different from the last.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

*What kind of research do you do to keep your M/M sex scenes realistic and effective?*

A.M. Riley, author of *Eye of Ra*, *Curse of the Giances*, etc.

I've noticed that women who write M/M sex scenes sometimes depict one of their character's in a more passive or 'feminine' role. I try to avoid this, although I have male friends who have assured me that it isn't unusual for traditional top/bottom relationships to exist out there. If I wanted to write traditional relationships, I would. Why write something just like everything else has?

It helps that I have a lot of gay male friends who are happy to discuss their sex lives with me. Heterosexual men I know will tell me about how sex works for them, but I have found that my gay and bi male friends have often given more thought to the entire thing.

Reading gay 'porn' written by established male authors has helped me to understand the male point of view as well. Bob Vickery is one of my favorite authors.

But truthfully I think women have their own way of representing M/M sex that can appeal to both men and women in their own ways. So I don't try to stifle my own voice or make my scenes feel like a man has written them.

As for 'effective', I hope that the sex scene will advance the story, not just be a titillating aside. The way two people interact in such an intimate setting tells the reader a great deal about those characters. I hope every sex scene is an

integral part of the story and never just 'insert tab A in slot B' type stuff.

\* \* \* \*

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.

I have two very close family members who are gay. One of them helps me when I have questions. Of course he tends to use phrases that I wouldn't put into a book, but the general idea gets across. I also have a wonderful man who beta reads for me and he's quick to let me know when I've got something wrong.

\* \* \* \*

James Buchanan, author of *My Brother Coyote, Twice the Cowboy*, etc.

Unless they have some serious emotional hang up, men are rarely reserved during sex. There may be a bunch of stumbling blocks getting to the point where clothes are shed. However, once you're there, all bets are off. The characters might be confused, perhaps, by their emotions. Possibly uncertain of what needs to happen next, if you've got someone inexperienced, but two guys will rarely pause to reflect on what they should or shouldn't be doing once they've decided to fuck.

And while fiction may want straight to anal: mutual masturbation, arm pit licking, head, slick-legging and a good rim job can be more important to the characters. A really committed blow job is often sexier than half-hearted

pounding. I'll write a sex scene, put it in a virtual drawer for a couple of days and then come back and layer more stuff in. In fact I do that with most of my writing, not just the sex.

Get comfortable with the words. Throbbing man poles do not exist. Cocks, dicks and pricks do. Guys also switch. It would be a rare creature indeed to find someone who always took it up the ass and never topped. If a guy won't ever consider bottoming, there better be a good back-story for that load of emotional baggage.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell Purgatory*, etc.

Have sex. Watch porn. Read other M/M stories. I do a lot of surfing on the Internet. Also, when I can, I try to get a guy to read my scenes for a reality check.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

I have a very vivid imagination J Not being born male, I have not had intimate, hands-on research into gay male sexuality, but with the advent of the Internet, who needs that? I don't specifically "research" one aspect of the sex scene—I usually have an idea in mind and work it out to a satisfactory conclusion. Some of these scenes may be sparked by things I've seen in porn movies, magazines, or websites. Then my beta readers step in. Two of them are male, and they help me with the logistics if any changes are needed. But I've been writing gay fiction for almost 10 years now, so I sort of know what fits where without much help

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of *The Vampire Magic* series, etc.

I was very concerned about this when I first started writing M/M. I did several things. I read "The Joy of Gay Sex", among other books. I looked at how established M/M authors were writing their sex scenes. And yes, I watched a lot of gay porn. LOL. But once you learn the basics (what is possible and not possible for a male body to physically do), there's only variants on a theme. Let who they are as people and the context of the plot drive the sex scene ... and how "real" it is boils down to everything that surrounds the mechanics. You can make just about anything seem realistic, if it's properly supported through characterization and plot elements.

\* \* \* \*

Neil Plakcy, author of *Mahu, Mahu Surfer*, etc.

Well, I know something is working if it gives me a physical reaction. I'm not sure I'd get that if I didn't have the right parts. I learned how to write erotica from reading a lot of it and seeing what turned me on and what didn't.

\* \* \* \*

The important thing to remember in M/M fiction that the sex is not simply about sex. It's about *love*.

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## CHAPTER 14: IT'S DIFFERENT FOR GIRLS

### Sex Scene Before and After

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, Publisher MLR Press

Your Adrien books are a terrific example of a great story re-grabbing the reader's attention when you humanized it even more by letting them see the romance and intimacy of the core relationship in the series. It is a perfect example of the genre. You show it's not just sex, it's love. Two intelligent, successful, professional, could-be-your-co-worker guys in love.

\* \* \* \*

Probably the simplest way to demonstrate the difference a detailed and explicit sex scene can make to your story is to offer an example of "before and after."

The excerpt below is the original version of the first time Adrien English and Jake Riordan have sex. Readers waited until book two for this moment:

*"So," he said casually, "You want to fuck?"*

*"Sure," I said.*

But I was less sure when we walked into my bedroom and undressed. For one thing, I knew sex wasn't going to solve anything, but it might change things. For the worse.



Secondly, as I watched Jake unbuckle his belt in a business-like fashion, I remembered that this was guy who liked to do it with whips and chains—and strangers.

If we could have fallen to the kitchen floor, swept away on a tide of passion ... but the lag time of walking to the bedroom, stripping, lying down on the bed ... it gave time to think. To reflect. To pause.

Jake knelt on the bed and slipped his condom on with a little snap like a detective donning latex gloves to examine a crime scene. Not a romantic noise.

I'd had enough to drink that I should have been incapable of rational thought, but for some damn reason, I was still thinking. I felt a little detached, a little distant as Jake bent over me.

The muscles on his arms stood out like ropes, his big hands denting the mattress on either side of me as he balanced himself. His cock looked like a warhead; I felt my eyes going wide. I had waited a long time for this moment though this wasn't exactly the moment I had waited for. Suddenly there seemed to be knees and elbows everywhere.

"Ouch," Jake said.

"Sorry."

He bent forward at the same moment I raised my head, and we banged noses.

"What the hell?" Jake's voice came out muffledly behind his hand.

"Sorry."

"You've done this before, right?"

I don't know why that hit me as funny, but I started to laugh, and Jake pushed back and said exasperatedly, "What the hell is so funny?"

I shook my head.

"You sure know how to break the mood." However he didn't appear to be giving up. His mouth found mine and he kissed me.

Whoopee ty yi yea!

Suddenly it was going to be okay. Better than okay.

I kissed Jake back, tasting the licorice-bite of the whisky on his tongue. He licked my mouth, which was different, sort of playful. My lips parted, anticipating, but he softly bit the side of my neck—and then a little harder. There was a lot of strength and heat in the body poised over mine. He smelled good, like my almond soap, and he tasted good, and he felt very good, his hand between my thighs doing things other men had done, but in his own way.

We realigned ourselves, the mattress squeaking noisily, and I raised my legs over Jake's shoulders. I wasn't expecting much in the way of foreplay, and I didn't get it. Jake pressed into me and I gritted my jaw as my muscles submitted.

"You with me?"

I grunted acknowledgment. Oh yeah, I was with him.

He began to rock against me, and I hung on for the ride of my life: a day at the rodeo and the Fourth of July all rolled into one. Yeeha!

*A Dangerous Thing* by Josh Lanyon (Gay Men's Press, 2002)

It's not bad, exactly. It's clear that they're having sex, who takes what role; there's a bit of humor and a little sensual detail. As far as it goes, it's all right—and I kept most of it for the rewrite.

Here's the revised version:

*"So," he said casually, "You want to fuck?"*

*"Sure," I said.*

But I was less sure when we walked into my bedroom and undressed. For one thing, I knew sex wasn't going to solve anything, but it might change things. For the worse.

As I watched Jake unbuckle his belt in a business-like fashion, I remembered that this was guy who liked to do it with whips and chains—and strangers.

If we could have fallen on the kitchen table, swept away on a tide of passion ... but the lag time of walking to the bedroom, stripping, lying down on the bed ... it gave time to think. To reflect. To pause.

To remember the last time I'd had sex with a guy I didn't know that well. Not exactly a joyride.

It was cold in the room. The light seemed too bright. I crawled onto the bed and wondered what the hell to do next. Had he ever done this without tying someone to the bed? Assuming he even did it in bed. My knowledge of the BDSM scene was sketchy at best—which was kind of the way I wanted to keep it.

Jake knelt on the mattress and slipped his condom on with a snap like a detective donning latex gloves to examine a crime scene. Not a romantic noise.

"Have you got lube?" he asked.

"Uh ... no. I wasn't planning..."

He glanced up and smiled. The smile disarmed me. He looked a little self-conscious. There was a flush across his cheekbones and his eyes were very bright.

I smiled back and he leaned forward and kissed me. The kiss reassured. His mouth was warm and already tasted familiar.

"I like kissing you," he said softly. "I didn't think I would. But I do."

"Good," I said. "I like kissing you too."

We kissed again. I tasted the licorice-bite of the whisky on his tongue.

He kissed harder and said against my mouth, "I want to fuck you so bad."

I nodded.

"Lie back."

I stretched out. I wasn't exactly sexually active these days but I wasn't a virgin either. I knew what to expect and whatever Jake's range of experience, I figured it would be okay. Probably not great for him, without all his little toys and costumes, and maybe not great for me either since he probably was not much into giving pleasure that didn't involve the release of some serious endorphins. I'd do my best to make sure he enjoyed himself; I wanted him to see that it could be good without the improper use of kitchen utensils.

He touched my face. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Of course." Maybe a little puzzled that he seemed unsure about it.

I ran a light hand over the hard planes of his chest. Flicked one flat brown nipple with my thumbnail. He swallowed hard and I smiled. Teased the other nipple into a hard point.

He sucked in a breath, let it out slowly.

I'd had enough to drink that I should have been incapable of rational thought, but for some damn reason, the wheels were still turning. Way too fast. Spinning, in fact. I felt detached, a little distant as he bent over me, big hands denting the mattress, the muscles on his arms standing out like ropes. His cock looked like a warhead.

I remembered the last time—and flinched at the sudden stark vision of all that strength and frustration slamming into me. I stared up into his hard face. He was watching me closely. My stomach knotted with anxiety.

But that other time hadn't been Jake. That didn't have anything to do with ... us. I wanted Jake. I did want him. And if I let myself think about that other time I was giving the memory power. And I'd been waiting for this moment for way too long.

He said, "What if I—"

"Maybe if I—"

Suddenly there seemed to be knees and elbows everywhere.

"Ouch," Jake said.

"Sorry."

He bent forward at the same moment I raised my head, and we banged noses.

"What the hell?" His voice came out muffled behind his hand.

"Sorry."

"You've done this before, right?"

I don't know why that hit me as funny, but I started to laugh, and Jake pushed back and said exasperatedly, "What the hell is so funny?"

I shook my head.

"You sure know how to break the mood." However he didn't appear to be giving up. His mouth found mine and he kissed me again, insistently. I felt myself quieting, giving into the unexpected tenderness.

He drew back, licked my mouth, which was different, sort of playful. My lips parted, anticipating, but he softly bit the side of my neck—then harder.

I bit back a yelp.

"Going to behave?" His eyes were amused.

I said in my best hypnotic-subject voice, "Yeees ... Maaaster."

He nuzzled the bite mark and I shivered.

There was a lot of strength and heat in the body poised over mine. He smelled good, like my almond soap, and he tasted good, and he felt very good, his hand slowly stroking my belly.

I said huskily, "I'm having trouble believing this is you."

He reached across to the nightstand with his free hand and picked up my sunscreen. "Nah," he said. "You knew this was going to happen. Like I did. You called it right. I came after you. Every step of the way."

He squirted a glop of sunscreen on his fingers and warmed it. I bent my knees, opening wide for him. Focused on

relaxing my muscles. Jake's fingers slipped along my crack, slick and silky. I'd wondered what those long sensitive fingers would feel like and now one of them was pressing against my hole.

I bit my lip, trying to keep it quiet, trying not to scare him away.

He pushed in. Just a fingertip. "You're so tight," he murmured.

He pulled out. Dipped in, dipped out. Pushed further in. That friction felt so good. I moaned. I couldn't help it.

"Yeah," he said with slow satisfaction. "You need it bad. Worse than I do."

I gasped, "Is it a competition? What do I win?"

"Shhh. Turn off for a few seconds, Adrien."

"A few seconds? Is that all it's—" I caught my breath as his finger moved knowledgeably, unerringly.

"There's the off button," he murmured.

I pushed back hard on his hand. Not like I'd never felt this before, and yet somehow I'd never felt it quite so intensely. It was like he was reaching right into me, stretching me open, finding every little secret place, stroking, smoothing, soothing the naked underbelly of need. I wanted to talk myself away from feeling too much, too keenly, but all that came out was a something unnervingly like a whimper.

So much for my theory on his lack of expertise. It was going to be okay. I was going to be more than okay.

"Baby, that little sound you made..." He stroked with two fingers. "What about this? Is this good too?"

Where had I got the idea he might not be experienced at this? He was in total control, perfectly gauging my responses and expertly bringing me to the edge with each electric—and deliberate—stroke across the gland.

No way was that beginner's luck.

The pressure built unbearably. My eyes flew open. "I-I think I'm going to come."

"You think?" His eyes were crinkled at the corner, like he was laughing inside.

"But..." It's way too soon. I let the half-formed protest go. Too hard to form thoughts, let alone words. I strained against his hand, aching for more, trying to capture that maddening touch, draw it deeper into my body, ease that screaming tension.

"Yeah, that's right. I've got you. Just let go..."

The wildness welled up inside me and began to pump hard, spilling through my body, sizzling along nerve endings, shooting out in creamy plumes. A half-sob of relief tore out of my throat.

"Whoa," Jake murmured eons later. He traced some design in the sticky wet splash on my abdomen. I opened my eyes, blinked at him. He was smiling, looking as relaxed as I felt.

I managed a grin. He leaned over me, kissed me again, said quietly, "Yeah, I like that."

I ran a hand over the top of his head, feeling the crisp texture of his cropped hair. It was the first time in our friendship I felt free to look my fill: the hard line of his cheek and jaw at odds with the sensual fullness of his mouth, the knowing gleam of his hazel eyes. My breathing had slowed



back down, my heart raced happily along like the start of summer vacation. "You'll like the next bit even more."

He was still smiling. "There's no rush."

"Speak for yourself," I said. I was tired, but it was a good tired. Loose and light. I sat up, but he pushed me back gently.

"On your back. I want to watch your face." He met my eyes. "And you'll like the ... stimulation."

We realigned ourselves, the mattress squeaking noisily, and I raised my legs over Jake's shoulders, leaving myself exposed and vulnerable, but I wasn't worried now. His warm hands slid over my ass, spreading me wider. His cock rested against my wet slick hole. Holding my gaze, he pushed in. "Christ, that's sweet."

I gritted my jaw, forced my muscles to submit.

He paused. Even stretched and prepped, my body needed a chance to adjust; he was a big man.

"Say my name," he urged.

"Jake," I said huskily.

Something lit in his eyes. He shoved the rest of the way in. I gasped, sphincter muscle spasming around his stiffness.

"Christ, you feel good. Like a glove." He thrust against me, just once like he couldn't help himself.

I panted, writhed a little, still trying to accommodate him. Making room for him in my head and in my body.

His hands covered my chest, tugging the nipples. I've never particularly got off on having my breast touched, but this felt weirdly good. I rubbed against his palm. He lowered

himself, kissed me, hotly, hungrily, pushing his tongue in. I moaned into his mouth, wanting more, needing more.

His mouth ground down on mine, his fingers pinched my nipples. So much sensation distracting me from the massive cock crammed in my ass.

"What are you feeling?" Jake's breath was warm against my face, my bruised lips tingled. "Tell me what it feels like with me inside you." His hips thrust against me again.

What did it feel like? My legs felt weak and trembly, my belly soft and liquid; my channel felt scraped and burned with satisfying friction. It felt like invasion—the invasion that comes with a liberating army. I felt my face quiver with that mix of pain and pleasure, lifted my lashes. He was staring into my eyes.

Something snapped inside me, relented, freed itself. I began to move, contracting my muscles around him, trying to arch up against him. My fierce response triggered him. He made some exclamation, began to move, hips pounding against my ass, impaling me with each thrust. The relief was that I could be rough back; I could let go and take what I needed too.

The mattress springs squeaked, the wooden frame creaked. Jake's hands closed on my hips. He redirected his efforts, thrust harder, deeper and hit the spot that sent exquisite sensation crackling through me. I cried out. Jake was grunting fiercely in time to the bang of the headboard against the wall. I gripped hard and felt him stiffen.

"Oh, baby," he groaned. His body went rigid, his face twisting in distressed delight. I felt him come hard, hot seed shooting into me.

Startled, I realized that I was coming too. Twice in one evening. It had been a long time since that happened.

"Adrien...." His voice shook. His arms slid under me, gathering me against him. I wrapped my arms around him, and we rocked together while our bodies played out, cocooned in warm and sticky closeness.

*A Dangerous Thing* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

The obvious difference, besides about 1500 words, is the fact that the reedited scene is rich in sensual details and emotional subtext. We're getting a lot more backstory, a lot more of Adrien's thoughts and Jake's reactions. There is no change as far as plot or theme go, but the revised scene makes a world of difference to our understanding of the characters—in particular the difficult and complex character of Jake.

Even I have to admit that the revised scene was more satisfying to write.

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## CHAPTER 15: IT'S A MAN'S, MAN'S, MAN'S WORLD

### Setting

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I'd like to see more complex characters with lives outside of their M/M relationship. I'd also like to see more about how gay characters have to interact in the larger world. The real challenges of a gay couple and the obstacles they have to overcome make for excellent fictional conflict and would serve to do a lot of teaching to the readers about the problems a gay couple deals with, many times on an everyday basis.

\* \* \* \*

One element frequently glossed over or ignored in M/M fiction is setting. Setting—where and when your stories take place—is one of those subtle components that can take a story from good to great.

Setting includes everything from the country where you've staged your story, to the sofa your characters tumble off the first time they make love. Setting is the weather, the time of day, the temperature, the wallpaper, the terrain. It's important for a lot of reasons, not least because setting directly determines the mood and atmosphere of your story.

To be effective, setting has to *feel* realistic, regardless of whether the story takes place in a Denny's on Topanga

Canyon Blvd., a goth club in New York, or an ice cavern on some distant planet in the year 3001.

And the way you achieve realism is by tapping into the five senses—which is simply another way of writing what you know.

No, you've never been on an ice cavern on a distant planet (and thank God for that because sure as hell, no matter how carefully you researched it you'd have some reader from outer space contacting you to tell you the cavern was torn down in '66 to make way for a Bank of America), but chances are you *have* been in a cave or in the snow. And you can use what you know about the way caves smell and the way snow feels for your alien setting.

Too often setting consists of a catalog of meaningless detail. The moon was shining brightly, the lawn was a manicured square of green, the room was large and sunny with flowered wallpaper, the wind was gusting leaves, blah, blah, blah.

Not that there's anything wrong with all that, but your descriptions have to be more than a recitation of the facts as you see them. And that's the key thing right there. Most setting revolves around visual cues of what the author is allowing the POV character to see.

There's nothing wrong with that. Humans—male humans in particular—are visual creatures.

But don't describe everything, and limit what you do describe to a few *telling* details.

*Sitting on the tree-shaded patio of the Coral Beach Cantina, I ordered a micro brew and nachos. The juke box*

*was playing "Boys of Summer" by Don Henley, and I was counting the disproportionate number of blonds, both male and female, filling the seats around me, when Steve dropped into the chair across the table.*

*The Dark Horse* by Josh Lanyon (Loose Id, 2007)

Stay in character as you describe the scene. What would your character be most likely to notice? *The description you give us is actually your POV character's commentary on the scene.* So what would be important or significant to the character?

Use all five senses to describe your scenes—but (as always) think quality not quantity. Stick with the essentials. Readers don't need to know what the POV characters sees, smells, hears, tastes and touches in every scene. Decide what's most important for a particular scene, and give us that. For contemporary fiction, usually a sentence or two will be sufficient.

Setting grounds your stories—quite literally. A vivid, well-drawn setting pulls your reader right into the moment with your characters.

*I stepped outside my apartment, and locked the door. The evening air was mild, filled with the hum of the pool generator and air conditioners. The lights were on in the pool, the solar-powered tiki torches flickering in the twilight. I could smell the jasmine in the air—and a hint of tobacco smoke.*

*Partners in Crime: Boy Meets Body: Cards on the Table* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

Below we get exposition without sensory detail, but the choices of what we see through Nathan Doyle's point of view

put us in historical context—and I think contribute to the mood of the story as well as establishing setting.

*He expected to be followed, and although he could see no sign of a tail, he took it for granted that he was shadowed. It didn't present an immediate problem. Stopping for breakfast at a diner, he treated himself to eggs and bacon, not because he was hungry but because he knew he had to keep his energy up. He paid with cash and his red stamp coupons—practically the first he'd used since getting back—and then had a cup of real coffee, watching through the Christmas-painted windows as a phalanx of P-38 Lightnings headed out toward the ocean.*

*Partners in Crime: I'll Be Dead For Christmas: Snowball in Hell* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

If you're a control freak like me, it's tempting to describe everything down to the knobs on the kitchen cupboards and the hooks on the bathroom door. Resist. Readers actually enjoy filling in some of the blanks. That's part of the pleasure of reading, being allowed to use one's own imagination.

Give the reader enough precise detail to put her in the moment—then let her do the rest.

\* \* \* \*

K.M. Frontain, editor

Authors should give the world to their readers. Plots driven by character thought processes make abysmal reading material. Many submissions I see, not just for m/m fiction, rely on thought processes, character think—or internals, as some call it, flunk.

Nothing worse than reading through the gray haze of nowhere such characters exist in. Give the reader the world. A character must feel real. To feel real, he must seem to exist. Where does he exist? In a world. Make the world real before you make a character's thoughts real, and the reader lives the story with character ... in vivid color.

\* \* \* \*

It helps to visualize the scene. Not just the real estate, but the mapping out of your characters movements within the framework of the scene.

Ask yourself some basic questions:

*Where exactly does this scene take place?*

*Where are the characters standing in relation to each other?*

When and why do the characters move? (Take note of body language.)

*Is anything happening in the background?*

Keep track of the stage props. If your character picks up a glass or pulls a gun, keep track of what he does with it.

*I checked out the refrigerator, opened a few cupboards, pretended he wasn't there, but after a few minutes his silence sort of got to me. I leaned against the counter, waiting for the microwave to melt the block of pork chops, "So are you on vacation or something?"*

*Nothing.*

He was an alien life form and I was wasting my time trying to communicate.

The microwave bell rang and I popped open the door.



"Or something." Devlin spoke curtly from behind me. To my surprise, after another long pause he said, "How did you get involved in the ghost hunting racket?"

*I searched the spice rack, selected cumin seeds, black peppercorns, coriander and sea salt. "It's more of a hobby than a business," I said. "I mostly teach history."*

"Ghost of a Chance" by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

You can also use setting to establish and affirm character. There's some truth to that old saying about a man's home being his castle. Just as the clothes your character wears should say something about him, so should his domicile.

*Jack closed the door and I looked around curiously. Tidy as a monk's cell. A stark black and white print of the desert hung over the fake fireplace. There were a few pieces of generic guy furniture, a number of paperbacks—mostly non-fiction and mostly true crime—on a low bookshelf. Nothing had changed. Jack had changed, that was all.*

*Partners in Crime: Boy Meets Body: Cards on the Table* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

Remember, ideally we learn something about the POV character through what he chooses to notice—whether the POV is first person or third—and we learn something about the character who belongs to the place or setting being described.

*Doyle lived in an apartment in one of the old original Victorian houses on Olive Street.*

*Matt and Jonesy identified themselves, and the apartment manager led them upstairs into a chilly room with large bay windows overlooking what must have once been a lovely*

*garden. There was an unmade pull-down bed and a table with a typewriter—a half-full bottle of Teacher's blended Scotch whisky beside it.*

There were no pictures and no religious icons. There was a tall bookshelf, mostly empty except for a couple of Christmas cards, a parcel wrapped in reindeer paper, and several volumes on travel and history and archeology. There was a copy of the dialogs of Plato, and a couple of books about Thomas Aquinas.

You could tell a lot about a man by what he chose to read, in Matt's opinion. He liked a good western himself, but it was a long time since he'd read any.

There were more books stacked on the table, a couple of medical books, and books on psychology. A book lying next to the bed bore the title *The Homosexual Neurosis*.

*Partners in Crime: I'll Be Dead For Christmas: Snowball in Hell* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

And so should the domicile of every other character tell us about that character. Whether your secondary and supporting cast lives on a horse ranch in the outback or a castle in Transylvania, let the scene and setting tell us about more than square footage and collectibles.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

If the story is well told, I'll read any plot again and again. That said, I do get tired of vampire themes where the vampires have this huge society set up like the mafia. I can't

see that. Living and working among us in secret I can deal with, but a huge population of them all killing each other and taking humans over the world undetected, I can't believe in this day and age. If I can't believe the setup, I can't believe the story. Of course, I'm a vampire fan.

\* \* \* \*

Remember that your setting takes place within a larger setting or context—a world.

Chances are, unless you really are writing what you know and only what you know, you're going to have to do a certain amount of research. Maybe your story takes place within the world of horse racing or organized crime or the occult. Unless you're a jockey or a mob boss or a witch, you're likely going to need to do a bit of research.

The fact is, if you can get the little things right, the reader will be a lot more likely to swallow the big things—like a love story between the son of a yakuza mob boss and the boss's first lieutenant, or an underground vampire subculture, or a ghostly romance.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

The amount of research I do is directly related to how important a role the subject plays in the story—which is a very confusing way of saying "not much and almost entirely online". I did do a great deal of research with Jodi Payne for the *Deviations* series. I read a lot, I asked questions of people

I met who were in the scene, and I spent hours with Jodi online following links and sharing information. BDSM and D/s were something that we clearly had to know a lot about for our story to work at all.

However, I know nothing about ranches, I have never ridden a horse without being led, and the cows I've met have all been dairy cows and not beef cattle. If I don't know something I ask people who do know these things, and I'm lucky enough to know people who understand the way a ranch works. It really helps to have people who are not scared to point out mistakes read over my work—and it really helps to go looking for that kind of a beta reader.

Also, I've never been on a space ship of any kind. Yet.

\* \* \* \*

By their very nature, certain genre stories require more research than others. A contemporary crime story may require you to learn something about forensics, police procedure and ... maybe archeology, or Broadway theater, or wine fraud, whereas historical fiction is going to require study on everything from period costume to the slang of the era. The research involved in historicals is extensive and intensive. Odds are good that you won't get through a single page without having to double-check some fact. Don't kid yourself that because you're writing sexy romance novels you don't have to get it right. You do.

The novella *Snowball in Hell* is set in 1943 Los Angeles. The story takes place during World War II. One of my protags is a newspaper reporter just back from the European Theater;

the other is a LAPD detective. While I was able to do a little Internet research on the war and Los Angeles in the '40s, I needed to get more in-depth info on attitudes and treatment of gays, as well as police procedure and Los Angeles back then. I ordered a couple of books actually published in the '40s from the Advanced Book Exchange ([www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)) including *Turn Off the Sunshine: Tales of Los Angeles on the Wrong Side of the Tracks* by Timothy C. Turner, *The Homosexual Neurosis* by Dr. William Stekel, *Going Places In and Near Los Angeles* by Margaret Gilbert Mackey, and *Homicide Investigation: Pratical Information for Coroners, Police Officers, and Other Investigators* by LeMoyn Snyder. I referred to *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* by Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons. I read a bunch of pulp fiction from the 1940s including Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, and I watched many hours of film noir. I bought several old copies of *Esquire* from the 1940s.

Having spent time and money researching this period, I knew I would almost certainly set other stories within the same world. To my unexpected pleasure, by the time I finished the novella I knew I wanted to do many more stories with these particular characters.

For contemporary settings there are lots of good resources including travel brochures, magazines (old and new), and catalogs. Films and documentaries can be useful.

Fantasy, science fiction, and paranormal stories require world-building, and world building requires hitting the books and pounding the cyber streets. Studying other cultures and

histories is going to provide a prime resource for these kinds of stories.

\* \* \* \*

*What kind of research do you do for the setting or location for your stories?*

Sarah Black, author *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

I do quite a bit, mostly to get me in the mood for the story, and so when I'm ready to start writing, I don't have to stop and look things up. I usually spend about a week reading and researching the setting. I have an idea to start what the setting will be, including place, the year, the season—I'm thinking about a story set in Vietnam right now, and I'm looking at maps on the Internet, photos, so I know what it looks like, and am reading several memoirs by people who served in Vietnam during 1968, the year the story will be set. I've found memoirs to be the best research, especially by non-writers, some of whom are so crystal clear and honest about how things felt. The Internet has such wonderful resources in all media. When I was writing the murder mystery called "Death of a Blues Angel," I listened to blues music on Youtube, watched the musicians play, and then checked out more of their music from the library. I really have a thing for food, too, and I rarely write anything that doesn't have food in it—so I will cook whatever the characters are cooking or eating, so the house smells the same. I've been eating *mole* all week, because I was playing with *mole* recipes for a story. For me, the music and the food go a long way to putting me *in* the setting, so when I start writing, I'm

already there, with the characters. I think the sensory details really make the setting come alive—weather, smells, colors, music, but I use them to put myself in the setting, so the writing really flows—it's like hearing a character's voice, when you get the setting that way.

I also like it when the setting suggests conflict. A story set in Mississippi in 1966 is a setting that will suggest racial conflict, rural poverty, and ... the blues! A story set in Vietnam in 1968—the Tet offensive, POWs—our pilots in prison in Hanoi, being tortured, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, war protests, Chicago and Kent State, moon landing, and the music—Buffalo Springfield, The Stones, the Animals, Janis Joplin, Blood Sweat and Tears. This setting is so rich with conflict I'm going to have a hard time figuring out which ones to use!

\* \* \* \*

Laney Cairo, author of *Fand*, *Undercover Blues*, etc.

For me, the primary "research" is developing a sense of place in my own life. Forming emotional attachments to the settings around me helps to recreate that in my fiction.

*Fand* is the only novel of mine with a setting I'm not familiar with. For *Fand*, I spent far too much time studying maps and locations, and had a tame research assistant on the ground, who did things like phone Griffith Park and ask what kind of patrol vehicles their rangers used. It helped that *Fand* is an urban fantasy, and is therefore set in an imaginary Los Angeles, but I'm not intending to ever set a novel somewhere I don't know again.

Apart from *Fand*, all my settings I've either experienced directly, or they're entirely imagined places. Sometimes journeys lead directly to stories, as with "Temporary Absentee", which I partly wrote in my head while on a train from Milan to Paris. Sometimes places linger, appearing years later in stories.

I'm deeply attached to some cities, and keep revisiting them fictionally; Melbourne, Sydney, London, Amsterdam. "Marginalia", which is notionally set in a dystopic near-future Sydney, is heavily based on a visit to Buenos Aires in 2004.

\* \* \* \*

*He should never have come back here. Clayton had walked outside his mother's tiny, two-bedroom house, the cinder blocks the same yellow-tan as the sand, stared at the trash blowing down the empty street. Dust swirled in the hot air, coating everything with a yellow haze. The houses had been built by the BIA back in the sixties, concrete block houses built close together so they could share utilities. When the old aluminum-clad windows fell out, they were replaced with plywood or plastic or miscellaneous pieces of window glass shimmed up to fit. The roofs were dotted with tires. The tires helped hold the shingles on when the wind was strong.*

*Border Roads* by Sarah Black (Loose Id, 2007)

\* \* \* \*

*What elements do you consider essential for setting up a scene?*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.



For me, I need to know the mood and feel of a scene first, because that will dictate the language. If the scene is going to be sorrowful, for example, or something is going to go badly wrong, I can use language to put some of that mood across, even before the action or dialogue that suggests something going wrong. And going into the scene you need to know the conflict that is going to be worked on—not to forget, when the conflict is over, the story is over. So when the scene ends, you need to have the conflict pointing to the next scene.

\* \* \* \*

Laney Cairo, author of *Fand*, *Undercover Blues*, etc.

Some years ago I attended a master class given by James Allen Gardner, ostensibly on pacing action scenes, and what I learnt there has formed the core of the writing process for me, so a tip of the hat to James.

Integral to setting up a scene is being able to experience through the filter of the viewpoint character. I need to be inside that character's head. What are they sensing? What does it mean to them? What happens during the scene that changes them?

\* \* \* \*

*He leaned in the doorway to the dining room, drying his hands on the linen towel tucked in the waistband of his cords. Jacob was sitting in the corner, his cello between his knees, bare feet, and he was playing with his head bent over the instrument. His lashes were dark against his cheeks. Peter felt his heart do a slow stumble in his chest, at the beauty of the*

*morning, the beauty of the music, happiness moving like a gentle wind through his hotel.*

*Murder at the Heartbreak Hotel* by Sarah Black (MLR Press, 2007)

\* \* \* \*

*How much sensory detail—and of what kind—do you think necessary for creating believable settings/locations? Do some scenes require more detail than others?*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

The scenes that have a lot of fast paced action or brilliant dialogue may not need as much sensory detail, but I love feeling in the story, feeling like I'm right there, so I tend to use a lot—smells and music, especially, feel, but vision not so much—I'm trying to do more of this. I think character's voice is critical, and setting also has a voice that you can't break. If your landscape, for instance, is threatening and dangerous and slightly sinister, it needs to retain a bit of that even when the sun is shining and your character is thinking everything is okay.

\* \* \* \*

Laney Cairo, author of *Fand*, *Undercover Blues*, etc.

The amount of sensory detail is driven by the character and the technical requirements of the genre I'm writing. Erotic scenes need to be written with smell, taste and touch included, since erotica that is sight and sound based reads as though the writer has only ever watched porn movies, instead of actually having sex themselves.

I'm a lapsed landscape painter. I was never very good at it, and it's harder to paint for a living than it is to write for a living, but the process of learning to see what is actually there, rather than what I thought should be there, has shaped how I describe settings.

\* \* \* \*

*The unsealed road lurched over a sand dune, glaring white sand and clumps of scrub, and the ocean was in front of them, pristine green and turquoise out to the horizon, huge breakers rolling in, perfect curls of blue, breaking into dense white foam, the sky above absolutely cloudless, the sun bleaching the sky white.*

*Surfing Cactus Break* by Laney Cairo (Laneycairo.com)

\* \* \* \*

*What are your thoughts on creating mood or atmosphere within a story? How necessary is mood or atmosphere in your opinion?*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

I like mood, because we can really play around with the language, use our best word play. My primary interest is character, to tell you the truth, and I just think of the setting as another character, but mood is fun. I depend on weather too much for mood, though. Probably like everything, the fresher images and the more carefully thought out ideas will have the strongest impact. A strong contrast between the character's mood and the weather, for example, makes each stand out more strongly. It would be more interesting to have

a sad character looking out to brilliant sunshine and laughing children, rather than having a character who is feeling sad staring out at a rain-streaked window and a gray sky.

\* \* \* \*

Colin Dunne, author of *Murder in Pastel*, etc.

I think mood and atmosphere are part of what makes a book memorable. Certain books give you a certain feeling—the way fragrance triggers memory. *Murder in Pastel* is set in an art colony on the northern California coast. I tried hard to capture the damp and the chill of the coastal town through the use of sensory detail. Also, although the main character is a writer, he's the son of a famous painter, and he's grown up in the art world, so I had him often likening the scenes before him to works of art.

\* \* \* \*

*The yellow sun blazed overhead, like a Van Gogh star.  
Pewter-edged clouds shape-shifted across empty blue canvas.  
The grassy hills rippled beneath the undulating strokes of an  
invisible paintbrush. The day shimmered with life and energy,  
and it was hard to accept that Brett was gone forever. That  
Brett was now just a memory.*

*Murder in Pastel* by Colin Dunne (Torquere Press, 2007)

\* \* \* \*

*Any thoughts about creating a masculine environment?*  
Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

Hmmm. I never considered a masculine environment, to tell you the truth, but I'm fairly nonconformist, so I don't know. I think what women should remember about men is that each character is individual and very different, but testosterone is a powerful hormone! I suspect some men have thoughts of punching other guys in the face on a fairly regular basis. I suspect all men crave attention. I suspect many men have the urge to protect people and take care of the people they are responsible for. But how gender-specific are these qualities?

The thing is, though, writers are going to write about the kind of men who are interesting to them. Not saying they want to take them home and keep them, but I write about guys I would probably like, even when I feel exasperated with them, and who have some of my interests. I wouldn't write a character, for instance, who was deeply into fashion, or who cared a lot about shoes. I've known guys who were really into those things, but I just don't share their interests, so it would be hard for me to sustain an empathetic interest in the character. But I never thought of environments as being masculine or feminine.

\* \* \* \*

Laney Cairo, author of *Fand*, *Undercover Blues*, etc.

First up, I believe that there are minimal core differences between men and women; we're far more alike than we are different, we're all humans. The differences are a result of socialization, and that's a process the writer can engage with. I can speculate that love feels the same to a male character

as it does to me, and I can reconstruct how the cultural indoctrination of gender affects how my male character expresses that love.

My male characters rarely make overt declarations of love, but love shapes their actions, showing that love to both the other characters and the reader. I may be writing romance, but that doesn't mean I'm limited by the conventions of the genre.

In my novel *One Way Street*, Dale proposes to his lover, Shane:

Dale stopped and looked at Shane, then at himself. "I'm not sure that mud counts as romantic, but I was wondering if you'd like to regularise this."

"Regularise?" Shane asked, looking puzzled and amused.

"You know, make it legal," Dale said. "Your lawyer and my lawyer draw up contracts, then we wander down to the registry office and take the limited legal steps available to us to formalise the relationship."

*One Way Street* by Laney Cairo (Torquere Press, 2008)

No flowery declarations there, not when they're covered in muck from playing footy, but the sentiment is from the character's heart.

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## **CHAPTER 16: IT'S NOT JUST A JOB; IT'S AN ADVENTURE**

Writing a Series, etc.

\* \* \* \*

Kiren, TwoLips Reviews

There has definitely been a change in the quantity of books and I would say that in order to meet the challenge of the competition, the quality has increased as well. What I find remarkable is the number of authors that are trying their hand at M/M since the market is so hot—some quite successful and others you can tell are not doing their "homework."

\* \* \* \*

A skilled and disciplined writer can pretty much write anything. It's like training to a certain level. Once your muscles are strong and flexible enough, you can rely on them to carry you the distance. That doesn't mean everything you write will be accepted, but the passes will be based almost strictly on the needs of a publishing house versus your writing ability.

In the early part of your writing career, that's not the case. Most of the rejections you receive will be based on execution.

Most beginning writers fail to believe this. Especially if they've had a few successes. And of course, human nature

being what it is, the temptation is always there to think that rejection is based on outside circumstances ... like the willful blindness of New York publishers. Who wants to think he or she's just not ... good enough? Especially when you look at some of what *does* get published.

Believe me, I've heard it all. In fact, I'm the one who said a lot of it. I know all about rejection. I've been writing since I was sixteen and its only the past two, maybe three years that I would consider my skill to have reached the level that I would call myself a *good* writer.

Now part of that is because it takes a certain amount of living before you have anything useful or wise to say in your writing. But part of it simply is it takes a hell of a lot of writing and reading—and more writing—to develop whatever is the literary equivalent of an ear for music.

True, you don't have to be a brilliant writer to sell M/M stories. You don't need to be subtle or sensitive. You can have a successful publishing career based on nothing more than a craftsman-like approach. Hell, you can probably be successful with a technician's approach—assuming you're a good enough technician and you've got a thesaurus handy.

If you're just in it for the money, well, there's money to be had. Not riches, mind you, but this is a lucrative corner of publishing right now, which means that all kinds of writers who generally have zero interest in M/M fiction, will try to cash in.

That isn't wrong. It's logical. We're all trying to survive; we all have to earn a living; and we're all competing for publishers and readers. But the reality is, with so many



quality writers and manuscripts to choose from, publishers become increasingly selective. Which is actually a good thing, unless you were only getting published because the original demand for M/M stories was so great.

The other thing that happens is the old publishing paradigm of supply and demand. Publishers see that there is an urgent demand for M/M fiction, and pretty soon the market is flooded with inferior stories and writing. Readers tire of the novelty, the demand wanes, and the supply of backlogged manuscripts exceeds the needs of the market.

I'm not trying to discourage you; I'm explaining why you need to constantly strive to improve your writing—even if you're getting published now. And if you're trying to break into a competitive market, you have to be at the peak of your abilities, not kid yourself that because some so-so books get published, you can succeed merely by showing up.

Some people have a knack for writing, just as some people are natural athletes or are born with perfect pitch. Those folks have a natural edge. But every element of writing that we've discussed thus far is something that you can control. You can learn to create stronger characters and complex plots. You can heighten sexual tension, tighten pacing, and bolster the thematic elements of your work. If you don't have a sense of humor, you can still write focused and snappy dialogue. If you don't have a lot of imagination, you can still come up with commercial and interesting story hooks.

The only thing that really can't be taught is heart. If you don't genuinely enjoy M/M or GLBT fiction, if you're only doing this for money, there's no faking it. Your stories will

lack that emotional center that means the difference between an okay book and a book readers love. If you write books that readers love, they'll buy everything you write, and even when you turn out the occasional clunker, the odds are good that they'll forgive you and keep on buying your work.

Even more important than writing what you know is writing what you *love*.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I think it shows in the writing when something isn't someone's genre. Not that there aren't some writers who have been successful with it, but the vast majority fail if they are just in it to cash in on the popularity. They fail because they change their character's name to a masculine noun but not anything else about them. They don't successfully write two men in a relationship. They don't recognize the differences in the sexual needs or the reactions of men. It's not the same as a heterosexual couple with the tab and slot names changed. The emotion of love is the same, yes, the desires and physical want the same, but men act and react differently with other men. I don't mean they don't want or like romance, either; they do. It's a complex dynamic that not everyone grasps. And if M/M isn't a genre that calls you to it for itself, because that's what you have to write, the writer usually fails to write it convincingly. Readers will know, especially the male ones.

\* \* \* \*

Oh yeah, *them*.

There's a reason not too many men are involved in fan fiction, and it's partly the same reason that most gay male readers have yet to be won over to M/M literature. Despite the hot sex and the imaginative plots, most of the writing is just too ... feminine. The characters, the dialogue, the attitudes are female-centric. That's not a bad thing—the M/M audience *is* mostly female at this time—but if you're interested in broadening your appeal, in expanding your readership to include the other half of the species, you'll work to make your male characters a little more realistic, a little less of a strictly feminine fantasy.

Occasionally I read an M/M story either so sappy or so planar—the characters either emasculated or too testosterone-bound to feel anything—that I wonder whether the writer actually ever met a man she didn't hate. If you don't like men or writing about men, your readership is going to be limited—and you're not going to have a lot of fun. And since the money is not *that* good....

Writing is hard work. Don't kid yourself. If you're going to write the kind of thing you don't enjoy, you might as well keep the day job.

I'm not a fan of creative writing exercises. If you're going to do character studies and plot arcs, do them for stories that you plan on writing and selling. Invest time in your writing, but invest wisely.

The best advice I can give you is to write and read a lot. Constantly, in fact. Read in this genre—yes—but read outside

as well. Push yourself all the time to write outside your comfort level. Try devising different kinds of characters, try constructing more complex plots. Don't settle for the first ideas that come to you, keep working them, keep refining. Your first draft is *not* good enough. I don't care what your friends tell you.

*What's my motivation?*

I mean, besides filthy lucre. Even now, when having a roof over my head and food in the microwave depends on my writing every day—writing publishable-quality deadline-driven prose *every day*—I still have days when I feel ... unmotivated.

*When it is hard as hell to crank out the words.*

At some point in every project, I suddenly run out of steam. I start wondering what I liked about this idea to begin with, the writing seems stiff and clunky (even as I remind myself that I write a very ugly first draft). The characters feel unknowable and removed. I've learned the hard way that this means absolutely nothing. It's totally me, and nothing to do with the work at all. I know this because I've gone back months and years later to take a look at those half-starts, and without fail, they're all as strong as anything I went ahead and finished. In fact, many of them I *have* gone ahead and finally finished.

*Finish your first draft.*

If the idea was worth starting, it's worth finishing. This is assuming that you took a few minutes to think through the initial idea and jot down a rough outline so that you knew before you started that you had enough plot to carry you the

distance. Don't fall into the bad habit of starting and abandoning projects for new and better ideas. The odds are good that your new idea isn't any better than the old idea.

It's kind of like falling in love. The new idea is full of romantic promise. It's an attractive unknown. You haven't had time to see its faults, its flaws. You haven't seen it drunk off its ass or snoring with its mouth open. It hasn't stuck its tongue in your ear when you're trying to sleep, or wrestled you for the remote control. But after you've spent some time with the new idea—putting in the work required of an actual *relationship*—you start to see that it has its flaws too, and its socks are just as smelly when strewn across the living room floor as the old idea's socks were.

Finish the first draft. Write all the way through to the end, skipping over the rough parts, the parts that just won't come, the parts that you hate, just write 'til you get to the end. That's the first and most important step.

Write every day. As near as possible. If you can't manage to write, then edit and revise, do research—or work on another project. I always have several projects going at once, so even if I get a little bored or feel like I need distance from one manuscript, I keep my momentum going. A writing career isn't about one book; it's about consistently producing quality stories that readers can't wait to read. You have to take the long range view when it comes to your writing career.

Set goals and stick to them. If the plan is to finish a book by the end of the year, figure out how many words a day you need to write in order for that to happen, then take a look at

your calendar and figure out how you're going to make that work.

It's not hard for me to stay motivated. My financial survival depends on it. But even when it didn't ... writing is my passion. I love it—even when I hate it. It's what I do. It's what I am. I am a writer. You're not a writer if you don't write.

Remind yourself of that when the going gets hard—remind yourself that writing two hundred and fifty or whatever words a day isn't a punishment, it's what you *want* to do.

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### *Working through Writer's Block*

Adrianna Dane, author of *Mariposa Soul*, *The Seductive Tale*, etc.

I have quotes stuck up all around my desk. I also have a board that rests over my desk with all kinds of images and short sayings that inspire. I always keep a list posted next to my computer with my deadlines so I know where I should be headed. Little bits and pieces of this and that to keep me going. Sometimes I'll offer myself rewards for sitting down and writing for a certain length of time because I can be a great procrastinator. And sometimes I just have to trick myself into just getting started and then I'm good to go. Sitting down is the most important first lesson.

\* \* \* \*

Ally Blue, author of *Willow Bend*, *Love's Evolution*, etc.

For me, the very best motivation is simply to keep writing. Write a little every day, even if it's only for a few minutes. You've heard this before, but it really is the most important, most helpful thing you can do. I also like to go out and people-watch. Downtown areas are my favorite places to people-watch, but you can do it anywhere. Find a person who catches your eye or captures your imagination, for whatever reason, and make up something about that person's life. Once you get started, it's hard to stop. I've ended up with some wonderful ideas that way :D

Exercise. Seriously. Going for a three mile run ups my energy level and gives me a sense of accomplishment, and that carries over into my writing. You could apply that basic theory toward anything, really. Meeting one goal makes you feel good and gives you confidence to meet the next one.

\* \* \* \*

Kayelle Allen, author of *Wulf*, *Jawk*, etc.

I have a workroom with a door that shuts and locks. I post a sign on the outside when I can't be disturbed. Otherwise, family is free to knock and enter. Knowing the door is shut (and I can see it from my desk) reminds me that it's important to finish, since it's keeping me from my family. That visual cue also helps my family remember not to disturb me unless it's a real emergency.

Music is a huge motivator for me. I love music and need it to work. With each royalty check, I purchase an iTunes gift card. If I want new music, I have to earn it by writing!

\* \* \* \*

William Maltese, author of *Love Hurts*, *Diary of a Hustler*, etc.

Shall I blame it on being a Gemini that I bore easily, and that my attention span can sometimes be next to zilch, and that I, therefore, empathize with all authors who sometimes find it hard to stay motivated?

About the only thing that I've found that really works for me is to choose projects that have my complete interest from the get-go. If I start out thinking, "Well, okay, I suppose I can do this, if just because I don't have anything better to do at the moment," I'm far less apt to see it through to its completion than if I'm, from the outset, "God, I love this idea!"

\* \* \* \*

T.A. Chase, author of *Here Be Dragons*, *No Going Home*, etc.

Motivation, for me, is simply wanting books that I can relate to or want to read. I keep writing books that fit my taste. If aspiring writers do that, they'll never stop writing, no matter how long it might take to get published.

\* \* \* \*

Liam Moran, author of *The Darkness of Castle Tiralur*, etc.

I am among the most evasive writers on the planet. I love to write, I believe it is what I was born to do, and I avoid writing in the most amazingly successful ways. I've now implemented a schedule of set hours to write. So far, I'm



having more success with that than a million other tricks and tips I've come across, tried, and abandoned.

Also, after three encounters of the operational kind, I have a CT scan every six months to make sure I've remained cancer-free. Those events are very effective at refreshing my motivation. I feel I have several really good unwritten novels in me left to write, and I am committed to getting them written (and maybe even published!) before I check out. This latter source of motivation is not necessarily one I'd recommend for aspiring writers.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

I often create little rewards for myself to make sure I sit and write when I'd rather go and work on one of my hobbies, but for the most part I don't worry about being motivated. Writing is my job and if I want to get paid, I need to write. It can be pleasant to know that at the end of the current page I can take twenty minutes to do something fun like organizing the kitchen, but as I really enjoy telling stories motivation to get the work done isn't a huge problem. My trouble is more one of time management—there's simply not enough hours in a day to get to all the fun things I like to do.

\* \* \* \*

*Once around the block*

Once in a while you may run into a creative wall. I don't mean you feel unmotivated to write; rather you can't manage it at all. This is generally referred to as writer's block.

I think there are two kinds of writer's block. The first happens when you're blocked about a particular, specific project. You can't see your way, the words won't come, and if you force the words, you can tell you're spinning your wheels, digging deeper and deeper into the mire.

This usually indicates you've gone off track with the characters or the plot.

You fix it by tracing back to the last point where the story felt like it was flowing properly, and you delete everything from that point on. You stick the deleted bits in a special file where you keep all such fabulous writing—and it usually is really fabulous writing that unfortunately didn't advance the plot an iota—for cannibalizing at a later date. You return to the manuscript and you start fresh from the last point where everything was working.

Brutal, but effective. Take it from me, this works.

The second kind of writer's block is when you have no energy or interest in writing anything at all. Maybe you're too stressed to feel creative. Or maybe you just feel burned out. Maybe you've been ill or there are things happening in your personal life that require all your energy and focus.

Guess what? Those are all legitimate excuses for not writing.

If you're ill or stressed with personal obligations or commitments—and you're working to a deadline—communicate with your editor as soon as possible. Let her or

him know what's going on. This stuff happens, and you're not the first writer to miss a deadline—not that you'd want to make a habit of it, but adding guilt to the existing stress load isn't going to make you more creative or productive.

If you're not working to a deadline, allow yourself a reasonable amount of recovery time. And then get back to work.

If the problem is burn out, that's a little different. Basically your creative well has run dry, and you need to refill it. Dr. Lanyon prescribes reading, watching films, spending time with friends, taking a trip, taking a class, taking a walk. But, it can't be the same old stuff you usually do when you need a break. Read in a genre you don't write in, rent foreign or silent or animated films, visit a museum, call friends you haven't talked to in ages, listen to music you don't ordinarily listen to. Try a new restaurant, read poetry, look through art books. Fill your brain with new images, new sounds, tastes, smells. Kick start your senses. Stimulate your brain.

If you feel like jotting down some ideas, great, but no pressure. When the well is full again, you'll be eager to write.

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### *Working through writer's block*

Adrianna Dane, author of *Mariposa Soul*, *The Seductive Tale*, etc.

I have moments when I'm not sure which direction to go in and I freeze. In order to clear the way, I have a folder of writing prompts and I'll usually pick something random and do a stream of consciousness writing session. It could even

be a character and I just start fleshing out a quick character study. It may not even be related to the story I'm working on. I have been known to just look out the window and start describing the tree in minute detail. Or I'll use the old standby of "I remember..." and take it from there. That will usually get me going. I remind myself that no one has to see what I write and I work to turn off the self-editor simply to get the words down. If I can turn off the editor, the muse usually gets back to work, and I get down to writing.

\* \* \* \*

Ally Blue, author of *Willow Bend*, *Love's Evolution*, etc.

I'm not sure I've ever had REAL writer's block, but I've had times when I was disenchanted with what I was writing and that made it extremely difficult to get the words out. In those cases, I take a break. Either I take a day or two and don't write at all, or I take a day or two and write something completely different. Fan fiction is a wonderful way to get your groove back. You don't have to submit it anywhere, or even let anyone else read it, but for me writing it helps unblock the creativity flow. With fan fic, you don't have to worry about making up characters (they're already there!), you don't have to worry about proper punctuation or grammar or even whether the story makes any sense. Just write whatever comes to you. Let yourself write something stupid, or nonsensical, or just plain bad. It's very freeing, and I find that I can then get back to my contracted work with more energy and more ideas, and be excited about it again.

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Kayelle Allen, author of *Wulf*, *Jawk*, etc.

I get it with every book. If I let it defeat me, I'd never be published. Knowing it will be there and that it will pass helps me deal with it. I do several things to overcome it.

One is to write something else related to the book. I might create a press release, for example. I also edit other parts of the book that I've already finished. Reading the book from start to wherever I happen to have run out of steam gives me a new view of the story as well. Also, I keep emails from beta readers (or crit buddies) who have looked over my work and see what their responses have been. The excitement they feel often generates into renewed personal excitement.

I always write the synopsis before I write the book. It might be only three or four paragraphs, but the overall concept of the story is there. When I get stuck, I go back and see if I'm heading in the right direction. Often, the block has come because I've changed the story line. If necessary, I change the synopsis to suit the changes. Sometimes, I have to "tear out stitches" and rewrite the piece I just finished because it didn't go where it needed to go. However, I always save things I cut. Several of those have ended up in other books.

That said, I once spent a year on a book that I finally had to set aside. I later discovered why, but at the time, my dogged determination to complete it had me spinning my wheels. Once I put it aside and worked on something else, I turned out two books within six months. The book I set aside

has provided the basis for five other books, however. Sometimes, you need to say enough is enough and move on.

\* \* \* \*

William Maltese, author of *Love Hurts*, *Diary of a Hustler*, etc.

Knock on wood, and give credit to a possibly over-active imagination, but I can't recall ever having had Writer's Block in the stereotypical—sitting for hours in front of a blank computer screen, trying to write something, anything—sense of the term. What I do experience are periods of time when I just have to quit writing altogether and go off and do something entirely unrelated, like just stripping down for a lie in the sunshine, or reading a good book (other than one I've written), or spending a couple of days doing absolutely nothing but being a couch potato. I find such respites rejuvenating, and they invariably leave me, sometimes sooner than expected, anxious to get back to my neglected creative-writing routine.

If, for whatever the reason, I'm in the middle of a project, and a problem in the plot-line arises that I'm not immediately able to figure out, I usually find that by taking the problem to bed with me and going over and over it in my mind, each and every time I regain even partial consciousness, that the problem usually has a solution, come morning (no pun intended).

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T.A. Chase, author of *Here Be Dragons*, *No Going Home*, etc.

Every writer has experienced Writer's Block at some point in their writing life. Especially if a particular story or character isn't talking at the moment. How I combat that is simple. I just go to work on a different story. There's always a plot or character who will talk to you and get the creative process working again. After that happens, I can go back to the story that created the block in the first place and start working on it again.

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Liam Moran, author of *The Darkness of Castle Tiralur*, etc.

Yes, I've experienced what I've called writer's block. I work through it by re-reading James N. Frey's (How to Write a Damn Good Novel, I and II) comments about writer's block. In the first book, he's empathetic and understanding and psychologically wise about writer's block. In book two, he's much less sympathetic and gentle.

In book two he says writers with writer's block want to be martyrs, Saint Sebastiens. He provides a wonderful little story about the bricklayer who comes home with bricklayer's block, lies down on the couch and turns on the TV. His wife asks him if he's going to get paid while he's got bricklayer's block, and he says no. Her rolling pin takes care of his bricklayer's block. Frey is brutal (as he usually is) and he's right on the money as far as I'm concerned.

Much of the time I feel awful about my writing—that it's crap, that nobody will enjoy it, that it's not "good enough". As

a result my major challenge is to complete a first draft without getting lost in editing. And re-editing. And editing over again until I've lost all the juice that should have been used for the scenes that remain unwritten still. I'm convinced that most of my difficulty in writing is insecurity, vicious self-criticism and cowardice rather than any real block. I figure if I've got ideas, I'm not blocked. I almost always have ideas. Mostly I'm just afraid of what I'll have to say about what I write—if it were ever to get written.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

I don't think I've ever been blocked. There have been long periods of time when I didn't write—months long—but I never thought of it as being blocked. I knew that the ideas would come back and that I would write again, and I never got upset about it. I tend to follow my passions through life and I've learned that they can come and go and come back even stronger. When I'm not writing I'm more than likely off doing something else I love or taking a class to learn something new. The words will come back, the ideas will come back. I don't fear the loss of writing; it's too much a part of who I am to be something that I can't find again.

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### *Thirty-one flavors*

While a lot of M/M fiction is strictly contemporary romance, more and more of it falls into specific sub-genres: M/M



mystery, M/M fantasy or science fiction or paranormal, M/M historical. As we discussed earlier, if you're writing an M/M genre novel, you have to meet the requirements of both the M/M romance and the genre fiction.

Even though the main attraction for me is always the characters and their relationship, I prefer writing M/M mystery over straight M/M romance because simple romance just doesn't have enough plot for me. A mystery offers a very structured framework on which to hang a love story, and I enjoy the action and adventure, as well as the puzzle elements, of crime and mystery stories. Best yet, mystery offers all kinds of thematic and philosophical possibilities for a story.

\* \* \* \*

Elisa Rolle, reviewer and bookseller

When I started reading M/M genre the most common plots were the futuristic one and the contemporary. I have never been very fond of the futuristic plot in the traditional romance, but it seems pretty popular in the M/M genre. So I read a lot of futuristic novels, and some of them I like very much, but still it's not my preferred plot. I think it's so common because you can imagine that your gay couple is able to do a lot of thing that in the real world is forbidden ... but this is the reason I don't like it very much: if they can do everything like a hetero couple, in the end they act like an hetero couple, and they slip into the routine I don't like in an hetero romance.

So contemporary plots are my preferred one. I like to read of real life, of the joy and trouble to be a gay couple in a world sometimes friendly sometimes hostile.

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If the characters are strong enough, and the plot complex enough, a plain contemporary romance can still provide a compelling story with plenty of conflict. Especially if you choose powerful themes: interracial or interfaith affairs, infidelity, coming out, etc.

One of the first M/M writers to write the challenge of relationships between different ethnic characters was J.M. Snyder. I asked her to share her thoughts on writing interracial M/M romance.

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J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

I don't sit down and decide to write a story that will rival a Benetton ad. I just think that there are different types of things that appeal to me about different types of men. As a Caucasian, I realize that much of that appeal stems from the fact that I find people different from my "norm" to be intriguing, and they stimulate my sense of eroticism. Some are attracted to sameness, others to diversity. In trying to keep my stories real, I have to recognize this trait in some of my characters.

The first interracial story I wrote was "His Song," featuring a Caucasian musician and his Indian boyfriend. As it appeared in a self-published collection, there was no initial resistance to

the pairing. Two other self-published books of mine also have interracial pairings: "Power Play" has a couple who is Hispanic and white, and "Stepping Up to the Plate" has white, black, and Hispanic characters. But I have also had quite a few interracial stories published ("On the Down Low" is between a black man and a white man, "Just What the Doctor Ordered" has Asian and white characters—both from Aspen Mountain Press) and the editor had no problem with the racial issues that arose from the relationships. In fact, in both those stories, racial tensions were at the heart of the plot.

Any negative response, from either a publisher or a reader, would to me seem racist, and I wouldn't want to work with someone like that. If love is blind to gender, then why can it not be blind to other differences, as well? Race, age, appearance ... if the symbol of gay love is the rainbow, doesn't it stand to reason that the colors represent all shades of queer humanity, regardless of race, creed, gender, etc.?

Regarding reader response, I have had quite a few letters from readers who appreciate my non-stereotypical depictions of men of color. I guess because there is a significant lack of representation in gay fiction of such men, readers are pleased to see them done well. I'll admit that such feedback encourages me to include more diverse characters in my future stories.

\* \* \* \*

Kiren, TwoLips Reviews

I'd also love to read more historical stories—how hot would it be to read about gladiators? And come on now, all those

men, off on campaigns for months on end ... talk about delicious fantasies.—grin—

\* \* \* \*

Elisa Rolle, reviewer and bookseller

An historical plot? I read some of them, but there are very few examples, and sometimes they are only a way to wear your characters in cute dress. Real and accurate plots are rare. I love History, with capital H. I read essay and biography. So my historical romance has to be very good to satisfy me.

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Historical M/M has terrific thematic and plot possibilities. For me, the main thing is to get the facts right, but integrate them into the story so that at no time does the story read like a time machine travelogue.

The characters have to be true to their time and period. Nothing grates more (on me, anyway) than the anachronism of politically correct characters.

One of the greatest pleasures of writing is the research. It's a danger, too, because one interesting discovery often leads to another, and before you know it, you've spent days researching WWI flying aces for a two-sentence mention in a short story.

At the same time you can't always leave all the research to the end because very often the research itself will lead to new twists and turns within the plot.

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*Writing historical M/M romance—Key things to keep in mind when writing historical M/M fiction?*

Lee Rowan, author of *Ransom*, *Walking Wounded*, etc.

The biggest point, I think, is to remember that historical fiction isn't just modern people in costumes. If you aren't ready to do the homework of researching a particular period—I would even say if you don't actively enjoy such research—stick with contemporary. People who read historical stories do care about the details and they will notice if you have an 18th-century person saying "Are you okay?" ("Okay" just wasn't used by English speakers until the mid-19th century) Attitudes are even trickier, and they vary not only by time, but by place. Read all about the period you've chosen, and if possible read material, fiction and nonfiction, written by people in the period.

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Erastes, author of *Standish*, etc.

I think that this part is quite subjective, going by the different historical M/M that I've read—some people seem to want the sex, the whole sex and nothing but the sex, others want a mix, whereas others want plot over everything. My motto is to write for myself and not to let the fact that most m/m novels tend to be more sexy than mine put me off. I want to tell a story, and if there is sex, then it will happen as part of that story and not because I think "eek—I'm supposed to writing one sex scene a chapter."

For me, the accuracy is paramount. I'm not saying I get it right, in fact I know I don't, but I do try. It's important to me because I assume my readers are as interested as me in reading about the difficulties homosexuals had in eras other than their own. There's nothing that annoys me more when I read something with glaring errors, like trains in Regency England or built up areas of London described when there was nothing but fields at the particular time.

But over all that, the important thing is to have your book wear its history lightly—as I can't bear books that infodump detail after detail on you—I know Dan Brown isn't historical but look at the huge amount of detail he spews out on the page, telling you every detail of everything he writes about. Compare that with Bernard Cornwell who makes you think that you are there, rather than reading about being there.

Stay true to the period: By this I mean don't write modern men in fancy dress. If you want to write modern men—then write modern men. Don't jump into an historical novel just because it's the latest bandwagon. There's nothing worse to read than Regency marriages, kissing in the street, Regency society (or just about ANY society before the late part of the 20th century) being fine with homosexuality. I don't mean that your characters have to angst 24/7 over the fear of punishment, but don't ignore the very real facts that it would have been a fear that existed.

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*What type of research do you do for your historical M/M fiction?*

Lee Rowan, author of *Ransom*, *Walking Wounded*, etc.

I start with a period I find interesting, then read everything I can get my hands on—see above. For *Ransom* and *Winds of Change*, I read dozens of books on the Age of Sail, plus Patrick O'Brian's amazing series, and I even found one excellent book that featured excerpts of log entries, letters home, and journals of Napoleonic War-era naval officers. For a Victorian story I'm working on, it's history again, plus—the Sherlock Holmes opus. Conan Doyle was writing in the Victorian era, and it's interesting to observe the change in vocabulary between 1801 and 1897. I can't recommend any book more highly than *The Timetables of History*. It will tell you why a sailor in 1800 won't have a zipper on his pantaloons.

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Erastes, author of *Standish*, etc.

Tons, it takes time and sometimes it's very frustrating. Sometimes you just want to WRITE and you find yourself screaming because you have introduced something idiotic (like I did—model trains ... ) into your book which you know NOTHING about and there is so much information on line you hardly know where to start. I use Google constantly, Wikipedia not so much. I take advantage of The Historical Novelists Society, relevant Yahoo Groups (I joined a model train society once and asked the men there for help and they were wonderful!), I write to churches, local historical societies, re-

enactment groups and libraries. I've never been turned down by anyone, and I'm grateful for it. I also use Justor and other library sources, and my bookshelves are groaning with homosexual historical text books from every era possible.

However, when it comes to actual writing, I'm very much a "as I go researcher." People vary. I have writer friends who will research an era for a year (or more!) before even writing a word, so they are immersed in the era whereas I (probably wrongly) leap straight in and learn as I go. What's important, though, is to check EVERYTHING—even if you think you know it, check, check, and double check. For instance I was writing a scene in *Standish* where my main character gets his newspaper. I rushed off to check what newspapers there were and whether he would be able to get one in Wiltshire. Then he was opening his post, so off I went again to check the postal routes, the stamps, the delivery. It takes time away from writing but better to attempt to get it right than to get an email listing your errors. I made a massive mistake in *Standish*—I was going to include *Dracula* as one of the books Ambrose was reading—went and researched it, found out that it was anachronistic and found *The Vampyre* instead and used that. But I didn't edit out every reference to Stoker's book—and several eagle-eyed readers were only too delighted to point it out to me!

That being said—a reader will be able to tell if you've tried, and that's the important thing. I read so many historical books which are no more than the aforementioned modern men in fancy dress—and the reader can tell the difference, the discerning ones will care—a lot. They won't like modern



speech patterns and kissing in the streets. But if you've been as true as you can to the period, then the reader will forgive you more easily if you make one or two small slip ups here and there.

I never trust one source either—you can't rely on Wikipedia for 100 percent accuracy—and I can't afford an Encyclopedia Britannica—so I find a fact and then I'll check it three or four places on line and that's as much as I can do, I have to hope that they are accurate.

Books I consider are fabulous examples of the genre:

*As Meat Loves Salt*—Maria McCann—English Civil War

*The Boy I Love*—Marion Husband—Post World War 1

*At Swim, Two Boys: A Novel*—Jamie O'Neill—Ireland 1916

*Winds of Change*—Lee Rowan—Age of Sail

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Here's where I admit that I'm not a huge fan of fantasy, science fiction or paranormal. Once in a while I'll be in the mood for science fiction or something magical—usually in the tradition of high fantasy—but generally.... no. Which tells you how little I know, since it's probably the single largest M/M subgenre.

The main thing to me is to keep the characters real, and to keep the world-building from taking over the story. Read a lot of history, study a lot of different cultures, so that your universe feels real and grounded, but don't fall so much in love with the Phoenician alphabet that you forget the elements of writing good dialogue. Fantasy or not, these stories are still stories about two men and their relationship.

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*Writing fantasy, science fiction or paranormal M/M romance—Key things to keep in mind when writing fantasy, science fiction or paranormal M/M romance?*

A.M. Riley, author of *Eye of Ra*, *Curse of the Giances*, etc.

The lovely thing about paranormal fiction is that I can choose how much reality to leave in the story. I generally like a real setting with fantastic creatures inhabiting it, so I'll use real life settings which I know very well.

\* \* \* \*

Kayelle Allen, author of *Wulf*, *Jawk*, etc.

To me, the number one most important aspect of writing good fantasy and SF is world-building. Take the time to know the culture's history. What is the background of your people? Why are they living where they are? What is the history of the world? Were there wars that shaped the society? What's the view on individual rights?

One of my worlds has a matriarchal society that forbids males to be educated. The law has far reaching consequences in every aspect of their society. Consider the ripple effects of changes that individuals have in their society. What hope does one man or one woman have of changing their world?

Ask yourself these questions as you create aspects of your world. Why? What effect will this have? How can a character overcome it? How can they use this to their advantage?

\* \* \* \*

Liam Moran, author of *The Darkness of Castle Tiralur*, etc.

Top of the list are coherence of vision, cohesiveness of execution, and a pervading sense of wonder.

I believe the best fantasy is written because the speculative world exposes and facilitates fresh exploration of human issues that exist in the regular world but are more difficult to approach there. However, that exploration can get awfully heavy unless there is some sense of human celebration to animate it, some unique beauty and/or happiness that it brings to the reader. In other words, there ought to be some special "wow" factor intrinsic to the plot, not just a clever thing bolted on to the story like an unnecessary appendage. What would *Dune* have been without the spice?

\* \* \* \*

T.A. Chase, author of *Here Be Dragons*, *No Going Home*, etc.

In Fantasy and SF, if you're creating new worlds, you have to do enough world-building that it makes sense to the reader. You can't just throw them in this world/universe you've created without giving them background on how things work there. I think Fantasy readers are a little more forgiving with a story line. SF readers come in with certain expectations that need to be met ... depending on how "hard" your science is going to be. Still, a writer shouldn't be afraid to mix things up or push boundaries in those genres.

\* \* \* \*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

I think the major importance is staying in character. A werewolf or vampire is going to respond differently to situations and during lovemaking than a human will. They use their sense of smell or ability to taste things in a partner's blood to discover things or to enjoy their mating in a different way. You have to show that difference, focus on the elements that make this M/M pairing unique and enjoyable.

In SF, your aliens need to have traits that aren't always human traits just masked with a difficult to pronounce name and blue skin. They have to remind the reader they are in another world, new rules, odd occurrences, especially during lovemaking. In my *Details of the Hunt*, the exchange of body fluids during lovemaking is actually altering the DNA structure of the human partner. It's something that naturally occurs to the race of his new alien lover to ensure the pair bond forever, but it has some negative, unexpected effects on a human. And since he's the first human to ever mate with one from this race, they are finding out the benefits and the problems of these unique side affects of their lovemaking as they surface.

And then there is the physical difference to explore as well. Alien means not human. It gives you a chance to enhance the sexual interaction and set new boundaries for lovemaking. Writing in this genre gives an author a lot of room to explore sensation and emotional responses. That's why it's one of my favorites to write in. I can get into the emotions of the characters, showing their unusual or enhanced abilities, and

give the readers more insight into the characters' hearts without feeling like I'm writing wimpy male characters.

\* \* \* \*

James Buchanan, author of *My Brother Coyote*, *Twice the Cowboy*, etc.

Fantasy and Paranormal, I go at it with the same dedication, just different books. If I'm going to write about skin walkers, I won't just dress up werewolves in Indian Paint. For *My Brother, Coyote*, I had binders full of research on Navajo language, traditions, ghost stories, witchcraft and attitudes on homosexuality. What you find may often surprise you as the writer. You can wing a little bit more on the willing suspension of disbelief, however you have to have small details right.

In order to write about sailing across the ocean in tall ships, I spent every chance I could get at the maritime museum in San Diego crawling around the ships docked there. I read and re-read *Two Years Before the Mast* and pulled up schematics of old ships. Ninety percent of what you research won't make it into the MS. It will, however, lend a richness and solid base to your fantasy world.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor, Loose Id and MLR Press

There has to be a good reason for a vampire or werewolf story, just as there has to be a good reason that a story is m/m. Just as a m/m story must be much more than an anatomically re-configured m/f romance, a vampire story

must be more than a romance in which one character periodically noshes on free range O-neg. Science fiction and fantasy, at their best, offer the chance to consider life—and that should be Life, with a capital *L*—in ways that it can't be examined otherwise. Life doesn't have to be big issues. The small ones, the intimate ones shouldn't get short shrift. But, when you can imagine erotic romance through a whole new world, don't forget that there's humanity at the heart of it. I especially appreciate fantasy and science fiction writers who don't waste those opportunities.

\* \* \* \*

Although mystery and suspense are my acknowledged forte, I'm not going to spend a lot of time telling you how to write a mystery. As with the other genres there are lots of excellent books to walk you, step by step, through the process.

Some good basic ones are *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America* edited by Sue Grafton, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* by Patricia Highsmith, *Writing the Private Eye Novel: A Handbook by the Private Eye Writers of America* edited by Robert J. Randisi, and *Writing Crime and Suspense Fiction and Getting Published* by Lesley Grant-Adamson. Also very useful are the books in the Howdunit Series put out by Writer's Digest Books.

A lot of writers are intimidated at the idea of writing a mystery. It's not nearly as complicated as you might imagine because in essence a mystery or crime novel consists of a series of partial interviews or scenes with interesting

characters who reveal a small piece of the puzzle—the puzzle being who killed/stole/kidnapped/sabotaged whatever is at the heart of the crime.

The most interesting thing for me in a crime or mystery novel is the motivation. It's key to the characters, and as we all know by now, for me it's all about the characters.

\* \* \* \*

*Writing mystery/crime fiction—Key things to keep in mind when writing crime or mystery fiction?*

A.M. Riley, author of *Eye of Ra*, *Curse of the Giances*, etc.

There is a definite story arc in a crime story or mystery. All of the character stories should follow that arc. Every scene and vignette is giving the reader information that they will automatically try to fit into the jigsaw puzzle you are creating. There shouldn't be many "but what about...?" and "but you didn't explain why...?" when the reader has finished the story.

I learned the above the hard way.

\* \* \* \*

James Buchanan, author of *My Brother Coyote*, *Twice the Cowboy*, etc.

The clues have to be there. Nothing is more infuriating than reading a mystery and finding out the murder weapon was a specialty knife in the kitchen drawer ... when no one ever mentioned being in the kitchen or a chef fetish or anything. When I write crime fiction, I write the novel and then I go back and layer in more clues, at least twice.

I have gone back in and added a sex scene in the back of a classic Cadillac hearse just for the purpose of telling you that the hinge on the back gate is weak. Why? Because when the hero goes to escape, that hinge has to fail. When the critical moment comes in your MS and your hero needs a code to tell his buddy that he's in trouble, you better have established at least once that pattern of banter or people won't buy the premise.

Too many people cop out on the details of how something happens. In crime/mystery you can't do that. People will call you on it.

\* \* \* \*

Josh Aterovis, author of the Killian Kendall mystery series

Personally, I think the most important thing to remember is to keep your characters real. If they're not real, your readers won't believe them, and if they believe them, why would they want to invest their time in them? To make them real, you have to believe in them first. They have to be real to you. Be true to your characters. Don't force them to act out of character just to fit into your plot. Maybe it's your plot that should change. Readers will forgive a lot if the characters are real to them.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

*What type of research do you do for your crime or mystery fiction?*



A.M. Riley, author of *Eye of Ra*, *Curse of the Giances*, etc.

Crime is much more difficult and requires more research. I am not a policeman, lawyer, doctor, or CSI tech. To give my story any sort of feasible feel, I have to read quite a bit about how those professionals conduct business. I try to keep my locations local, as I know the area best. And my extraneous characters and the scenes of crimes will often be those that I know well. For instance, I inculcated the history of the gay liberation movement in Los Angeles in a story, because I was there, I knew those people, and it's just easier for me to write what I know. I write quite a bit about film industry people because I know them well. There's a little history in almost all crime novels, so if something took place that I'm not sure about, I'll trudge on down to the library and look it up. Often the research takes longer than the actual story. For instance, that terribly short story I wrote set in the Valley of the Kings took me a couple of weeks of reading to research. Maybe I only write as an excuse to read books on interesting subjects! I find myself reading a lot of books by journalists turned novelists. Michael Connelly, for instance, is a great resource. I talk to cops and read their blogs (weird). Whatever it takes to get inside of the world.

Personally, I think understanding the lingo is important and I try to get the policeman's, lawyer's, or doctor's language as authentic as possible. For some reason, this seems to make my character "pop" for the reader, and makes the writing of him/her easier for me. It's like I can hear them in my head.

\* \* \* \*

James Buchanan, author of *My Brother Coyote*, *Twice the Cowboy*, etc.

For the crime/mystery fiction I have a bit of a background. I worked in the prosecutors' office while I was in law school. So for me, I can draw on a stable of stories and stuff I witnessed during court, witness interviews, evidence review and on ride-alongs with the now defunct CRASH units.

Even so, I have a shelf of police training manuals, several of the Howdunit series, and tons of true crime books including titles like *CopWorld*, *Homicide Special*, and *Prince of the City*. You'd be amazed at what turns up in used book stores. I haunt them. Added to that is my best book find ever, *The Spy's Guide: Office Espionage*. Want to know how to record a meeting with a cell phone, there's instructions. Need to know when someone left a parking space: cheap digital watch and electrical tape.

There are open access forums where you can ask questions of LEO about specifics. Reading through the threads though, is an eye opener. It'll get you a quick sense of how cops think, and not process wise. My uncle is a retired Detective and he said one thing that always colors how I write my cops. "Police are a really big gang that somehow got badges."

\* \* \* \*

Josh Aterovis, author of the Killian Kendall mystery series  
It depends on the book. When I first started, I read a lot of books on private investigators—how they work, state laws,

business models, etc. I even interviewed a couple PI's. I also read up on police procedures, crime scenes, etc. I still have the books to refer back to now and then. For each book, I may have to do a certain amount of research for the mystery I'm writing. One involved child abuse, group homes, and the foster care system, so I had to research how all that worked in the area where my books are set. Another book involves an escort service, so I interviewed actual escorts and learned how the business worked. The book I finished most recently deals with a modern Native American tribe and archaeology. That took the most research of anything I've written. I was researching that book for over a year, interviewing tribal elders, shamans, interviewing archaeologists, and reading lots of books.

\* \* \* \*

### *A series of unfortunate events*

Readers are very fond of series characters, so the temptation often exists to take appealing characters and turn them into series stars.

There are several things necessary for a series. First, the characters must be sufficiently vivid and engaging to carry a series—and it's hard to know whether they are until you've had reader and reviewer response to the first book. Sure, *you* love your characters, but it's like when all your friends and family are warning you not to get involved with a particular guy—and you don't want to listen. How often does it turn out that you were right and everyone else was wrong? Not often.

If you're the only one in love with your characters, they aren't the characters to carry a series.

Secondly, these vivid and engaging characters must have a large and interesting character arc (also known as an on-going story/conflict) to last over the course of several books. They have to be complex enough—their lives have to be complex enough—so that readers have something to worry about, care about, wonder about for years.

And finally, while each book is a complete story in itself, ideally you want an overarching storyline or arc that will stretch for the length of the series. Adrien English solves a murder in each book, but the overarching story is, will he ever find the love and companionship he longs for? It's for this that readers keep coming back to the series.

\* \* \* \*

### *What to remember when writing a series*

Lee Rowan, author of *Ransom*, *Walking Wounded*, etc.

I think the challenge of writing just one story about a set of characters is harder than a series ... when I get to know my guys in the first story, they usually hang around my imagination and suggest other story ideas. I'd suggest writing a thorough biography for each character, so you know who he is, who his family is, etc ... and make a timeline of the important events in his life. It's embarrassing to make someone an orphan in one story and introduce his dad further on down the line.

\* \* \* \*

Chris Owen, author of *Bareback, An Agreement Among Gentlemen*, etc.

The challenges of writing a series mostly seem to depend on what stage the writing is at when the first book is released. When Jodi Payne and I wrote the Deviations series we wrote it as one long story and it was complete before we even approached the publisher.

Therefore, the editing process involved a lot of checking for continuity and smoothing things, but for the most part we weren't terribly worried about the timeline. However, other series I've worked on (and I'm doing a sequel now) have involved long lists of things that happened, when, where, and which characters know about said actions. I have lists of names, places, and how I've explained the science of the universe so that I don't contradict myself. Writing a series is a wonderful thing, but occasionally it can be hard to keep track of the details.

Every relationship is an entity all its own, and each story is different.

\* \* \* \*

Josh Aterovis, author of the Killian Kendall mystery series  
Again, I think the most important element of writing a series is to stay true to your characters, but don't let them become stale. When looked at as a whole, I prefer to see a character arc throughout the whole series. I want to see the protagonist grow and evolve through the books. That's my personal preference.

\* \* \* \*

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

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## CHAPTER 17: REAL MEN DON'T

### Editing & Revisions

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Victor J. Banis, author of *Longhorns*, The Man from C.A.M.P. series, etc.

I should add, I talked to a woman locally who started up one of the e-book lines. She told me that their gay fiction does very well, but it is the gay fiction written by women that sells well, and the couple of gay male writers they have don't sell as well at all. Of course, their audience is largely women, so that factors in there somewhere. There are lots of women who read gay fiction, and I think that the women writers probably write "women's books" for readers like themselves, where gay male writers would be aiming their fiction at gay males rather than women.

\* \* \* \*

You're writing romance. Erotic romance at that. In fact, you're writing in a relatively obscure subgenre of commercial fiction. You're not going to get a lot of respect outside of our particular milieu. But, regardless of the opinions of the uninformed, commercial fiction does not have to equate to crap.

You can write quality commercial fiction. Or you can write crap. It's up to you. You have a better chance of getting

published—and building a large and loyal readership—if you opt for quality.

Unlike a great deal of heterosexual romance, M/M romance does not have to be written to formula. The fact that I'm trying to impress on you certain guidelines for constructing good fiction doesn't mean I'm asking you to write by numbers. One of the very best things about the current M/M market is that it has all the energy and originality of the early pulps. There are amazing stories being written. Some of them—like the old pulps—very badly. But that doesn't negate the fact that this is an amazing time of opportunity for writers who love man love stories.

If you love M/M romance, and you're willing to do the work, chances are excellent that you'll be published. Part of that work entails learning to edit and revise your own writing. Don't make the mistake of thinking that editing and revising is something editors do. Long before an editor sees your work you'll have revised it several times—each time is called a draft.

Very few people get first drafts published—even within e-publishing which is where the majority of M/M fiction is produced.

And that's because first drafts—even good first drafts—are just the beginning of the story. It's in the revision and editing process that the magic happens. That magic can't happen until the groundwork has been laid; creative writing is an organic thing. The best writing is *layered* writing. It builds upon that which must previously exist.



The second draft is where you refine and develop what you're really trying to say. It's often where your themes appear, where your characters develop psychological depth, where you think of new twists and turns of plots, flesh out the sketchy bits, and polish and hone your prose.

The difference between getting published and rejected usually lies in the writer's ability to dispassionately view her own work—and self-edit. Learn to separate your ego from your writing.

One thing I don't want to do here is reinvent the wheel. There are many, many excellent books on editing and revising your own work. You need to invest in a couple of them. Editing M/M fiction is just like editing any other work of fiction. You must be every bit as scrupulous, every bit as ruthless when it comes time for revisions.

One of my favorite books on self-editing is *Self-editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King.

Obviously you'll want to look for grammatical and spelling errors, passive language, and—this is a big one—verbiage. Go through and cut every possible dialogue tag you can, get rid of every single adjective and adverb that can be done without, and scan closely for all those add-nothing words like "big," "little," "up," "down," "some," "rather," "really," "very," and one of my personal pitfalls: "actually".

You'd want to do this in any case, but the fact is, the more terse your prose, the more masculine it will seem.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor, Loose Id and MLR Press

Writers would stop using those weak, lazy words soon enough if they knew what we call them. Linguists call them stall words, inserted to give the speaker time to form the next phrase or frame the next idea. On the page, we call them weasel words. I hate 'em. They're virtually invisible but they can destroy the rhythm or the power of a sentence—and they're virtually impossible for a writer or reader to diagnose. Exception: I can tolerate them in dialogue, but the author needs to have a David Mamet or Elmore Leonard ear for linguistic tics.

\* \* \* \*

That's all the obvious stuff, and you can do that immediately after finishing the manuscript. Then, put the first draft of your novel or novella or short story aside for *at least* two weeks. Longer is ideal, but if you're like me, you won't have the luxury of lots of time. Put the manuscript aside and get busy on the next project.

Or, if you've got a couple of trusted critique partners or beta readers—or if you've worked out an arrangement where your editor looks over your rough drafts—hand it off to her. You can effectively self-edit, but nothing beats an experienced, educated, and objective eye—especially if that eye belongs to a critique partner who will be honest with you.

When you get your critique/edits back—or when enough time has passed to take another look at your first draft—go through the entire thing again, and this time look for a few elements specific to M/M writing.

\* \* \* \*

Scott—or Scott—of The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

I'll admit that we have not read M/M fiction by women. I am sure they get most of it right sexually (basic anatomy usually suffices). They simply have the opportunity to present M/M relationships as described by a woman, which may be more appealing to a female audience. However, that presentation may not be how males would perceive it exactly. So it's not that they would get anything "wrong," but the emotional presentation may not be strictly "male." That's my guess. If they rent one M/M porn, they will have more than enough education on sex. One of the great things for any writer of sex is that you don't have to deal with any awkwardness of reality. There doesn't have to be any fumbling or nervousness or uncomfortable positions. Anything is possible and perfect and wonderful and the best they ever had. You just have to write it down to make it so.

\* \* \* \*

Cut back on the corny, sappy, illogical stuff. Go easy on how much your guys cry or talk about their feelings. Sure, I realize everyone is unique, but most guys I know aren't gaga to hold a baby or longing for big formal weddings. At the same time, remember that you're writing Male/Male romance for a mostly feminine audience. So as you run over your first draft, you'll want to pay close attention to the romantic elements.

Look over your story to make sure you've got a clean, clear emotional arc. Check for the relationship. Whether you're writing science fiction, mystery, or a western, first and foremost you are writing about the relationship of these two guys. The characters meet and feel ... what? The characters clash ... and feel what? Make sure that you're communicating to the reader what your protagonists are feeling—in addition to what they're thinking—and why they feel what they do.

Remember: guys don't tend to over think this stuff. You're communicating for females but you're attempting to do it in a male-seeming fashion.

A good way of editing for this is to never repeat yourself. *Say it once.* Typically, new and weak writers will state the obvious, and then explain it, and then reaffirm it by saying it again.

Joe felt depressed. He didn't want to be alone on his birthday. He hated being by himself on special days like this one.

We get it already!

It's a lot better to show us Joe's depression.

Joe turned off the alarm and pulled the blankets over his head. What was the friggin' point with Logan out of town 'til Monday?

Say it once. Say it well.

Check for flowery, fake-sounding language. Eliminate purple prose. You're better off with simple, heart-felt descriptions and words. Guys understand and use words like "warm", "moist", "sweet", "soft", "hard." Your reader responds positively to these sensual cues. The only people

who talk about "seeping" or "weeping" cocks are romance writers.

Keep us in tune with what the characters are feeling—give us bio feedback. Accelerated pulses, a gut knotting with anxiety, a mouth drying with desire, perspiration breaking out across shoulders, desire pooling in a belly. Put us in the scene, keep us in the moment.

Try to describe lovemaking so that it makes sense. The reader shouldn't need a diagram to figure out what's going on in the bed.

Make sure you've paid sufficient attention to the two key emotional turning points. The first is when your protagonist finally accepts or realizes he's in love. If you're writing from the POV of both guys, that's going to mean two separate epiphanies. Readers want to know the exact moment when the main characters actually recognize that they are in love. It's a defining moment in the story.

True, if you're writing in third person using a single tight or limited viewpoint it's a little trickier to show when your hero's opposite number falls for him, but there are cues you can give your reader without having to resort to verbal declarations.

In *The Hell You Say* that moment occurs when Jake and Adrien make love after Adrien is zapped by some faulty Christmas tree lights.

That night the fucking felt like making love. So slow and so sweet.... But at last we began to thrust against each other, pleasure knotting into hunger and passion and the need that always felt close to anxiety. I wrapped my arms around his

broad, muscular back, arching against him, feeling the hard probe of his dick against my belly. No questions here, the answers being self-evident.

*Jake muttered against my ear, "My God, I..."*  
*"Me too."*

I scooted back, smiling despite my tiredness, knees splayed, fingertips grazing the flat hard planes of his chest, reaching for him again.

Instead he pushed me back without roughness into the pillows. "Nah. Just relax."

Nah? "But..."

"Just ... shut up..." He leaned over me, found my mouth, kissing away the sting of that. "And ... relax." His lips trailed softly down my naked flesh, pressing tiny melting kisses on my chin, my throat, collar bone, breast bone, belly, the sensitive joining of groin and inner thigh. I shivered. He'd never ... was he going to...?

"Very pretty, Adrien," he whispered. "Every inch of you." And he kissed the head of my cock, which, embarrassingly, seemed to be reaching up for that very thing.

I laughed shakily, the laugh dying in the back of my throat as his wet, hot mouth closed around me. My hands fluttered to my sides, half protest—though what the hell was there to protest in this?—half supplication, clenching in the duvet.

Jake's tongue traced the slit, tasting. I caught a ragged breath, amazed, afraid to say a word that might break whatever magic spell this was. His lips tightened around my shaft, and I stopped myself from bucking up. I felt him smile, felt his fingers cup my balls and squeeze.

I did arch then, gasping, "Jake!"

"Right here. What'd you need?"

Oh, I didn't want him talking. Couldn't bear to be teased.  
Couldn't bear for that febrile slide down my dick to stop.

I moaned and was promptly enveloped in that slick, sucking heat. That sweet pulse of pleasure as his mouth dragged on my length, drawing me in deeper. The pressure of his tongue on the sensitive underside of the head of my cock. He took me all the way in, sucking hard, and my hands moved to his shoulders, squeezing, urging.

But Jake took his time, like we had all night, gentle and relentless, and in the end the intensity of feeling was so powerful it brought tears to my eyes. Coming was an exquisite shock of release, with me pushing up hard into the grip of lips and mouth, pumping out what felt like my life's blood in hard, long strokes.

I rested my forearm over my face so he wouldn't know, but Jake drew me into his arms, found my mouth. He tasted like me and like himself.

All I wanted to do was sleep, but I forced myself to mumble the words, "What about you, Jake?"

"I'm good. Go to sleep," he said, settling us more comfortably. He rested his face in the curve of my neck and lay very still.

*The Hell You Say* by Josh Lanyon (MLR Press, 2007)

The words are never said, but the reader who has been following along will pick up a number of clues to Jake's emotional state during this scene.

The second key emotional turning point—and this is the main one—is the big moment when both guys finally admit to the I Love You. I've read a few comments by women writers indicating they don't feel it's realistic for a male character to say I love you—especially to another male character. In effect: Real Men Don't Say I Love You. Ladies, all I can tell you is, those three little words are a problem for the guys who it's a problem for—and it's not a problem for the other guys. Write individuals, remember?

Don't cheat the reader. A lot of the time the declaration is going to be the last pages of the book—the resolution—but even if it's not, even if the characters confess their love early on only to be separated, make sure that when we do get to the resolution, the reaffirmation of this declaration is as satisfying as you can make it. This is the pay off. This is why the reader has slogged through all that misery and misunderstanding—anguish and angst. Don't skim over the moment or give it to us via a third party.

If you're writing a genre fiction story like a mystery, all the mysterious loose ends should be tied up first—the final pages should be reserved for the emotional resolution. Once the reader has swallowed her emotional bon bon, the story needs to end. You need to exit on an emotional high, not make the reader sit through an epilogue where you explain what happened to all the other characters. Nobody gives a damn by that point. Take care of the loose ends early.

Read your dialogue aloud to make sure it flows, that it sounds natural.



Check for voice. Male voice in particular. Do your characters sound like guys or do they sound like book people?

And remember what we covered earlier: all your characters should have distinct voices—so distinct that the reader can usually tell who is speaking without a dialogue tag.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor, Loose Id and MLR Press

My standard for distinct voice for each character is very direct, 'though not so simple. Take any line of dialogue. Can I imagine any other character in the book saying that line? Grammar and accent are obvious, of course. But, can I hear in the line the character's dry humor—or, alternatively—his broad sense of humor, his perpetual crankiness, his sunny naïveté, his tendency to approach things head-on or from an angle, his fractured idiom (oh, how I love Elmore Leonard!), his dismissiveness, his genuine concern, his resigned fatigue, his resolute nature? If, in line after line after line of dialogue, there's nothing that's unique to be found about the character, if he doesn't speak for himself, then we're looking at some serious edits in the dialogue.

\* \* \* \*

Voice is tied to character. A twenty-something surfer dude ought to sound different from a sixty-year old Manhattan art dealer. Allow your characters to use the lingo and language of their trade. But be subtle. Use slang, dialect, accents, etc. sparingly.

Check for logic and consistency.

Writing—storytelling—is an art. And like all art it is a very personal thing.

But when you write for publication you're producing something which you hope to exchange for something else. You're manufacturing a product. It's still art, but now you're asking for something in return. In the case of fan fiction, the something in return is usually feedback, praise, or perhaps publication in a quality zine. But when you submit your work to a publisher, you're asking her to invest in you, to risk her money on the theory that you'll earn it back—and more. That gives the publisher a personal stake—and a say—in the art that you produce.

That shouldn't be a difficult concept, but a lot of writers—especially new and inexperienced writers—have trouble with it. They feel they should have final say over things like cover art and titles, and in e-publishing, they often do. In mainstream publishing, they generally don't. And when it comes to editing and revisions, both e-publishers and mainstream publishers expect to have the final word on many, many points.

\* \* \* \*

K.M. Frontain, editor

The worst thing I've had happen is an author act without any degree of professionalism when discussing his/her submission with me. These authors often think their stories are already good enough and that editing is not required. They become very offended over the least suggestion to improve the grammar or fix the plot. I usually send these

authors on their way and wish them good luck, because there really isn't anything I can do for them until their eyes open.

\* \* \* \*

Yes, James Joyce's *Ulysses* features a sentence over four thousand words long; you're not James Joyce. Get over yourself.

Nobody enjoys being edited. Nobody enjoys being second-guessed. Nobody enjoys being criticized. But if you're going to be a writer you'd better get used to it. The process starts with critique groups and beta readers, proceeds to editors, and culminates in reviews and readers who email you to tell you what they did and didn't like about your work.

I'm frequently asked about writing and critique groups.

I think they're a good idea provided you get the right mix of people. It's important that the focus stay productive and practical. I've got no patience with touchy-feely amateur hours, and I've less patience with people who take out their own insecurities and frustrations on other people's creative efforts. I've run a lot of writing groups in my time, and I think the key is having a strong leader with a clear focus. Smaller groups work better than large.

The thing I always tell critique group members is to look for a consensus of opinion. Don't change something you disagree with based on one person's opinion, but if you're hearing similar comments from other readers, you need to take a close look. Same thing with positive comments. Look for the common message in the feedback you get.

And understand that every work is not going to appeal to every reader or reviewer. Some people just aren't going to like what you do, no matter how well-written it is. There's no point having a meltdown over one person's opinion—even if it's a reviewer on a website somewhere who leaves her nasty opinions in cyberspace forever.

Even better than critique groups, I think, are critique partners (CP), or as they're called in fan fiction, beta readers. The way I understand it is the beta reader mostly functions as a copy editor and maybe an expert on canon and character. A true CP is ideally another experienced writer who will fine-comb your work like a good content editor.

A good CP is worth her/his weight in gold because it's very difficult to get an honest and experienced opinion from someone who isn't your editor. Inexperienced writers tend to nitpick or hesitate to criticize at all. It's worth hunting for good CPs. Ideally, you want to stringently edit your work before you ever submit it.

\* \* \* \*

#### Tara Renee, TwoLips Reviews

Some of the smaller presses seem to put out books without proper editing or books that are not really quality fiction. Some books look like first time efforts that haven't been well developed or thought out.

Expect to be edited. Expect to disagree with a lot of the edits. Expect to get over it.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor Loose Id and MLR Press

Authors who have no experience with publishing should understand that, in many houses, the content/story editor must be satisfied that the story is ready for publication before the book can move forward toward release. Getting to that spot might take more than one or two rounds of revisions. Story edits can be traumatic for new authors.

\* \* \* \*

Very often a story will be accepted conditionally—meaning the editor/publisher thinks you've got the makings of a great book, but it needs some work. Final acceptance will hinge on whether you can make the necessary edits.

But if you think the editing stops there, think again.

Even after you've made these necessary revisions, and the book is accepted—even after you've got a contract and a publishing date, you'll eventually receive a full, detailed edit for content/story. This can come as a dreadful shock for writers who thought their work was done except for some copy edits. If you're a relatively new and inexperienced author, you're going to be hit with a lot of questions and suggestions. And not all the suggestions will be suggestions.

You may find yourself adding scenes, cutting scenes, expanding scenes, removing characters, combining characters, rewriting dialogue, adding a subplot, removing a subplot, changing the moral of your story—in short, the changes may be structural and not cosmetic. And you may find yourself wondering why the hell someone bought your book when they clearly wanted a different book.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor, Loose Id and MLR Press

You better believe that I've asked for sex scenes to be removed in some books. And, you certainly know that I've asked for them to be added. The genre is erotic romance, and both elements of that description have to be present. I've asked for sex scenes to be re-written if the scene is appropriate to the story but, despite its appropriateness, it does nothing to advance either the story or the romance. New authors have to understand that they can't just write a story and parachute in a few sex scenes to satisfy publisher guidelines. The sex has to be integrated into the story as an essential element of the plot or as a window into the relationship of the characters. Sometimes that means adding scenes, sometimes re-writing scenes, sometimes deleting scenes.

And that makes it sound like story editors fixate on the sex scenes. Not so. Scenes need purpose. Changes need transition. Dialogue needs authenticity. Characters need motivation. Minor plot elements need resolution. A content editor stands back from the manuscript in a way that few authors can, making sure that all those pieces—and more—are in place.

\* \* \* \*

One thing I can tell you is the requested changes will be based on what these experienced professionals believe will

make your work stronger and more appealing to readers. And in this they, not you, are the expert.

The other thing I can tell you is that after you've been writing for a few years—assuming you're working to improve your craft all the time—these story/content edits will become mostly cosmetic and fairly routine. And you will laugh, laugh I tell you, at the tears you shed over those first story/content edits a million years and manuscripts before. Well, at least you'll stop crying about them.

The content/story edits are the toughest for a new writer to deal with. These are followed by the copy or line edits, which are mostly annoying. This is where all your grammatical and spelling eccentricities are pointed out to you by insensitive people known as copy and line editors, and the part that will really drive you to distraction is that the rules and standards often vary from copy editor to copy editor and from house to house. That would be publishing house, but probably your friends' and neighbors' houses too.

Yes, absolutely, a lot of this stuff is subjective. But there's no point in arguing over semi-colons or "all right" versus "alright." There's no point debating the merits of *The Chicago Manual of Style* versus *The Associated Press Stylebook*. You're working for a particular publishing house, and they are attempting—reasonably—to standardize their list—of which you are now part. If you last long in this business you'll work with a variety of editors and copy editors. Some will be excellent, some will not. It is as the dust in the wind. Or the dust on all those copies of your books lining the bookshelves of your library.

Pick and choose your battles. There are things worth fighting for—there are a number of points on which I will not budge—but generally ... I don't sweat the small stuff. And neither should you. This is one story/novella/novel out of all the many you'll write.

On the other hand, if the requested changes have to do with theme or character or something more fundamental, courteously express your thoughts and feelings, and if compromise can't be reached, then decide if you can live with the changes or if you want to take your work elsewhere.

\* \* \* \*

Judith David, editor Loose Id and MLR Press

Once the contract is signed, it's not easy to take your work elsewhere. Release can be held up for a long time while the author futzes about with half-hearted revisions that don't address the edits. An editor will compromise, too, but the editor's there to strengthen the work, not weaken it.

The broad strokes of significant edits will have been discussed and recorded before the contract—or at least they should be. That's where the author has the choice to pull up stakes. Once the contract's signed, not so much—not nearly so much.

\* \* \* \*

Just remember: the writer who writes solely for herself gets the audience she deserves.

Edit your work carefully, and expect to receive further edits—occasionally even the request for a rewrite—from the



publisher. Do the requested edits quickly and on time. Always conduct yourself like a professional.

### *Editing in Action*

Remember Joe and Logan who helped us out when we were studying how to write action scenes? I'm going to recall them to active duty as we go over some of the finer points of editing.

He sat quietly on the sofa still feeling cold, in spite of the long hot shower, and shaky; he knew, without having to look, that he was pale. As he drank, his mind went back over the evening, over the harsh words he had thrown at Logan and he moaned to himself. "Oh, Logan, why do you let me hurt you? Don't you realize that by hurting you, I hurt myself?" He took another sip and held it in his mouth feeling the amber fire warm him, before slowly letting it trickle down his throat.

Where to begin?

Once again, the sentence structure is funky. Here's what we need: "He sat quietly on the sofa feeling cold and shaky despite the long hot shower."

Joe is *such* a damn wimp. But I digress.

...he knew, without having to look, that he was pale.

Huh? How does he know, and why is it necessary for us to know? The author wants to convey how Joe looks in this scene, but this is apparently the best she can do. Frankly, this makes the old get-up-and-look-at-yourself-in-the-mirror routine seem brilliantly innovative.

We're missing a few commas, but who has strength?

This is a very unmasculine scene. The whole moaning over harsh words is just not very ... male. Is it even female?

"Oh, Logan, why do you let me hurt you? Don't you realize that by hurting you, I hurt myself?"

Who talks like this? This is book people talk, not real people talk.

I also object to "amber fire" on general principles, but perhaps I'm nitpicking.

He closed his eyes; he had hurt Logan—and what was worse, he'd set out to hurt Logan. Because of Logan's harsh exterior and seemingly unemotional personality, people thought that it was impossible to hurt him, but Joe knew differently. He knew that most of Logan's exterior was an act, and that beneath the harsh shell was a man who could hurt, if the person doing the hurting knew how to penetrate the barriers—and Joe knew exactly how to do just that.

How many ways can we say the same thing?

Again, this kind of angsting over hurting Logan's feelings is not very male. Not that a guy wouldn't feel like hell over hurting his lover, but this is just too much. Too much wallowing in sentiment. Why isn't Joe *doing* something about hurting Logan if he feels so bad?

Okay, I can't take it. Let's jump ahead to another scene.

He let his body fall forward, placing his hands on his knees, whilst deliberately slowing his breathing and counting to ten. As the world became clearer, his nose began to twitch and he tasted the overly sweet, cloying smell of fertilizer. He glanced down at the ground and groaned; the field through which he'd been running had clearly been recently sprayed. Oh, well, at least it still smelt better than the falling in sheep dip!

Do you have visual on what's happening here? Because I don't.

The author is overcomplicating the character's every move—to the point where I'm having trouble picturing what appear to be Joe's gymnastics.

As the world became clearer, his nose began to twitch and he tasted the overly sweet, cloying smell of fertilizer.

He *tasted* the fertilizer? Surely not.

How about: "His nose twitched at the sweet, cloying smell of fertilizer."

Simplify, simplify, as the marines say.

Dragging a hand across his forehead to wipe away the sweat that was dripping down over his eyes and another through his hair, he glanced around him, automatically cataloging the land and where he was.

How about: "He wiped at the sweat stinging his eyes."

So many unnecessary words and phrases, including "automatically" and "where he was."

"Cataloging" is one of those not-quite-right words. "Registering" or "classifying" might be closer to what the author is hoping to convey.

...and another through his hair...

Another *what* through his hair? Another hand? Another sweat? Another forehead?

All this busyness adds nothing to the scene.

In the distance he saw the edge of the cliff as it reached majestically up to the sky. He tried to calculate the distance and thus the length of time it would take him to get there and quickly gave up—it was one of the things that Logan was

undoubtedly better at than himself; as, he realized, his mouth becoming dry, glancing up at the cliff, he was at heights.

Why does he just see the edge of the cliff? Once again, I can't picture what's happening. The scene is not clear. The geography is bewildering.

We don't need the "and thus the length of time it would take him to get there" because we all know why people try to calculate distances.

Please note: when drawing your male protags, give them rudimentary survival skills. This guy is an experienced park ranger/cop/spy/soldier. He should be able to triangulate. Most guys are pretty good at guesstimating distances and time—it's one of those right brain things—so allow your protag a few manly skills.

Now if the purpose is to point out that his partner is better out here in the woods, that's fine, but give Joe a realistic weakness like ... he doesn't know the difference between a poisonous snake and a non-poisonous snake, or what quicksand looks like, or how to catch a fish with a handmade spear, or what the signs of impending typhoon are.

Oh, and please also note this: if he was a normal boy child he melted all kinds of plastic toys using the sun and a mirror, so do me a personal favor and don't leave him bewildered as to the principles of lighting a fire from scratch. Surely, if nothing else, he's watched a few episodes of *Survivorman*?

From a writing standpoint, the sentence would read better like so: "The cliff was about a mile and a half away—Logan was better at these calculations." All the rest of it is clumsy and unnecessary. And why the hell is his mouth going dry?

I'm recommending Joe for a complete work-up the minute he gets back to base.

WAIT.

I just realized I read the previous sentence incorrectly.

"—it was one of the things that Logan was undoubtedly better at than himself; as, he realized, his mouth becoming dry, glancing up at the cliff, he was at heights."

I get it now. Joe is afraid of heights.

Now that's actually a good development. I like that. Tough guy or not, Joe is allowed his frailties, and a fear of heights is a respectable one (providing he works through it in the hour of need). But the sentence is so awkwardly constructed that I didn't understand what the author was getting at until I started wondering what the cliff was better at than poor no-survival-skills-Joe.

When you find yourself suffering from a compound sentence fracture, start over. Break it down into short, clean multiple sentences.

"He stared up at the tower, his throat dry. Logan was better with heights than he was."

Then, if you must, you can link them together in meaningful ways.

Like: "Logan was better with heights than he was, Joe thought, mouth drying as he stared up at the tower."

But, personally, I don't think you even need the "Joe thought" because we already know Joe is thinking. So I would just write: "Logan was better with heights than he was. His mouth dried, staring up at the tower."

Or a similar variation. I think I prefer the two original simple sentences: "He stared up at the tower, his throat dry. Logan was better with heights than he was."

It was the extra sense that kept them both alive; the seemingly telepathic ability that allowed them to work together faultlessly and oft times without words.

Lemme guess. The "seventh" sense, was it?

If they've got a seemingly telepathic ability, we don't need to hear that they were able to work together faultlessly without words because ... duh!

"Oft times."

I don't know any guys, tough or otherwise, who use phrases like "oft times."

As he reached inside himself, again slowing his breathing, he concentrated on his partner and their link. Suddenly a slight whiff of exotic, spicy oranges touched his nose; he drank it down like the finest wine, coming to an instant conclusion: Logan had been here, in this very place, very recently. Joe's head came up, grazing against the rough bark and he stared around him, halting his breathing and opening his ears and eyes in ways most normal people never tried.

I would write this "Slowing his breathing, he reached inside himself" because that action comes before the other.

Although I probably wouldn't say he "reached inside himself" because that's a little too ectoplasmic for me. Also I would cut *suddenly*. *Suddenly* is used way too often. It's a dramatic word, but it's often used in place of *then*, which means it can usually be dropped altogether.

"Slight whiff" is redundant. If it's a whiff, it's slight.

He drank it down like the finest wine.

Come on. This is overwriting. What the author is trying to say is Joe is thrilled to pieces to pick up Logan's scent, but there are better ways of getting this across. The image of Joe quaffing Logan's scent like a glass of vino is just plain silly.

I'm going to let the double "very" slide. Shhh. Pretend you don't see them.

Joe's head came up, grazing against the rough bark...

Joe really is a klutz, isn't he? This is just stage business the writer threw in because she wanted to say *something* about the scene, but didn't know what. When in doubt, say nothing. It will make for a cleaner, crisper read. The reader is more than capable of filling in any such details.

Remember: *quality, not quantity of detail.*

*...and he stared around him, halting his breathing and opening his ears and eyes in ways most normal people never tried.*

We don't need to know he stared around himself, because that's a given. And instead of giving us a painstaking recount of every flick of eyelash and twitch of nose, a simple sentence like "He focused his senses" reads more naturally—and it's less clunky.

Avoid ever writing lines like "in ways most normal people never tried" in relation to your own characters. You're just leading with your chin.

However, there was nothing; only the ethereal fleeting scent and the tingling sensation that assured him his partner was around and fairly close by.

I'm not going to touch that one. It's priceless.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

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## CHAPTER 18: MM! MM! GOOD!

### Getting Published

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

One thing that makes an M/M submission stand out is the same as something that makes any submission stand out: quality.

\* \* \* \*

Writing well is its own reward. At the very least, it's one sure way to have a never-ending supply of the kinds of stories you love to read. However, very few of us are content with an audience of one—no matter how appreciative. Something in the act of storytelling requires that the tale be shared.

Which brings us to publishing.

You'll notice that I didn't mention money as a big incentive for publishing your work. Of course, we all want to be paid for our hard work—and writing, when done correctly, is very hard work. And there *is* money in publishing, especially in a large and lucrative market like M/M. However, you will not be able to quit your day job based on selling one story—or, likely, even ten. That said, romance is one of the best categories in which to try and earn a living as a writer.

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

Don't bother writing M/M just because it's the hot thing to do. If you don't like M/M, or have no interest in it, don't write it. Just as with other in-demand types of stories, this is not uncommon. Unfortunately, readers and editors can usually tell when you love what you're writing—and when you don't love it, but wrote it because you thought it might get higher sales.

\* \* \* \*

There are easier ways of making money than writing, and there are more lucrative genres and sub-genres to write in than M/M fiction. Don't turn your attention to this field because you imagine it will be easier to break in with sub-standard work. You'll be unpleasantly—and deservedly—surprised.

Although the majority of M/M publishing is happening online through e-publishers, the decimation of traditional publishing's "mid-list" has sent many former mainstream writers searching for new homes on the World Wide Web, and that means the competition for cyber space and book shelf is the fiercest it's ever been.

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

If you do decide to write M/M, please read some first! Read M/M stories, get recommendations from other readers, and do your homework. Editors aren't often impressed when a

submission contains physical improbabilities or impossibilities, or skips over important details. If your story contains the first man in the world with a self-lubricating ass, you're not going to get past the first review (unless, say, the ass in question belongs to a lovely alien lad who just happens to come from a species with that nifty bonus feature). Research body positions for sex scenes. Don't have your 35-year-old heroes orgasm eight times in one day (barring the previously mentioned lovely alien lad—or maybe Superman).

\* \* \* \*

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is wait until your work is ready before you start sending it out.

Believe me, I know how hard that is. You've finished the first draft, you're thrilled, you *love* these characters and this story, you want to share it—you want people to read it and tell you how much they love it too—and you'd like to be paid for all that time and hard work you put into it.

All the same, put the story aside for *a minimum of two weeks*. Leave it alone and work on something else. Give it to your beta readers or trusted CP, hand it over to your critique group. Only when you can look at the writing with fresh eyes—meaning you don't anticipate what the next sentence is as you're reading through it—can you start revising in any meaningful way.

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

Readers are hungry for M/M, and authors know it. In the mad scramble to take advantage of that demand, there can be a tendency to rely on the subgenre, the M/M factor, to carry the whole story. (This applies to other in-demand story elements, too—vampires, BDSM, werewolves, etc.) An author should put into the story the time and effort and attention it deserves, the investment needed to produce a quality story, strong in all aspects. With stories that contain in-demand elements such as M/M, it can be easy to let yourself fall into the mindset of "Well, people are going to buy it anyway, simply because they want to read M/M. So I can skate by on some of the overall quality stuff." For one thing, that's not the attitude any self-respecting writer should have about themselves or their work. For another, it's no longer a true belief. Demand for M/M is very high—but supply is starting to catch up, which means the M/M story written by the author who put in the time and effort is going to trump the story written by the author who decided to skate by on the "They'll buy it because it's M/M" belief.

\* \* \* \*

Revise with the same care and attention you lavish on researching your sex scenes. (Yeah, I know *you!*) Revise with an eye to every single element, from story to semi-colon. Pay attention to every detail.

And only when you have finally and thoroughly polished that manuscript are you allowed to start the submission process.

*The man in the iron mask*

"Josh Lanyon" is a pen name.

One of the first questions you'll want to ask yourself as you consider publishing your writing is whether you will write under your given name or a pen name.

I suggest you use a pen name. Three reasons:

1. You may eventually choose to write something besides romance and erotica (also known as "porn" by many potential mainstream publishers). You may want to write literary fiction, and you may want it under your real name, and when your deathless prose starts appearing it may confuse and disappoint your previous loyal readership—just as your backlist may confuse and disappoint your new readership. I prefer to keep things simple for my readers.

2. There are a lot of nuts out there. I'm not suggesting you might end up battling your local school board over your fitness to retain your teaching position in a classroom full of minors, or going to court with your ex to keep custody of your children, or entertaining impromptu visits from representatives of the local branch of Church of the Looney Tunes. I'm just saying I'd advise you to keep a strong firewall between yourself and the so-called real world.

3. If you do get picked up by a large New York publishing house your new publisher will take a look at your previous sales record, and unless the numbers are in keeping with sell-through on the typical mass market print run, you're going to find yourself with a new pen name (like it or not) anyway—and if your previous pen name was your *real* name ... that's liable to be a little frustrating.

I would also suggest using a masculine or gender neutral name or gender neutral initials for your nom de plume. I realize that this sounds sexist, and I realize that in M/M writing, initials pretty much announce a feminine author, but it still creates a certain subconscious ambivalence, and, as a reader, I find that useful for the suspension of disbelief. While I don't believe that masculine readers or reviewers will dismiss you for being female, they *will* question many things from you that they will not from a male author, regardless of your research or experience.

Beyond using a pen name, I leave it to you how much of a "platform identity" you want to construct. Personally, I think keeping it simple is your best bet. You can still promote online and interact honestly with readers while using a pen name. In fact, unless you're concealing your gender, you can still attend conferences and do booksignings and promote exactly as you would under your own name. Assuming you like that kind of thing.

If you're concealing your gender, that's nobody's business but your own. However, I would advise the following: do not submit your work to female only anthologies (if you are actually a male author), do not write nonfiction articles, essays, or memoirs about your experiences and struggles as a gay man (if you're actually a straight woman), and do not hire anybody to pose as you—let alone disguise yourself with false mustaches, bushy wigs and Groucho Marx glasses. I'm just *sayin'*...

*I'm ooonnnn the first step...*

I had an agent for six years. She was a lovely person, and she sold several projects for me, but she never managed to sell a single piece of gay or M/M fiction. You don't need an agent to write and publish M/M fiction—not even to make a living at writing.

That said, if you do want an agent—and you need an agent to submit to the major New York publishing houses—you go about it the same way you submit to a publisher. You put together a proposal or submission package.

The basic submission package consists of a query letter, an outline and/or synopsis, and the first three (opening) chapters of your novel—which usually works out to about fifty pages.

Most writing books contain information on putting together a book proposal or submission package. One of the most important things to understand is that publishers don't actually freak out over the exact width of your margins or whether you're using Times New Roman or Courier font. The main concern is that everything be easy to read, cleanly presented, and that your writing is the very best it can be. Follow the publisher and agent guidelines to the best of your ability, but don't have a panic attack if something seems a little vague.

If you don't have a copy of the current *Writer's Market*, you might as well invest in one. It's a great tool for beginners. Understand that by the time *WM* gets into print, many of the markets listed are out of date. Still, the articles and general information are very useful, and the market

guide gives you a starting point. After that, you can do your follow up research on the net.

There's also something called *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*, which is geared strictly to selling fiction.

If you're bound and determined to get an agent, buy yourself a copy of *Guide to Literary Agents* or *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents 2008: Who They Are! What They Want! How to Win Them Over*. And then follow up at [www.agentquery.com/](http://www.agentquery.com/).

It's very important that you pay attention to the publisher and editor guidelines. I can't stress this enough. Those guidelines exist for a reason. Don't send erotica to publishers who don't handle erotica. Don't send literary fiction to Harlequin and don't send category romance to Trident Media Group. Don't e-mail chapters to agents who don't accept e-mail queries. Don't snail mail a submission to Loose Id. No one is going to be swayed by your dazzling writing; they're going to be irritated that you don't know how to follow the simplest directions, and they're going to bounce you right out the door. Which means you've just shot one opportunity.

Read the guidelines. Follow the guidelines. Exactly.  
Example (Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press):

As for submitting to Aspen Mountain Press directly, you should have a one-two page synopsis and holding nothing back. I won't ask for the story if the author says, "You have to read the story to find out the end." No. That is not for a publisher. That is for the potential reader. I like the stories to come in to [submissions@aspenmountainpress.com](mailto:submissions@aspenmountainpress.com) as an attachment in .RTF. Authors need to remember agents,



editors and publishers are here to see if the story has the potential to sell.

I like the first twenty pages or so of longer works, the first 10% of something shorter.

Every house, every agent is a little bit different. That's because they're run by people, and people are all a little bit different. They have opinions, preferences, prejudices. You'll minimize your chances of rejection if you have a little respect for these differences. Pay attention to the details.

Now, I'm sure as you glanced over the components of a submission package, it occurred to you that you could submit your book proposal before your book is actually finished. If you've got three terrific chapters, why not polish up your outline, write a synopsis based on that, and start pumping out those query letters?

Don't do it.

Once you're published, once you've built a relationship with an agent, editor, or publisher, yes, you will commonly sell your work based on what is called "a partial." But when you're first starting out, publishers don't know you. They aren't going to buy your work based on a promising start. They're going to read your submission and—assuming it's good—request "the complete." That means they want to read the rest of the manuscript, and that's excellent news.

Unless you haven't completed the rest of the manuscript.

Which happens *a lot*, which is why publishers want to see the complete before they make any decisions—and waste any more time.

Now if you've been hanging on my every word, you're going to have that polished and immaculate manuscript all ready to go.

*Score!*

And if you've been listening to your walkman and shooting spitwads from the back of the class, you're now sweating bullets as you attempt to complete twenty-to-seventy thousand words in two weeks. Yeah, two weeks to ... maybe ... a month. Any longer than that and the editor or agent could be long gone, and even if he or she isn't, they won't remember you or your sparkling prose.

Even if you do manage to complete the rest of the novella or novel within two weeks, it's going to be the first—rough—draft. It's not going to be an example of your best work. Unless that's pretty much typical of your best work, in which case, you might want to take up another hobby.

Okay, back to the proposal process. You need to take time putting together your query letter, but again, don't agonize. If the story sounds like something the editor or publisher is looking for, and the chapters are good, they'll ask to see the complete. Your flawless query letter is not going to change anything if the story isn't something that the publisher is interested in.

Understand also that everyone hates writing query letters, that they always sound stiff and phony. I've read all kinds of articles on writing snappy, sizzling queries. Personally, I prefer a straightforward, businesslike approach. State who you are, what your credentials are (previous publishing credits), and give a back cover-type blurb of the book. Save

the snap, crackle and pop for the actual writing of the book. Check the Resources Section for a sample query letter.

We talked earlier about putting together an outline, and if you did that, here's where it pays off again, because all you have to do is clean up that rough original draft so that it matches how the book actually turned out. Sample original outline in the Resources Section.

From the outline you'll find it quite easy to write a synopsis. Some agents/publishers require outline and synopsis, some require one or the other; read the guidelines and give them what they want. Sample synopsis, in the Resources Section.

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Judith David, editor Loose Id and MLR Press

Read the guidelines, yes. But, to really internalize them, read at least two RECENT books from the publisher. I say recent because, even a year ago, publishers with whom I work weren't taking—seeking out—the volume of M/M, BDSM, ménage and beyond, capture, dubious consent stories that they are now. In some instances, I find the bar is being raised SIGNIFICANTLY in terms of the expectations for the quality of writing in the initial manuscript and the level of heat. Unfortunately, I'm also seeing elsewhere a fall in standards for story, mechanics and character, just to get the heat to a quick release date.

My point is that the market is moving fast. Writers need to be aware that publishers are trying to keep up with it.

\* \* \* \*

You can submit directly to the list of publishers in the Resources section. You don't need an agent. Just take the time to match the right project to the right publisher.

We've also listed a couple of self-publishing providers. I'm not a huge fan of self-publishing, but I did choose to self-publish the third Adrien English novel when I was unable to find anyone to take it on—and that paid off in that the book shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Awards and helped me land a new publisher.

When I say I was unable to find "anyone to take on" *The Hell You Say*, I wasn't including e-publishers. I hadn't discovered e-publishing at that time. In fact, I hadn't even discovered M/M publishing. You have the advantage of me in that you already know that the bulk of M/M publishing is through e-publishers. And if you previously had narrow-minded notions about the quality of e-books and e-publishing, think again. It's big business these days.

If you do decide to self-publish, make sure you get your work professionally edited.

Beyond that, understand that it will be nearly impossible to get your self-published books into bookstores. You'll have to concentrate your promotional and marketing efforts on the Internet. If you're the shy and retiring type—like a lot of writers—that won't break your heart.

The thing is, if you've written publishable quality work, you'll find a publisher. The key lies in writing publishable quality work. And that's not as subjective as you might like to

think. Publishing is a competitive business, and getting more competitive by the day.

\* \* \* \*

*Tell me the odds—On average, how many gay genre or M/M fiction submissions do you receive a week, and of those submissions how many were accepted?*

John Scognamiglio, Kensington Publishing

I receive at least 2 gay genre submissions a week. I receive maybe one M/M fiction submission a month. Last year Kensington published 17 gay and lesbian titles.

Scognamiglio is looking for "strong writing, good characters, a story that will keep me turning the pages. A writer should like what they're writing and not be writing to meet current 'trends'".

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

At one point we seemed to be getting nothing but M/M submissions and we were accepting almost all of them. That has changed. I think we still accept a high number of M/M submissions of those we receive but the more we get, the more the range of quality or marketability varies. And our readers are getting choosier about what M/M they read. So we get a lot and accept less than we used to. That's probably the best answer I can give you.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

We really couldn't come up with an average of submissions per week, as the market fluctuates wildly. We do have several editors reading full time for new submissions. We accept approximately 5% of our submissions.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Speaking strictly of the slush pile, we receive 1-2 M/M submissions a week. We only accept probably 2-3% of the submissions we receive in the slush pile. We do receive direct submissions of M/M work from already-published-by-Samhain authors. Those have a higher acceptance rate.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

Per week? Perhaps one or two.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

In order to find additional authors who might interest us, we do hold a yearly contest, Heat Wave Erotica Writing Contest (which we started four years ago for our Amber Heat erotica imprint). I can take only our experiences with the most recent Heat Wave Contest into consideration. Based on our 2007 contest results, I can say that we received approximately 30-40 manuscripts in the M/M (or F/F ... overall, a mere handful) genre out of 200+ submissions. Of the entire group of submissions, only 7 overall manuscripts were rated high enough by a panel of judges to receive a

contract, and of those 7 manuscripts, 3 of them proved to be M/M erotica. Please note, each year the percentage of "winning manuscripts" has decreased, due, unfortunately, to the decline in quality.

Therefore, we accept a very small percentage of manuscripts ... but please keep in mind, this is again based on open submissions for only a two-week period each year. Our current roster of authors, however, produces a high percentage of new M/M manuscripts, which are typically contracted only on proposal.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Honestly, that number could vary from none to 30. But the (acceptance) percentage is pretty constant, about 25%

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

I would have to put the average per month, and it's probably around 2-4 a month. Since we've started taking M/M stories about a year ago, I think I've only rejected 2 or 3.

\* \* \* \*

*Show me the money*

Here are some numbers to think over. The average self-published novel sells around fifty copies. A low print run for a mass market paperback (which are about the same price as the typical e-book) is seven to ten thousand copies. My fellow M/M authors have quoted everything from one hundred to seven hundred e-book sales in their first year.

\* \* \* \*

*On average, how many books/titles does a first-time unknown M/M author sell in the first year?*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Well, depends on what you mean by unknown. We have several authors who were known for other kinds of romances and switched very successfully to M/M. We have other authors who were unknown to the romance market but had developed a fan base for other stories and have carried those readers over very successfully. If an author was completely unknown and hit big with the first ms, it would be the same as the other author scenarios I described—the author would be writing as many as we could sign him or her to without saturating the market or creating burn out.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

The sales of a first time author will naturally fall short of an established author with several titles out. We encourage new authors to submit short pieces in order to get reader recognition and increase their first time novel sales.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

This is a hard question to answer with a single number because there are untold variables in regards to sales: subgenre, whether the author promotes themselves and their works, if the author releases follow-up works in a timely manner, and many other factors. It's not unheard of for a



first-time M/M author to sell 300-500 copies in the first year. But I've seen it be much higher than that, and much lower.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

That's really a hard question to answer partially because it depends on the genre, subject matter, main conflict, length etc. I've had an author who has sold well over 100 copies of e-books within the first year of release.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

That's difficult to say, since it varies widely from author to author, and it's been only about a year since we published our first M/M book. I can, however, tell you that several of our M/M paperbacks have already made the #1 slot in the "Best-Selling Gay Fiction" list at Amazon, and they continually sweep the Top 10 lists on our own website and third-party retailers. Plus, each of our M/M authors has enjoyed increased sales as they release more titles (beefing up their back catalogues), therefore, many of the older titles in this genre have continued to sell in large numbers throughout the months. Additionally, several of our authors in the M/M genre have now been able to qualify for inclusion in PAN Membership with Romance Writers of America based solely on their sales figures from their "Gay Romances." This is quite astounding, since the majority of authors (e-published or not) have a difficult time achieving this goal.

A first-time author, however, must keep in mind a very important caveat ... an author **MUST** be willing to promote, and effectively. Gone are the days when authors can sit back and relax while a publishing company does promotion for them. There are too many titles being published each month, and only a handful of "Stephen Kings" in this industry. And in the M/M genre (with its limited market appeal), there are zero authors who can claim such popularity, plain and simple. So if an author feels that all they have to do is write a manuscript and they will magically have a fan base standing in line at the first book signing and their royalty checks will keep them in caviar and champagne for months to come, they had better think again! Authors who regularly promote themselves, and concurrently produce manuscript after manuscript, do "reasonably well" for themselves. Those authors who do not promote or create no new manuscripts on a regular basis, will suffer ... and quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

A good launch is 500 or more copies in the first 6 months, but we're not going to drop you if your book only sells 200 copies. A "book" is a 10 to 25K Novella. Most of our work is series or serial, and authors usually have releases monthly, bi monthly, or quarterly.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

*Is it possible to make a living at writing M/M fiction—  
meaning, have you seen it happen?*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

It's very difficult to make a living writing fiction, period. That said, our best-selling M/M authors make as much per year as many print authors. (We're not comparing quantity of books, just dollars.) I live in an expensive area of the country so I'd say you could make the bulk of your annual income from writing M/M, but I personally would have something else to supplement it. I'd say that to almost any author, however.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Absolutely. We have a number of authors making a living wage.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I think it's hard to make a living writing any type of fiction, whether M/M or otherwise. There are very few individuals who can afford to give up their day jobs just to write. That said, I know of an author who does not work outside the home and strictly makes her living as a writer. She writes across genres although primarily M/M fiction. However, I don't know her living situation—if she shares fiscal responsibility with a partner. I wouldn't say it's common though to make a living as an author, no matter the genre.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I believe it is possible to make a living writing M/M fiction, but I haven't seen it happen. I've seen a lot of erotic authors make a living at writing erotica, but it has come after putting in years of hard work. In the beginning you really have to work to find a fan base, need to let your publisher know of venues to advertise, have a newsletter to update fans, gather a mailing list, all those sorts of things. Saying all that though ... it is possible for an author of M/M to make enough to pay their heating bill, and that I have seen.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

It depends on how high one sets their standard of living. Several of our M/M authors are now seeing regular and sizable royalty checks that certainly help pay the monthly bills, but no one in this industry (to the best of my knowledge) has ever purchased a mansion based on their income as an M/M fiction author. Authors must always keep this in mind. If any writer is in the business to make a fortune, they will be sorely disappointed. On the other hand, if authors make a concerted effort to promote themselves, to write new manuscripts on a regular basis, a steady stream of income is a definite possibility. But, sadly enough, there will be no guarantees that the "popularity wave" will last indefinitely. Trends come and go, so an author must also be flexible enough to adjust to the industry and customer demands.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Is it possible to make a living writing e-books? The sex of the characters doesn't enter into the equation. How fast do you write and how well do you sell? How much do your mortgage payment, car payment, and utilities add up to? How many people are you trying to support? Does your spouse work? Many of our authors are full time, professional writers. Not many of them are driving Mercedes, far as I know, but the bills get paid. And the reality of e-publishing is, we're not writing to mainstream audiences. We're all here because we color outside the lines. We're a Niche market. If what you're after is 100K advances and the NY Times best seller list, figure out what NY wants and go after it with all you've got. If what you write is more important than how much money you're making, then chances are you can find a home in E-publishing—if you're good. But remember, we ARE a niche market. We're not looking for what NY produces. Don't take a NY genre and theme, make it M/M, and try to sell it to us. You've got to think outside the box.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

I'm sure it's possible, I've not seen it yet, but I do know authors that make a living writing e-books, so why not?

\* \* \* \*

I don't want to dampen anyone's enthusiasm, but I know very few writers who make a living at writing fiction.

Nonfiction, yes. It's definitely possible to freelance enough non-fiction to earn a decent wage. In fact, most of the money in publishing *is* in nonfiction.

The fiction writers who earn a living are those who consistently and steadily produce quality stories. Granted, if you're prolific enough, and you're working in a hot market, you can compensate for quality with quantity. That's how you know there is no God.

\* \* \* \*

*Do you make a living at your writing?*

Laura Baumbach, author of *Out There in the Night, A Bit of Rough*, etc.

No. I made \$9000/year from it in 2006 and roughly \$8000/yr in 2007.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless, Border Roads*, etc.

You crack me up. You're joking, right? It keeps me in pizza and beer.

\* \* \* \*

Carol Lynne, author of *Riding the Wolf, Open to Possibilities*, etc.

Yes, I'm very lucky that I have the opportunity to write full-time and because I work seven days a week/ten to fifteen hours a day, I'm able to produce enough that I make a comfortable living.

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

No, it is a supplement to my income and, as I'm looking at retirement in a couple of years, a very important supplement.

\* \* \* \*

Jet Mykles, author of *Hell*, *Purgatory*, etc.

Unfortunately no, but I'd say I'm about a quarter of the way there. If I didn't have a family to help support, I might be closer.

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

No. However, one of us works as an advertising copywriter. The other is a lawyer. So very different types of writing earn us a living.

\* \* \* \*

J.M. Snyder, author of *Crushed*, *Power Play*, etc.

At this point in my career, no. But then again, this is the first year I've made more than a handful of dollars off my writing. Prior to 2006, I only self-published, and the sad fact of the matter is, you'll never be rich that way. In September of 2006, I began e-publishing, and the increase in my sales has surprised even me. I anticipate a time in the future when I will become self-sufficient with my writing, but still realize that is several years away.

\* \* \* \*

Kira Stone, author of the Vampire Magic series, etc.

Not yet, but that's the goal. And that goal creeps a little closer every day. \*g\*

\* \* \* \*

### *The magic formula*

Yeah, I know you've been reading patiently, waiting for this moment. Well, Frodo, Luke, and Dorothy I've already *told* you the secret. The secret sauce recipe is in your hands—and possibly on your clothes.

It's all about the quality of the writing. And the secret of quality writing lies in paying attention to the details.

Take time and trouble to craft realistic but loveable characters—first and foremost, really think about your characters. And then start working out a plot with enough depth and conflict to carry the story of those characters the necessary distance. Think about the arc of the relationship.

Pay extra attention to dialogue, to pacing, to your action scenes whether they take place between the sheets or during a car chase. Give some thought to what your story is really about. Yeah, it should be fun, but that doesn't mean it has to be meaningless. And don't forget the possibilities to up the emotional ante through use of hurt/comfort and plausible angst.

And take the time to edit your work. Acceptance may not be quick and easy, but rejection is. Don't make it easy for editors and agents to pass on your work.

\* \* \* \*



K.M. Frontain, editor

The biggest mistake? Sending a manuscript that is clearly not polished, that shows all the beginning writer mistakes, that indicates a lack of writing knowledge; manuscripts that haven't been checked for spelling or grammar, misused POV or massive plot flaws. Even if the author follows the submission guidelines exactly, subbing material that obviously hasn't seen the benefit of a stern and honest crit forum is not a good idea. To beginning authors, I say, "Get a better, professional grip on the writing craft before you submit a story. Learn grammar and punctuation. Brave the crit forums. Critique for others. If you want a good manuscript, learn how to edit your own work with a critical eye."

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

*Describe your ideal M/M submission*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

My ideal M/M submission is an interesting story that has a hook our readers would love reading, characters you can care about, a central romantic element and a strong, distinctive voice. It would also be free of major errors, with good grammar, correct dialogue punctuation, and a good sense of plot and style. The end of the story would be as strong as the beginning and middle, not rushed or contrived. The most important thing would be that the author stay true to what

their strength is, rather than trying to live up to a false market expectation.

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Authors who take their writing seriously and write good hot stories with at least some romantic elements in them.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

My ideal M/M author: One with unlimited imagination, who surprises me with the creativity in every submission. Writes clean, is easy to work with, accepts criticism and praise with equal grace. Writes characters I fall in love with, and stories that will stick with me for years to come. One who understands that promotion is as important as writing, and manages to balance it all with no problem whatsoever.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

Ideally, it would be paranormal or science fiction, written in third person with sensual, consummated love scenes between equally strong partners, although their strengths can and should be in different areas. There should be conflict on a couple of levels, both internal and external. In addition there should be a "universal" experience that all the readers can relate to, a situation or feeling that resonates with them and connects with them on an emotional level. Characters should have growth; they should change for the better

(hopefully, unless this is a literary work), overcome some "real" obstacle that anyone could relate to (i.e. fear of heights, fear of repeating a past mistake, etc.). There should be reasonable, logical motivation for their actions and decisions, and those actions and decisions should have consequences. In short, my ideal M/M submission would follow the basic guidelines of any good story.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

A manuscript (or an author who knows how to write such a manuscript) containing high emotion, an interesting plot, sizzling sex scenes (for erotica stories) and, the bottom line, a firm grasp of the English language! 99.9999% of all manuscripts we receive in our yearly contest are rejected based on misspellings, punctuation issues, grammar problems, sentence structure, etc. we find within the first few paragraphs. Authors need to learn their craft, and those who do not ... well, the slush pile grows increasingly higher thanks to those individuals. No editor worth their weight in salt will deal with an illiterate author, especially one who acts like a prima donna and refuses to alter a single word, and unfortunately with e-publishers and small presses popping up every week (and run by owners who haven't a clue how to construct a proper sentence), these sort of authors are becoming the "norm." Frankly, it's shameful.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

A short, hot, sci-fi or paranormal read that's got enough plot to stand on its own no matter what the sex of the primary characters, and enough sex to scorch your computer screen. And if we don't fall in love with your heroes on the first page, we're not interested.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

An ideal submission for anything would be a well written/edited story, characters the reader can identify with, a story that keeps the reader glued to the pages, and an author willing to participate with us as a publisher.

\* \* \* \*

*But does it work?*

Remember those story hook ideas we were playing around with in the beginning—the one's adapted from heterosexual romance novels? I asked our publishers to give me their off-the-cuff responses to each one.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Any of these could be a Torquere book provided that the plot, characters, and writing style fit our house philosophy and provided they had the hook our particular market enjoys, which is a strong romance element along with the other genres the story fits into.

\* \* \* \*

*Nick Lane, leader of a Special Operations force is sent into the wilds of Iraq to rescue his missing ex-lover, a Navy SEAL. (Remember, this is the story idea based on those two memoir book deals in Publisher's Weekly.)*

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Suzanne Brockmann is doing another gay romance? Hot doggy! I suspect this would appeal to a gay male audience and if it was done right, would cross over to female readers as well.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I'd love to see the full manuscript on this. Sounds dark, adventurous, very interesting. This is what I'm looking for. Strong alpha males on the hunt.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

This I initially said "no" to. Why? First off, Navy SEALs rescue their own. Second, both main characters are specially trained ops, so there is equality in strengths where it is easy to say, "Why does this character need rescuing when he is capable himself?" Now, if this ex-lover is a politician, an envoy, or an oilman, someone without the survival skills of a SEAL, then you have a more unique situation.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

That depends mostly on genre. Is it's sci-fi or paranormal?  
Have you read our guidelines? 'Cause this doesn't sound like  
you sent it to the right house.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

Not something I see a lot in M/M stories actually, most of  
our stories have a dominate hero and a secondary hero, I've  
got a feeling there'd be some strong, sensual competition  
between the two very MALE heroes.

\* \* \* \*

*When his partner mysteriously disappeared searching for  
the legendary lost city of Ubar, Charlie was set on finding  
him. And, infuriatingly, he needed the help of Jack Martin, the  
brilliant archeologist.*

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

His previous sex partner? Archeology partner? I'm  
assuming we have a potential ménage here as well as the  
age-old question over which guy to pick (that question would  
be put on hold as they save each others' lives and see exotic  
spots). That plot could be very hot. (In case you haven't  
guessed by now, I'm expecting sex in these stories.)

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

I'd want to see a more thorough, in-depth synopsis on this project. How the author would strike the balance between Charlie searching for his partner—as written I assume partner means life partner, but maybe it's just a work partner?—especially when it sounds like Jack is going to be Charlie's love interest. Makes me go hmmm.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I'd want to see this one because of the potential for emotional disaster. You'd think Charlie is in love with his missing partner, but Jack enters the equation, and then what happens?

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Again, where's the sci-fi or paranormal element? I suppose this could work, but it sounds like a M/M makeover of *Romancing the Stone*.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

I like these kinds of stories, whether they're M/M or M/F. I love the transition the character has to make from being overly annoyed by someone to falling in love.

\* \* \* \*

*Time had run out for Alexander. Despite his struggles he was going to have to sell his failing family business to*

*corporate raider, Scott Harper—his former lover, whom he had not seen for nine years but for whom he still felt nothing but hatred.*

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

I have to admit this is my favorite of the four, even though it does sound a wee bit like a sweet romance. But I see the potential for all those quarrels with all the unrequited love underneath.

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Could be interesting. What's the saying about there only being a thin line between love and hate? However, having seen similar ideas in the past, if too much time is spent focused on the hate, the story gets old fast. Tension is good, all-out hatred and disgust isn't as easy to stomach.

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

I'd pass on this one. If the business is failing then it makes sense to sell it. Holding a grudge for nine years sounds, on the surface immature (unless the grudge is the fact that Scott killed Alexander's family or something like that). The conflict as stated feels very contrived.

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Probably not even if it is a paranormal. Personally, I'm a pretty hard sell on the "I hate you but fuck me anyway" themes.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books



This one doesn't really appeal to me, there has to be a good reason for his hatred and it would take a very well written story to make him getting over that hatred seem legit. Not an easy task.

\* \* \* \*

*Mark Whittier is searching for his twin brother who disappeared during a photo shoot on the Navajo Reservation, much to the displeasure of hot and handsome Tribal Policeman Ralph Goodeagle—rumored to have started an affair with the missing man shortly before he vanished.*

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Ah ha. The twin (must be an identical twin, right?) problem. That's always a crowd pleaser.

\* \* \* \*

Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing

Sounds like it has possibility. I'd be interested in seeing the whole manuscript.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

This is one I'd want to read the partial and synopsis on. You could easily have an internal conflict with Goodeagle regarding who he really wants, you have the unique factors of the Native American lifestyle and experience, and you have the mystery of the missing brother in which Goodeagle could

also be a prime suspect. This is a story that could go lots and lots of ways.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret Riley, Changeling Press

Chances are we're going to pass on this one, even if it is a paranormal. Sounds too much Tony Hillerman gone M/M. Not looking for standard NY themes with a M/M twist. Or any other twist.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

Rumors huh? Falling in love w/ your brother's boyfriend/girlfriend is another topic that has to be written right or it becomes cliché, or the resolution too easy.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

As in all cases listed above, the premise has potential ... it all depends on whether it is placed in the hands of a capable author. Give any one premise to a handful of writers, and you could receive everything from absolute "total rejects" to potentially riveting and brilliant masterpieces. Again, it depends on the author and their skills in "storytelling."

\* \* \* \*

And this, of course, is the lesson I want you to take away. If you're good enough at what you do, you'll find a publisher for your stories.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

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## CHAPTER 19: RENT BOYS

### Marketing and Promotion

\* \* \* \*

Bobby Michaels, author of *The Veteran*, *Jock Dorm: Dar and Gregg*, etc.

First of all, writing is an obsession. You don't write because you love it, you write because you have to—you have no other choice. Sticking with it is the first thing. The second is to be open to criticism. I have two people I show my work to as I'm writing. I don't always agree with what they say, but I always listen. Third, and this was a very hard one for me, you have to believe in yourself and your ability. Fourth and last, you have to constantly strive to do better. That's how you get better.

\* \* \* \*

I think that there are going to be, in the next few years, more and more ways to publish than by paper book. My publisher is an e-publisher and my books are downloaded by my readers to their computers or their handheld devices. I think the internet is going to be a major player in publishing both from the standpoint of actually producing books but especially the advertising of them. I'd hate to admit how many of those e-mails from Amazon.com with the book

recommendations in them have sent me to their site to order one of the books listed.

I think, though, that this is going to force writers to become more and more involved in the marketing of their books, something I don't especially see as a good thing. Writers should write—marketers should market. I don't know many writers who are good marketers or the other way around.

I wish that success in this business was just about the writing. Unfortunately, you can write the best book to ever throw two guys into each other's arms, but if no one knows about it, you're not going to get the fame and fortune—or even the two hundred bucks of royalties—rightfully yours.

In fact, it's actually reached the point where some publishers request a marketing plan with a complete manuscript submission.

That's because the way that readers find out about your work is through marketing and promotion. It doesn't matter how good your book is if no one has heard of it.

Laura Baumbach was kind enough to volunteer an example of a very rough marketing plan for *Details of the Hunt*; basically this amounted to a paragraph in her query letter to a New York publishing house:

My plans to market this manuscript are varied and comprehensive. I belong to a marketing co-op of M/M authors who run ads in gay specific venues. I am scheduled to attend the high profile events in NYC, the West Hollywood Books, two national romance conferences, and several smaller author events. I provide promotional materials such as bookmarks

and excerpts to bookstores and reader events and giveaways. While at these events, I plan on arranging book signings in local gay friendly bookstores. I routinely participate in reader chats and Internet loops to promote my name and my titles. I run ads on theme specific websites. For this book I would target science fiction sites and magazines such as Realms of Fantasy. My website is professionally designed, easy to read and updated regularly. On it you'll find a listing of the recent writing awards I have been nominated for and presented with. I have an active blog and also participate on the Amazon connect plog to reach readers. I also service in panels at conferences and volunteer for work on committees within the professional writing associations I belong too such as RWA, and EPIC. I'm open to further suggestions from my publishers for additional avenues for promotion.

Some marketing and promotion is done by the publisher. Mostly this consists of sending review copies to review sites. Ask your publishers where they send their M/M releases for review. Do your own research and check your publisher's listing against your own; new review sites are springing up all the time. And if your book has crossover potential, meaning you've written, for example, an M/M mystery, an M/M fantasy novel, or an M/M historical, check out genre-specific review sites as well. There are some great ones out there like Speak Its Name for historical GLBT novels, or Reviewing the Evidence for (print) mysteries. And don't overlook blogs and bloggers. Some of these informal sites do as in-depth and well-written reviews as the official review sites. Yes, it costs

money to give books away. It's called *advertising*. Budget for it.

One more thought on the topic of reviews. Few things stroke your ego more than a flattering critique from a sharp reviewer. But, gratifying though that is, the real value in reviews lies in the repetition of your name for readers, which means that good, bad, or indifferent doesn't matter as much as getting reviews in as many places as possible.

*(But yes, I agree, getting a bad review sucks.)*

\* \* \* \*

Kiren, TwoLips Reviews

Write the story that you want to write—not what the market dictates. With so many choices, it's true that readers tend to look for something new but trends, much like bell-bottoms and mullets, will pass so be true to yourself and your characters.

\* \* \* \*

As wonderful as your book is, unless something in the blurb triggers a reader's interest, she or he probably won't buy it until they've either read enough tantalizing reviews or heard some positive word of mouth. That's why you want lots of reviews—why it's even worth investing in print review copies if necessary (especially if you've self-published). And that's why it's worth giving away copies to readers—and offering free fiction on your website.

If that free story is good enough, it's the best possible sales pitch for the rest of your work. (And don't

underestimate the simple pleasure of feedback from readers; besides, building a loyal fan base is what it's all about.)

\* \* \* \*

### Bella, TwoLips Reviews

Love what you do. If you love what you do, your readers will be able to tell in every word you write. Know your audience and credit us with intelligence. Promote your work. Be loyal to your fans. They will be loyal to you. Don't ever kill off a heroine or hero.

\* \* \* \*

The major portion of marketing and promotion will be your responsibility—and that's true whether you're self-published, e-published, or traditionally published through a major New York house.

Invest in a couple of good books on promotion geared to writers. I recommend *Guerilla Marketing for Writers: 100 Weapons to Help You Sell Your Work* by Levinson, Frishman and Larsen, and *How to Publish and Promote Online* by M.J. Rose and Angela Adair-Hoy.

I asked Allie McKnight, in charge of marketing and technology at Loose Id, a few questions about self-marketing for authors.

*How important is promotion and marketing to an author's success?*

This is one of those catch-22 questions. Promotion and marketing expose an author's work to a broader audience. But no amount of promotion or marketing can make a poor



book into a best-seller. The book itself must capture the readers, and the best marketing is word of mouth. It's my opinion that authors should focus on getting their book into as many hands as possible, while looking to cultivate positive impressions.

Name three essential things an author should/could do to promote her work.

A. Understand the story you're selling and reduce it down to a sharp premise and a clever hook. That is, spend most of your marketing time developing the book's "branding," i.e., something like, "She's a rich man's Cinderella, right down to her three year old Jimmy Choos, but her Prince Charming's more interested in pumpkins than pumps." It sounds silly out of context, but it contains key elements people will remember, and from there you can call it a Cinderella story with a twist—riches to rags, or concentrate on the way the two characters are different from each other. Plus the tone says chick lit, especially with the mention of shoe types. Every promotional item—including the cover art—should ideally be designed around that theme.

B. Use professionals. Nothing turns readers off faster than promo you printed off your desk jet. No swag is better than swag people are going to pitch. So, put your time and money into communicating your marketing hook to a professional or using a professional printing service, and think hard about whether the world needs one more pin, pen or Post-it stack. Same thing with a website. Get it professionally designed. If you can't afford that, go with a low graphics solution and use a simple template. There are plenty of standard designs that

come with software like Word Press. Anything's better than geocities or websites you have to scroll forever to read.

C. Have a website or blog that allows you some form of communication with readers. Readers like to express their opinions. They like to know about you and your next project. As above, use professionals, but be sure to update frequently with little tidbits of news or ideas, anything to keep them coming back frequently.

*In your opinion, what is the single most effective promotional tool you've seen?*

I've never seen a tool that works for everyone. If you're a blogger and you like blogging and you're good at it, blogs are an excellent tool. If you're not, they're worse than no blog. E-mail lists can be equally effective, if you like to distribute short stories or parts of your upcoming works in progress—though you can do that on a blog, as well.

I suppose I'd say a website is very nearly essential for promotion right now. But a bad website can't help you, and it can hurt you. Go for simple and add on as you see what you can reasonably maintain.

*Anything else you want to add or say?*

Right now, when you're planning your promotion, you're probably excited and eager. A bottomless font of energy. When your book comes out, that buzz will carry a week or two at most. Be honest with yourself. Plan promotion that you can do and maintain, that won't be a burden to you to do, and won't keep you promoting when you should be writing.

And finally, the best promotion is to write a good book. So focus your efforts there, and when you've sold the first one, get to work on the next.

I'll be the first to admit that my strong point is not marketing or promotion, but there are certain things every writer can do.

The very first thing is to attach a sig file on all your outgoing messages (unless you don't want people to know what you're writing, in which case you need to come up with an email address and account for your pen name).

Your sig file should be no more than four lines long. It's not your resume; it's simply the title of your latest available work and your website address. Maybe your blog address too. Change your sig file every month or so, because people grow used to it and it becomes invisible.

The second thing you need is a good website.

The key to a good website is that it's easy to navigate, and that you keep the content fresh. Meaning you update the site every time you've got a new story out, and you offer free fiction and/or contests on a regular basis.

Your website is like your business card. You have to have one. It needs to look professional ([www.joshlanyon.com/](http://www.joshlanyon.com/)).

\* \* \* \*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

Have a hook. Both in your overall marketing and in each novel. When we started, gay romance novels in the tradition of Harlequin and the like was our hook. It got a lot of media

attention, and that attention got the attention of agents and publishers.

\* \* \* \*

In addition to a website you need a mailing list because even your most devoted fans don't visit your website every month. If you want them to buy your new work when it first comes out, you've got to make sure readers stay informed.

You can do fancy mailing lists—there are programs and software for that—or you can start cheap and simple with a Yahoo or Google group ([groups.yahoo.com/group/JoshLanyon/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/JoshLanyon/)).

Some writers start actual web discussion groups, which is great if you have the time and energy to moderate.

You'll also probably need to consider a blog of some kind.

A blog is an online journal or weblog. It's used to interact with readers on a more regular and personal basis than a mailing list affords. Some people do daily updates, I try to do mine weekly. I admit I enjoy the discussions generated at my LiveJournal.com blog a lot ([jgraeme2007.livejournal.com/](http://jgraeme2007.livejournal.com/)), although I don't know how much they've influenced sales of my work.

Promote yourself as an expert—assuming you have an area of expertise. Perhaps you have some area of expertise that ties in with your fiction: the law or gardening or a particular period of history. Most of my LiveJournal posts have to do with writing, which ties in naturally with my role as an authority on M/M and mystery-crime fiction writing. But as writers we all have something to say about writing, we all

have experiences and opinions to share, and you'll find that many readers—especially the aspiring writers—will find posts on such topics as writing dialogue, or ridding your work of exposition, or handling POV more riveting than you might imagine.

Again, there are lots of options for free blogging, or you can pay to have a blog professionally designed. The main thing, in my opinion, is to not subject visitors to a constant barrage of advertising. Nobody's going to keep tuning in for that. What you want to do is post about things that interest you, things that readers can respond to so that discussion builds from there.

If that doesn't sound like you, maybe you can try banding together with some other writers and do a group blog. That takes some of the pressure off. In fact, group promotions are one of the more painless ways to promote your work. Sharing expense and effort often has the added pay off of exposing your work to fans of your writing and promotional partners.

One good thing is that there are plenty of things you can do to promote your work that are free or inexpensive—beyond the investment of your time (and that actually is one of your most valuable assets, so spend it wisely).

When it comes to promotion, you're aiming for a cumulative effect. I don't think any one thing is the key; the goal is to try a bunch of different things to get your name out in front of readers.

One of the easiest things you can do is take active part in a number of online communities and discussion groups. Joining a group you have a legitimate and genuine interest in,

and then actively participating in casual conversation, offers a great way to reach potential readers. And it's good for you—writing is a lonely, self-absorbed business. It's healthy to communicate with people about something besides yourself and your writing.

But I caution you strongly: do not join discussion groups merely to spam them with announcements of your releases. Rude and oblivious writers have been doing that for years, and most Internet groups are highly sensitive to being used as an audience for your commercials. You won't convince people to buy your books, but you may very well convince them to *not* to buy your book. Nobody likes a spammer.

Join groups that you really want to take part in—and take part. If your posts show you to be an interesting and intelligent person, odds are in your favor that people will begin clicking on your sig file and checking out your website. Then, if the writing excerpts on your site are good, people will start buying your work.

\* \* \* \*

Raven, acquiring editor for M/M at Loose Id

In marketing, know your audience. If you're marketing to an Internet group devoted to romance, guide them toward the romance in your story. If you're marketing to an science fiction group, make sure they know about that spiffy race whence comes our aforementioned alien lad. If it's to an M/M group, point them toward the M/M content. But don't exclude—don't hide the M/M aspect from the romance folks, the romance from the S/F folks, the S/F from the M/M folks;

just make sure they're particularly aware of the specific elements you know appeal to them. Every element should be integral to the story, woven seamlessly throughout, so the romance readers and the S/F readers and the M/M readers all find satisfaction within the content.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

### *Tips for marketing and promotion*

The Romantics, authors of *Hot Sauce*, *Razor Burn*, etc.

We have found that being able to self-market is essential. Whether you self-publish or have a publisher (we have done both), the business has some of the worst promotion out there. You have to do a lot of PR and be willing to do a lot of the heavy lifting for the media when they are interested. We have written many articles and completed interviews via email where we basically write the article for the journalist. You have to send review copies and follow-up with every lead. Also, keep an electronic "scrapbook" of all media clippings to show others, including agents and publishers, to prove the effectiveness of your marketing. Surprisingly, media coverage snowballs. Even when other media have covered you, others are more interested, not less, when your story has already been written. There doesn't seem to be a "scoop" in literature. Journalists will see your story somewhere and want to do another like it for their publication.

\* \* \* \*

Adrianna Dane, author of *Mariposa Soul*, *The Seductive Tale*, etc.

Ah, marketing and promotion. There's so much to be said on that subject. I do a variety of things and don't spend all my time in strictly one direction. I'm not generally an extrovert so it does take work. This is an area where I need to challenge myself. I sometimes participate in loop chats, I blog, I create bookmarks and postcards, I attend at least one convention per year, sometimes more, I maintain a website or three, I do some podcasting, I do interviews, and I've just started to participate in panels and workshops. I try to be cost effective in what I choose to do and I am always looking for new ways to reach readers. If I can think of a way to approach it that will work for me, even if it means I'm outside of my comfort zone, I'll see about giving it a try. I look at and study what others have done, but just because it works for them, doesn't mean it will work for me. I have to put my own spin on things. Creativity is just as important in marketing as in writing.

\* \* \* \*

Kayelle Allen, author of *Wulf*, *Jawk*, etc.

The biggest thing for me is to involve other authors. I have learned that while others are indeed my competition, we are all in this together. I regularly invite others onto my personal group to do promos, author chats, featured author days, and contests. I partner with others when my new books come out. Why? Their readers are now suddenly aware of me. They tell their readers to come over and visit on my site. My personal



group on Yahoo doubled within a year, and then doubled again. Sales increased. I'd say being open to others has been my biggest success, and the bonus of it is that I have gained many wonderful friends.

\* \* \* \*

T.A. Chase, author of *Here Be Dragons*, *No Going Home*, etc.

The one thing working best for me, besides finding a co-op of like-minded authors to join and cross-promote, is my blog. I've found readers like to know what's going on in their favorite authors' lives. Whether it's a movie I've gone to see or a song I've found particularly enjoyable. I do a quick update every day. If you're regular about when you do your update, whether it's once a day or once a week, readers will come to check you out and it's a good way to get them interested in your books without having to chase them down.

\* \* \* \*

The following are a collection of tips and tricks that arose during a brainstorming session at the online group homopromo: [groups.yahoo.com/group/homopromo/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/homopromo/). Some cost nothing but your time. Some require financial investment.

—Hold contests, scavenger hunts and website giveaways (including everything from free books to gift baskets, candles, etc.).

—Purchase professionally made bookmarks to hand out at signings, mail to bookstores, give out at conferences.

- Post excerpts from new releases on mailing and discussion lists.
- Buy Google adwords.
- Exchange banners and links with other authors; set up or take part up author webrings.
- Buy banners and online ads at review and other GLBT sites.
- Buy print ads in GLBT or genre-specific venues.
- Maintain a MySpace presence.
- Do podcasts.
- Join an advertising co-op with other authors.
- Enter your work for awards like the Eppies or the Lambda Literary Awards.
- Buy or make video trailers on websites and YouTube.
- Network on sites like GoodReads, FaceBook, etc.
- Get your stories accepted by the larger and more prestigious e-publishers.
- Attend conferences and workshops—taking part in panels.
- Conduct online writing workshops and seminars.
- Do booksignings and live appearances.
- Hire a publicist or promotional company.
- Write reviews or nonfiction articles in your area of expertise or on the writing life.
- Take part in online chats.
- And—in my opinion the single most important thing you can do—brand yourself through your writing.

By now, my faithful readers, you know what to expect in a Josh Lanyon novel. If you don't like my work, you would call

this writing predictable. If you do like my work, you'll find it reliable and consistent. The thing is, no matter how much you write, your work has to stay at the level of excellence and originality that your core readership expects from you. You can never take those readers for granted. If you offer them quantity in place of quality, your brand name becomes crap.

I can only imagine what your logo will look like.

One final thought about promotion: I made a conscious decision a long time ago that I would never spend so much time and effort promoting that it cut into the quality of my work. Because this is a risk. You can lose entire days to loops and chats and blogging and interviews and before you know it, you've got a deadline crashing down on you.

I try to do three things toward promotion each day. It may be nothing more than posting an excerpt on a discussion list, responding to comments on my LiveJournal, and taking part in a live chat in the evening, but it all adds up.

Different techniques work with different books and different authors; no one thing works all the time with every reader except writing a terrific book. *That's* the best marketing tool around.

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## CHAPTER 20: FAMOUS LAST WORDS

\* \* \* \*

Treva Harte, Loose Id

Write it. Finish it. Make us believe it.

\* \* \* \*

If you give ten writers the same plot blurb and put them to work, I guarantee that you'll get ten totally different stories with ten sets of totally different characters. Sure, there will be similarities, but we all bring our individual background, unique perspective, and particular brand of imagination to the work.

You can memorize every single thing I've said about writing, and you can put it all into practice, but your stories will remain your own. The thing that makes the oldest tale in the world seem fresh and new has to do with that inimitable something the author brings to it—and no two authors bring the same thing.

Not everything that works for me will work for you. That's one reason I enlisted the help of so many other talented writers—not to mention reviewers, editors, and publishers. There is no one way to write a book or tell a story. The only certainty is that good writing is hard work—and that hard work generally pays off.

I hope you'll find most of the opinions and information gathered here of use. If you take nothing else away, remember that there is no such thing as a born writer. Some

people may be gifted with a certain knack, but writing skill is something that develops with time and practice. Persistence and discipline are every bit—if not more—important than raw talent.

If this is what you want to do, there's nothing to stop you. It's up to you now.

*All she wrote*

*Sasha Knight, Samhain Publishing*

Familiarize yourself with a variety of the published work currently available. Do your research. When you're interested in submitting to a publisher, read some of what they've already published. Find critique partners who are comfortable with the genre and, after you've gone over the manuscript until you can't see straight, have them go over it with a fine-tooth comb as well. Submit the most polished product you can.

Pay attention to submission guidelines at the publishers. Be professional and courteous. Treat your writing as a job, treat the publishers as professionals—and expect to be treated the same in return. Publishing is a business—never forget that.

That said, love what you do, really love it, because writing is a difficult job, but the more you love it, the more that will come across in your writing. Don't give up, but also don't expect to contract the first book you write to the first person you submit it to. Part of the writing job includes rejection. Consider the rejection, and any feedback you receive, and see what you can learn from it. Then move on. Revise. Or don't. Keep writing. Keep moving forward. Keeping learning and

growing as an author. And celebrate when you finally get that contract.

And then start the writing process all over again.

\* \* \* \*

Sandra Hicks, Aspen Mountain Press

Advice? Study your craft. Your craft is writing a compelling fictional tale. Just because your story features M/M relationships doesn't mean you can throw conventional writing wisdom, experience and practice out the window. Read. A lot. Both fiction and non-fiction works so you can study writing. And, if you are not gay, I would suggest having someone you know who is gay read your stuff to see how true the emotions, situations, and reactions are for a gay couple.

\* \* \* \*

Trace Edward Zaber, Amber Quill Press

These days, it's very easy to get published. With the Internet consuming our lives, many people who write a blog or send an e-mail also "assume" they are authors. Wrong! Unfortunately, many publishing houses are also being formed by these very same individuals. So first, authors must be aware of this and they *must* learn their craft! No doubt about it! Learn punctuation, learn sentence construction, etc. These are the "tools of the trade," so no skimping can be done here, unless an author doesn't care about quality. Then an author must read every "how to write" book on the shelves at their local library, and even join a critique group to learn how to deal with rejection and criticism. And finally, if an individual

still yearns to write after all of that, they must research every single company and its history before submitting a manuscript. Too many authors in the past few years have been "duped" by hitching their wagons to the "newest hot e-publisher or small press" star based on word of mouth, only to wonder why the company "forgets" to pay royalties or folds within a year's time. What many authors don't seem to realize is that many new publishers were formed by frustrated authors, and many of these individuals have never run a successful lemonade stand, let alone a quality—not to mention, profitable—publishing house! Research is the name of the game these days, especially with so many fly-by-night companies popping up. Therefore, authors owe it to themselves to invest time in this endeavor. If not, they will be sorry in the majority of cases.

\* \* \* \*

Tina Burns, Liquid Silver Books

Really, no matter what genre you're writing there are some key things you want to make sure your story does:

1—Makes sense. You'd be surprised at how many stories don't.

2—Well developed characters. That doesn't mean a ton of backstory, but try to write 3 dimensional characters.

Make sure it's critiqued. And not by someone who doesn't know how to write and just gushes over it, a publisher can tell which authors have those type of critique partners.

3—Find the right publisher for your story. Research. If you've written a mainstream M/M mystery then submitting to

an erotica publisher will not get you published. Make sure the publisher is solid in their business practices.

4—And probably the most important, have fun. Write what you love, not what's the "HOT" topic. Trust me, publishers and editors can tell when you've written a story to "sell" vs. from your heart.

\* \* \* \*

S.A. Clements, Torquere Press

Research your market. If you write soft romances with no sex, you're looking for a different publisher than you are if you write traditional gay male erotica. If you write threesomes with men and women, your market is different than if you write erotic M/M only romance. Query your potential publisher to see if they're right for you, which will save a lot of rejection in the long run.

Be professional. Read the submission guidelines. Send us an interesting synopsis and query letter.

Write us a good story.

Just do it!

\* \* \* \*

Anthony Bidulka, author of *Amuse Bouche*, *Sundowner Ubuntu*, etc.

There is a lot of advice out there for people wanting to write. I can only offer my slant. First, I feel it's important to know what kind of writer you want to be. What is your definition of being a successful writer? Is it to see your short story or poem in print? Is it simply the act of making the time



to sit down and put pen to paper? Is it to show what you can do to family and friends? Is it to become published and sell lots of books and make money? Is it to educate? Is it to entertain? Is it a career? A hobby? A love affair that is hot and quick, never meant to last forever?

Second, set reasonable goals, achieve them, celebrate (more on that later), set new goals.

Third, communicate with other writers. Spend time with writers. Take a class. Join a local or provincial or national writers group. Meet people who see the world the way you do (or maybe not), who can dispense personal "how to" advice. Try to understand how the writing life fits with your own.

The fourth and last piece of advice I have is for if and when you do become a writer, in whatever way, shape or form: never forget to be grateful and celebrate. To this day, for even the slightest achievement or milestone, for every good book review, or the first time I see the cover art for a new book, for every bookseller who invites me to read in their store, I am grateful and I celebrate. I celebrate being a writer. It's what I do, it's who I am, it's me.

\* \* \* \*

Laney Cairo, author of *Fand*, *Undercover Blues*, etc.

Is there anything I can say that doesn't sound pretentious? Write, write, write. Doing a college degree in writing isn't necessary, it might even put you off writing completely, but the occasional class on the technical side of writing can only improve the writer's skills.

In an interview, Neil Gaiman said, "Somebody like Ray Bradbury once said something like, you have a million words of crap in you and you have to get them out before you get to the good stuff."

Neil's right. Write your million words of crap, which shouldn't take that long, really. Then write some good stuff that other people might want to read.

\* \* \* \*

Sarah Black, author of *Fearless*, *Border Roads*, etc.

How bad do you want it? Are you burning for it? If so, put the work into it just like if you were getting a graduate degree. When I started writing seriously, about 5 yrs ago now, I decided to not get an MFA in writing, but just to spend 20 hrs a week writing, instead. Now I spend more than that. Also, get involved in an online writer's workshop, like Zoetrope, read and critique other people's stories, and don't get your feelings hurt when someone tells you thirty things that are wrong with your story. Just go write it again and again. I think writing is one of those things where talent can be defined by how much work you put into it. And how much work you're willing to put into it is how much you're burning for it, baby.

\* \* \* \*

One final thought. In order to write, you have to have something to write *about*.

Don't hone your craft at the expense of the people in your life. Stay involved and stay engaged in the world around you.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

If you have to choose between being a great writer and actively participating in your own life, something's wrong.

Choose life and you'll always have something to write about.

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## CHAPTER 21: NUTS AND BOLTS

### Resources

### Glossary

Alpha male—The leader, always in control. Aggressive, dynamic. A Top.

Antagonist—The villain of the piece. The character that stands between the Protagonist and what he wants.

Beta male—Combines qualities of Alpha leadership with sensitivity of Omega. Independent, communicator. Sometimes can be a former Alpha or an Alpha on the rise. Can play Top or bottom.

Beta reader—Fan fiction term for a critique partner who checks mostly for spelling, grammar, punctuation and canon inconsistencies.

Fan fiction—Stories made up by fans of television, movie or other media characters. There is also real person fiction. Don't ask.

Genre fiction—Fiction written to fit into a specific literary genre or category (in fact, it is also sometimes called "category fiction") like mystery, western, romance, etc.

HEA—Happily Ever After

HFN—Happy For Now

Niche—A distinct or specific market segment.

Omega male—The polar opposite of the Alpha male—subservient to Alpha *and* Beta—always a follower. Passive, submissive, sensitive. A bottom.

POV—Point of View

Protag—The main character. In M/M there are sometimes two protagonists.

Slash—Fan fiction where the typically heterosexual canon protagonists engage in same sex relations and romance with each other. The classic example is Star Trek's Kirk and Spock or K/S. "Slash" actually refers to the slash mark.

Yaoi—Japanese term for explicit sexual and romantic love between men as portrayed in anime (cartoons) and manga (comic books). Artwork, themes and roles in Yaoi are strictly defined.

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## **The Hell You Say: Original Notes**

Professor Guy??—50ish, a handsome Professor Sneed, socks with sandals, coal black hair, a cape. A pipe and can blow smoke rings. Teaches demonology. An expert on all things mystical and magical. Strong and eccentric, liberal. A possible romantic partner to Adrien. As strong and attractive as Jake, but different.

Note: darker, edgier than ADT

It's Christmas time and the dark side is catching up with Angus, Adrien English's college student employee and "resident warlock." When he begins to receive death threats at work, Adrien decides on a quick fix, and gives Angus a cash Christmas present with instructions to take a little "holiday" with new girlfriend Wendy (whom Adrien refers to as Wanda Witch).

"Listen, Harry Potter, do us both a favor..."

(why is angus in trouble with the coven? How does Adrien get him out of it? Has he witnessed something? What do we know about Angus?)

Meanwhile, Adrien's mother Lisa has finally decided to remarry—not that Adrien has problem with this but it's unexpected and jars him a little—or maybe it's just the holidays and the melancholy feeling they trigger for those alone. Still, he braces up to his equally wacky father-in-law to be who is taking an uncomfortable interest in his new "son." (Does he have a useful extended family for Adrien to play off?)

Her upcoming nuptials trigger Lisa to...?

Adrien goes to UCLA to check out Angus's professor of all things mystical and mythological, the man who Angus believes is behind all his trouble (Angus is his teaching assistant?). Guy???????? Is a handsome 50ish Professor Sneed type, eccentric but charismatic—and gay. He fences with Adrien and clearly knows more than he pretends.

Shortly after, Adrien is harassed by punk Goth kids. Adrien, as usual, is sarcastic and to the point, very much parent to child; but though Adrien is tough-minded and courageous, the threat against him is real, and he is physically vulnerable.

Jake, meanwhile, is investigating the mysterious deaths of UCLA college kids in the Goth underground. Devil worship, etc. seems to be involved.

Though their recent experiences at Pine Shadow Ranch (see A DANGEROUS THING) deepened their friendship, Jake's increasing tension over the fear of being "outed" puts strain on their relationship. He's a bit more snappish and brusque with Adrien who, despite his feelings for Jake, won't put up with any crap. This tension will carry into their "case."

"What part of stay the fuck out it, don't you understand?"

To Adrien's exasperation, Angus and Wanda return, just in time to get accused of murder. (Whose?) Now Adrien is involved whether he wants to be or not, because no one is interested in helping Angus.

Professor Guy comes to warn Adrien that a spell has been cast on him. Adrien scoffs, but he is having a weird run of bad

luck, including a fender bender, handles come off in his hand, food is spoiling, etc.

A chance encounter with Jake (accompanied by his cop girlfriend Kate and his nieces and nephews) results in Jake snubbing Adrien. Later he apologizes and tries to make it up, but the truth is, Jake still desires children and a "normal" life. On Christmas Eve he decides to marry Kate and renounce his dual sexuality.

Nonetheless, Jake will still provide Adrien's "back up" (albeit unwillingly) when he tackles ... WHO??? Jake's case is heart of the mystery and Adrien's involvement is tangential. Who is murdered and why?

Other smart-ass pop cultural references: Lord of the Rings, Magick, Dungeons and Dragons, the devil, etc.

Angus free, the promise of a new relationship, the close of one year and the beginning of another brings Adrien to accept the fact that Jake is a lost cause. Adrien catches his flight (symbolic) to Brittany on his own.

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## **The Hell You Say: Original Outline**

ONE—Phone death threats to Angus; Adrien sends Angus on holiday. Jake mentions recent discovery of possible ritual murder. Book signing with Gabriel Savant, and Savant's announcement of cult exposé. Brunch with Lisa—Lisa announces marriage plans.

TWO—Brunch with Lisa cont. Jake further discusses cult scene and the discovery of a second body. Adrien visits UCLA and Professor Guy Snowden—attractive but can he be trusted? Bob Friedlander stops by bookstore looking for missing floppy disc.

THREE—Dinner with Adrien's new and slightly overwhelming "family." Someone lurking in back alley of shop? Pentagonagram on the shop doorstep.

FOUR—Jake patronizing Adrien—and warning him off case; Adrien visiting Dragonwyck witchcraft shop; Adrien reading news story details on second murder victim.

FIVE—Partner's In Crime writing group; indication of Jake's ambition; call from Guy Snowden; on-going trouble getting coverage in shop; Jake and Adrien "at home."

SIX—Gabriel Savant still looking for disc and acting weirder and more paranoid than ever—first mention of Blade Sable ; lunch with the attractive but secretive Professor Snowden; Jake injured in hit and run.

SEVEN—Visit to Jake clearly underlining the two separate sides of Jake's life; computer research on Wicca, etc; call

from Jake; lunch with Lisa; Adrien joins Dark Realm and begins asking about Blade Sable; Gabriel Savant is missing.

EIGHT—Adrien hires Velvet Snow; more threats from the dark side; dinner with Lisa's Councilman. Visit from Blade Sable girls; Jake with news of Kate's pregnancy.

NINE—Phone call from Angus; visit to Angus's house and discovery of the body in the bedroom.

TEN—Jake's decision to conceal Adrien's role in discovery of the body; phone call from Snowden; Angus arrested; official visit from Jake and Detective Rossini.

ELEVEN—Snowden indicates a personal interest in Adrien and introduces Adrien to Oliver Garibaldi; no word from Jake; Velvet Snow going through Adrien's desk; Superbowl Sunday at the Dauten's.

TWELVE—Visit from detectives working for Angus's attorney; first nibble at Adrien's Blade Sable internet query; Bob Friedlander pumping Adrien for information at bar. Jake canceling dinner plans.

THIRTEEN—Visit to Snowden at UCLA and recognition of second Blade Sable girl. Unsuccessful effort at tracking student—is Snowden really trying to help? Names of other students in Angus's "coven."

FOURTEEN—Police questioning Adrien's role in Savant's disappearance. Wiccans arrive to perform cleansing ritual just as Adrien's new sisters make a surprise visit to Cloak and Dagger books.

FIFTEEN—Adrien pursues Wicca lead and visits the hedgewitch. Believes he is being followed by Velvet Snow.

SIXTEEN—Meeting with internet contact who turns out to be Oliver Garibaldi. Garibaldi fills Adrien in on street rep of Blade Sable and invites Adrien to explore spiritual possibilities. Jake tells Adrien he is going to marry Kate.

SEVENTEEN—Detective Rossini visits without Jake—clearly suspects something. Adrien pursuing suspicions of Friedlander's role in Savant's disappearance (makes connection that Friedlander writes the books and Savant is the public persona).

EIGHTEEN—Adrien attends social gathering at Garibaldi's and bumps into Guy Snowden—and Velvet Snow.

NINETEEN—Following up on questioning students who knew Angus and Tony Zellig.

TWENTY—Questioning Garibaldi regarding Savant's disappearance.

TWENTY ONE—Adrien and Snowden go to Goth club and nearly get run down by hit and run driver.

TWENTY TWO—Snowden and Adrien "investigating" infuriates Jake who shoves Adrien down and warns him to keep out of case.

TWENTY THREE—

TWENTY FOUR—Adrien sneaking into Blade Sable "church" and cutting Savant loose. Phone call to Snowden asking him to take credit for solving Savant's disappearance and to keep Adrien out of it.

TWENTY FIVE—Loose ends tied up. Angus free and a final wordless encounter with Jake. Snow in Los Angeles? Christmas with the Dautens (like being trapped in a Perry Como special). A phone call from Snowden.

Man, Oh Man, Writing M-M for Cash and Kinks  
*by Josh Lanyon*

"Oh well. What the hell."

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## **The Hell, You Say: Synopsis**

Mystery writer and Los Angeles bookseller ADRIEN ENGLISH (POV) is an attractive, successful, thirty-something gay man with a knack for playing amateur sleuth—much to the disapproval of his on-again off-again lover, closeted L.A.P.D. homicide detective JAKE RIORDAN.

In the third book of the series, it's Christmas time, and the dark side is catching up with ANGUS, Adrien's college student assistant (and "resident warlock") at Cloak and Dagger Books. After Angus receives death threats at work, Adrien decides on a quick fix, and gives Angus and his girlfriend WANDA a Christmas bonus with instructions to take a little holiday. Adrien is certain he can resolve the situation by contacting Angus's former professor, DR. GUY SNOWDEN, an expert in the occult. Jake is none too pleased with this intervention as he believes Angus may know something that would help his current investigation of what appear to be a number of ritual murders occurring over the past decade.

After a trip to UCLA and an interview with the unexpectedly attractive Dr. Snowden, Adrien is hopeful that Angus's harassers will find someone else to terrorize—although he doesn't quite trust the enigmatic professor.

A book signing for best-selling author GABRIEL SAVANT leads to a public announcement that the flamboyant writer's next work will be a non-fiction exposé of the local cult, Blade Sable. When Savant disappears after showing up at Cloak and Dagger Books (ostensibly searching for a missing disk with

some mysterious research notes), it appears Jake's suspicion that his murder case may be tied to the local occult scene, could be correct.

Meanwhile, LISA ENGLISH, Adrien's overprotective society matron mother, announces that she is remarrying. Adrien does not have a problem with this, however Lisa's machinations to get Adrien to bond with his new "family" serve to underscore his loneliness and desire for something more permanent with Jake—as well as his uneasy instinct that Jake is slowly and subtly withdrawing from him. Jake has never made any secret of his desire for a "normal" life. When Jake informs him that his "cover" girlfriend is pregnant, Adrien realizes it's only a matter of time before Jake ends their fragile relationship.

If Dr. Snowden has followed through on his promise to speak to Angus's harassers, there's no sign of it—in fact, after a bloody-looking pentagram is scrawled on the doorstep of Cloak and Dagger Books, it appears that Adrien may now be a target. Never one to leave well enough alone, Adrien begins to investigate in earnest. He encounters local Wiccans, the Hedgewitch of Hollywood, and—through the reluctant Snowden—wealthy and enigmatic OLIVER GARIBALDI, a local expert and writer on the occult.

Not only does Garibaldi seem to know Adrien's step-father-to-be, but he seems well acquainted with VELVET SNOW, Adrien's new bookstore assistant, who Adrien discovers searching through his private belongings and listening at keyholes.

Adrien believes he has a solid lead when two of Angus's friends try to raise a little hell at the bookstore, but the lead turns (literally) into a dead end when he finds one of the girls murdered at Angus's house.

Angus is arrested for the murder. Adrien believes Angus is innocent—so does the PI Angus's defense attorney hires, who suspects Adrien is hiding something. Adrien *is* hiding something: his relationship with Jake, the police detective investigating the girl's murder. Threat of exposure widens the gulf between Adrien and Jake, which at last erupts into near violence when Jake discovers Adrien is still poking his nose into Jake's business.

With Jake effectively out of the picture, Adrien is on his own pursuing his inquiries through the internet and around the Los Angeles occult scene. He turns to Guy Snowden for help. They are nearly run down outside a Goth club.

Adrien also investigates the possibility that Savant is the victim of some non-occult force. Could his assistant (and secret writing partner) Bob Friedlander have played a hand in the celebrity author's disappearance?

With Snowden's help Adrien at last finds and rescues the missing author Gabriel Savant. Savant has been kidnapped by Oliver Grimaldi, leader of Blade Sable. Garibaldi plans to slay Savant during a Satanic Mass on Christmas Eve.

With Angus free and the murderous Garibaldi brought to justice, Adrien has no excuse not to spend Christmas with his new "family." A surprise last minute phone call turns out not to be from Jake but from Guy Snowden.

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## Sample Query Letter

Josh Lanyon  
1234 My Street  
Apt. A  
Anywhere, ZZ 12345-1234  
JoshLanyon@myemail.com  
(123) 123-4567

April 6, 2007

PUBLISHING HOUSE 'R US.

John Smith—Editor-in-Chief

123 Bright Lights Avenue

New York, NY 10022

Dear Mr. Smith,

I'm Josh Lanyon, the author of the Adrien English mystery series, previously published by the now-defunct Gay Men's Press in Britain. I'm currently at work on the fourth book of the series, *DEATH OF A PIRATE KING* (estimated word count 75—80,000), and am submitting sample chapters and outline for your consideration.

In the fourth book of the series, Adrien is asked by hunky bisexual film star Paul Kane to look unofficially into the murder of a movie producer—something Adrien is hesitant to do with hostile ex-lover, closeted LAPD lieutenant Jake Riordan, overseeing the case.

I am able to provide sales figures on the first two books in the series (which have now been retooled and re-sold to electronic and print publishers who are marketing them



toward the rapidly expanding M/M audience). The third book is currently short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award in the Gay Mystery category.

In June I won a Mystery Writers of America grant for the series. The terms of the grant require submission of DEATH OF A PIRATE KING to six traditional publishing houses, but having read interviews with you over the years—and being a great fan of so many of the books you publish—I wanted to start with PUBLISHING HOUSE 'R US and yourself.

I've enclosed an SASE for your convenience. It is not necessary to return sample chapters or outline. I appreciate your time and consideration, and sincerely hope that you will decide the Adrien English series belongs at PUBLISHING HOUSE 'R US.

Sincerely,

Josh Lanyon

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## **M/M-related Writing Contests: By Publisher**

Amber Allure—An imprint of Amber Quill Press, LLC  
[www.amberquill.com/](http://www.amberquill.com/)

After the success of our four previous Amber Heat Wave™ Contests, Amber Heat (our erotica imprint) and Amber Allure (our GLBT imprint) has decided to repeat the process again, welcoming you to send us the hottest, steamiest, most sizzling fiction you can create! Think you have what it takes to win a publishing contract with us? Then submit your short Erotic Romance story (see below for content guidelines and word count) to AQP's Amber Heat or Amber Allure imprints during the first two weeks of January 2008! Apart from this annual contest, Amber Heat and Amber Allure (and its parent company Amber Quill Press) remain closed to all "outside" manuscript submissions throughout each year, therefore, this will be your single opportunity in 2008 to show us your writing skills and possibly become a part of the Amber Quill Press family of authors. Winning entries will be published in electronic format in June 2008 to coincide with our 5th annual Amber Heat Wave™ celebration.

\* \* \* \*

Dark Eden Press  
[www.darkedenpress.com](http://www.darkedenpress.com)

The REC Dark Eden Scottish Nocturnal Contest

Submissions will be accepted until January 31, 2008.

Maybe it's the kilts or the accents or even the mythical beauty

but whatever it is we love Scottish men. Here's your chance to impress us with your hottest, most scintillating Scottish tale ever! But we have a way to make these heavenly hunks even hotter ... How you ask? By making them creatures of the night! Each of the Scottish leads has to be a creature of the night; be it a Vampire, werewolf, gargoyle, go ahead, impress us!

We are looking for truly hot, original pieces that keep us reading.

\*\*\* And yes, GLBTQ stories are welcomed \*\*\*

Length of works: 8-12K

Heat level: Sensual to Erotic

\* \* \* \*

Gival Press [www.givalpress.com](http://www.givalpress.com)

Fiction:

The Gival Press Short Story Award

The Gival Press Novel Award

Note: there is a reading fee associated with submittals

\* \* \* \*

Liquid Silver Books/ Molten Silver Division

[www.liquidsilverbooks.com](http://www.liquidsilverbooks.com)

Satisfy Our Naughtier Side Writing Contest

Closed for 2007

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## **M/M-related Writing Contests: General (not hosted by a Publisher)**

The Eppies [www.epicaauthors.com/index.html](http://www.epicaauthors.com/index.html)

The EPPIE Awards have been given annually since the first EPIC conference to recognize outstanding achievement in e-publishing.

\* \* \* \*

CAPA Awards [theromancestudio.com/capa.php](http://theromancestudio.com/capa.php)

The Romance Studio's annual hosted contest

\* \* \* \*

Golden Rose Awards

[www.loveromancesandmore.com/goldenrose.htm](http://www.loveromancesandmore.com/goldenrose.htm)

Hosted by Love Romances Café

\* \* \* \*

The IPPYS

[secure.independentpublisher.com/transentry.php](http://secure.independentpublisher.com/transentry.php)

Independent Publisher Book Awards

\* \* \* \*

Passionate Ink

*(A Special Interest Chapter of Romance Writers of America)*

[www.passionateink.org/index.php](http://www.passionateink.org/index.php)

Passionate Plume

## Stroke of Midnight

Includes Note: I don't see any references to GLBT on the Passionate Ink site, but they show resources for e-publishers that include many of the ones on our list

\* \* \* \*

## Lambda Literary Awards

[www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/guidelines.html](http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/guidelines.html)

Many categories

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## **Publishers that have published M/M 3/14/08**

Italics = Self-Publishing

(Please note: Inclusion in this listing should not be understood as a recommendation or an endorsement of the following publishers, nor should omission be understood as a recommendation against any publisher.)

Credit to Lori Lake: [www.lorillake.com](http://www.lorillake.com) for providing the basis of this list.

Alyson Books

P.O.Box 1253, Old Chelsea Station

New York, NY 10113-1251

[alysonanthology@planetoutinc.com](mailto:alysonanthology@planetoutinc.com)

Not currently accepting gay male erotica [www.alyson.com/](http://www.alyson.com/)

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Amber Allure—An imprint of AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

[HeatWaveContest@amberquill.com](mailto:HeatWaveContest@amberquill.com)—Invitation Only except  
for writing contest [www.amberquill.com/](http://www.amberquill.com/)

\* \* \* \*

Arsenal Pulp Press

Editorial Board

Arsenal Pulp Press

341 Water Street, Suite 200

Vancouver, BC Canada V6B 1B8

[info@arsenalpulp.com](mailto:info@arsenalpulp.com) [www.arsenalpulp.com](http://www.arsenalpulp.com)

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Aspen Mountain Press  
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www.aspenmountainpress.com

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Attagirl Press  
M2M / Editor-in-Chief  
AttaGirl Press  
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Just accepting short stories for M2M2  
attagirlpress.com/

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Casperian Books  
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subs@casperianbooks.com www.casperianbooks.com

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Circlet Press

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39 Hurlbut Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

circletintern@gmail.com [www.circlet.com/](http://www.circlet.com/)

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Changeling Press

[Submissions@changelingpress.com](mailto:Submissions@changelingpress.com)

[www.changelingpress.com](http://www.changelingpress.com)

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Cobblestone Press

[submissions@cobblestone-press.com](mailto:submissions@cobblestone-press.com) [www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

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Cleis Press Inc.

P.O.Box 14697

San Francisco, CA 94114

[fdelacoste@cleispress.com](mailto:fdelacoste@cleispress.com) [www.cleispress.com](http://www.cleispress.com)

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Dark Eden Press

[submissions@darkedenpress.com](mailto:submissions@darkedenpress.com)

[www.darkedenpress.com/](http://www.darkedenpress.com/)

\* \* \* \*

Dreamspinner Press

[dreamspinnerpress@gmail.com](mailto:dreamspinnerpress@gmail.com)

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com/](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/)



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Echelon Press (general adult)  
9735 Country Meadows Lane 1-D  
Laurel, MD 20723  
editorial2@echelonpress.com [www.echelonpress.com](http://www.echelonpress.com)

\* \* \* \*

Ellora's Cave  
Ellora's Cave, Ltd. of the UK  
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GLB Publishers

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San Francisco, CA 94107

glbpubs@mindspring.com [www.glbpubs.com/](http://www.glbpubs.com/)

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Green Candy Press

Green Candy Press

601 Van Ness Ave, E3-918

San Francisco, CA 94102

[editorial@greencandypress.com](mailto:editorial@greencandypress.com)

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Insomniac Press

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192 Spadina Avenue

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CANADA

Publisher: [mike@insomniacpress.com](mailto:mike@insomniacpress.com)

Managing Editor: [dan@insomniacpress.com](mailto:dan@insomniacpress.com)

[www.insomniacpress.com/](http://www.insomniacpress.com/)

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*iUniverse (Self publishing)*

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NeWest Press  
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Silk's Vault Publishing LLC  
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Torquere Press Publisher  
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The Death of a Pirate King  
The Good Thief  
Pulse  
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Blood Claim  
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Out There in the Night  
A Bit of Rough  
Fearless  
Partners In Crime #1 Boy Meets Body  
Partners in Crime #2 I'll Be Dead for Christmas  
The Hell You Say  
A Dangerous Thing  
Fatal Shadows  
SUCKS!  
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Bond-Shattering  
Love Hurts  
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